

2000

Family literacy project

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Family Literacy Project

A Graduate Project

Submitted to the

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Master of Arts in Education

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by

Laura K. Scully

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3/7/00
Date Approved

Rick Traw
Head, Department of Curriculum
and Instruction

Abstract

The purpose of the family literacy project was to implement a partnership program connecting the Title I reading teacher and the school with parents of children receiving Title I reading services. It involved an effort to promote children's literacy in the home. The partnership emphasized collaboration and encouraged input from parents. The focus of the project was to integrate curricular activities that met the students' current educational needs with literacy activities that already occurred naturally in the home.

During an informal meeting/conference with the parents, the Title I reading teacher emphasized that literacy is an ongoing process and parents can have a positive effect on their children's literacy development. Literacy activities were suggested to the parents. At the end of the session, the parents were given a list of suggested daily reading and writing activities that involved them with their children. In an effort to increase participation, parents were asked to record the daily activities completed with their children on a monthly calendar and return it to school at the end of each month for a three-month period.

Parental, or caregiver, involvement in children's emerging literacy is a factor that has been regarded as highly significant for many years (Danielson, 1997). (In the rest of the paper, the adults primarily responsible for children's upbringing will be referred to as parents). Some parents, however, have uncertainties about participating in their children's language learning. Frequently, teachers have limiting views of parent involvement (Fawcett, Rasinski, & Linek, 1997). To help break down the barriers and improve home-school relationships, teachers and administrators are learning ways to improve communication with parents. Schools are creating partnership programs with parents to share suggestions that promote children's literacy in the home (Brand, 1996). The key factor to successful literacy partnerships between home and school is collaboration (Lazar & Weisberg, 1996). Literacy programs need to be developed *with* rather than *for* parents (Come & Fredericks, 1995).

Reasons for Parents' Limited Involvement

Parents' interest and involvement in school and home experiences may be limited for a variety of reasons:

- *Teaching is believed to be the teacher's job.
- *They do not know what to teach.
- *They believe they do not have the skills to teach.
- *Both parents work or a single parent works.
- *They are too busy with day-to-day activities.

Some parents may hesitate to become involved in their child's literacy development because they view school as a "...frightening monolith, not

only in the sense that the power of knowledge makes them feel inadequate...but because every bit of communication from the school comes as negative appraisal of their child, a destructive comment about their lives” (Come & Fredericks, 1995, p. 20). Traditionally, communication between teachers and parents has traveled one way - - from school to home. “Parents usually *receive* information about their child *from* teachers rather than actively *contributing* to an emerging portrait of their child as a learner at home and at school” (Lazar & Weisberg, 1996, p. 229). Unless they are asked for specific input about what they observe at home, many parents may not see a connection between how their children use language and print at home and their ability to achieve success in school.

Value of Home – School Collaboration

Many parents want to help their children, but they are not sure what their role should be. Teachers know the importance of involving parents in children’s literacy development, but many teachers have little information about and experience working with parents (Brand, 1996). It is important to examine not only what schools can offer parents concerning literacy development but also what insights parents can give to schools about how their children relate to literacy experiences at home. The more teachers can learn from their students’ families, the more they can take advantage of the tremendous variety and wealth that family

cultures contribute to children (Voss, 1993). Families structure reading events differently, depending on the abilities, interests, and needs of children as well as the beliefs, practices, and plans of parents (Lazar & Weisberg, 1996).

Ways to Initiate Home – School Collaboration

Schools can initiate several ways to receive parent input. Parents can be invited to orientation meetings during which they will be asked to share observations of their children's reading and writing outside of school. Teachers may also hold individual interviews with parents asking about their beliefs, practices, and goals that are related to their children's literacy and the language experiences provided to their children in the home. Another way to gain parent input is through home response journals that are shared with the school and to which teachers respond. Journal writing gives parents opportunities to reflect about their children as readers and then receive positive feedback from teachers. This form of communication helps teachers identify ways to support students' reading outside of class (Lazar & Weisberg, 1996).

Through collaboration, parents and teachers can find many ideas and strategies that can be transferred from school, supported at home, and shared with the school. Parents can build their children's self-esteem through literacy by encouraging their children to read for fun and by

establishing a daily read-aloud time (Voss, 1993). While children are reading aloud, they should be encouraged to think about what strategies they use while they are reading. They should be reminded to use their prior knowledge and experiences as well as visual cues (Does this word look like...?), semantic cues (Does this sentence make sense?), and syntax cues (Does this sentence sound right to you?) (McMackin, 1993). Other home literacy activities that families may engage in include taking trips to the public library, making collections, sharing mail by writing letters to extended family members, writing invitations for family gatherings and school events, sharing joint journals, sharing oral histories and family memories, cooking using a recipe, completing projects, and sharing hobbies (Flood, Lapp, Tinajero, & Nagel, 1995).

Examples of Home – School Programs

Many programs are available as models of school-home collaboration. These programs focus on helping parents and teachers make positive connections between home and school. For example, a project called PITCH (Project Interconnecting Teachers, Children, and Home) emphasizes developing and expanding programs in school that include the promotion of literacy. This program offers an in-service program for teachers to improve home-school relationships. Teachers learn to recognize and acknowledge parents' fears, concerns, and difficulties.

Such teacher response encourages parents to become involved and introduces them to home activities that are an extension to the school's curriculum. The activities suggested by the teacher meet the students' current educational needs and are flexible so that parents can fit them into their busy daily schedules (Brand, 1996).

Another program that supports the home-school connection is PAT (Parents as Teachers). This program focuses on what parents can do to enhance their children's literacy. The program views parents as partners in education, supports parents in enhancing learning in the home, and builds on family strengths. In this partnership, the school presents a rationale, modeling, suggested materials and related reading and writing activities and gives feedback to the parents (Danielson, 1997).

The program, Storymates, addresses the problem 9-, 10-, and 11-year-olds have as they attempt to comprehend library books written on their grade levels. The Storymates program was developed to provide a direct link between home and school literacy and provide meaningful experiences with easy books. It was found that through storybook reading to younger siblings, relatives, and friends, students with reading difficulties became more interested in reading and writing. Storybooks that usually have simple uncomplicated plots, help older children explore the structure of stories, organize their thinking, and recall more information.

In this program, teachers demonstrated to students how to make story maps and webs. Later, students worked with partners to identify cause and effect, make predictions, summarize events, make inferences, draw conclusions, and compare character and events. The storybooks that children read at school were reread to younger children at home. Parents were involved in the Storymates program by relating what they observed. They were able to tell the teachers that their children seemed to enjoy reading and were seen reading more at home (Fox, 1997).

The paired reading program, recommended by Hayden (1995-96), involves parents directly as reading facilitators. It is based on the assumption that readers of all ages experience reading success under the guidance of a more successful reader. The paired reading approach encourages the less abled reader to move from supportive (reading with parent) to independent reading. The first component of paired reading is the selection of a literature work; the child selects a book to read aloud simultaneously with the parent. The child is expected to read all the words correctly. If s/he does not, the parent repeats the word correctly while pointing to it and continues reading with the child. When the child feels confident to continue reading independently, s/he signals the parent nonverbally and begins reading alone. The paired reading program is successful because it allows parents to model

fluent reading, the child's struggles with text are supported, attempts at self-monitoring are rewarded, and reading independently is encouraged.

Most parents care deeply about their children's education. When their interest and involvement in school experiences are valued and promoted by teachers, their children's emerging literacy is enhanced (Flood et al., 1995). Programs that encourage input from parents and emphasize collaboration with them will contribute to a strong partnership between parents and teachers. When children feel secure in their learning environments and see a connection between them, their literacy will thrive.

Parent Literacy Involvement Project

It is important for students in the intermediate grades (4, 5, and 6) to develop good reading and study habits so they will be prepared for the changes and challenges they will face in junior high and high school. Even though children are needing to accept more responsibility for their schoolwork at this age, they still need guidance from their parents. With this in mind, the writer (Title I reading teacher) extended an invitation to selected parents whose children received services from the Title I program to attend an informal meeting at school. The purpose of the meeting was to give parents the opportunity to share and discuss ideas with other parents about literacy activities they promote in their homes

and to receive additional activity ideas and suggestions that would encourage and foster their children's reading and study habits at home.

Then, letters were sent to ten families asking parents to attend an evening meeting (see Appendix A). Parents were asked to complete a form indicating whether or not they planned to attend the meeting or whether they would like to schedule an individual conference. Four families responded to the invitation; two indicated they would like to attend the meeting and two indicated they would like to schedule individual conferences. The six families who did not complete the form received follow-up invitations by telephone. Each of the six families who were contacted by telephone said they would not be able to attend the meeting and declined scheduling an individual conference.

On the evening of the meeting, parents were asked to come to the classroom of the Title I reading teacher. The school principal was also present. Both parents from the two families attended the meeting. After introductions and a few minutes of casual conversation, the parents were asked to complete an informal checklist of literacy activities that they regularly model or perform with their children on a weekly basis (see Appendix B). At first, both sets of parents hesitated to complete the inventory. Sensing their discomfort, the writer assured the parents that they were probably already engaging in many of the literacy activities

listed. It was explained to the parents that the purpose of the inventory was to make them aware of what activities presently occurring in their homes were helpful in developing their children's literacy. They were told that an increased awareness could assist them in building upon, extending, and increasing the frequency of literacy activities they do with their children.

As the parents completed their literacy activity inventories, it was evident that they supported many in-home activities with their children, such as reading to them, helping with homework, and sitting down as a family for a meal and conversation. Involving children in outside-the-home activities was less evident. For example, both sets of parents indicated that they attended school activities, but visiting the public library or attending museums or other cultural events were not regular family activities.

Prior to the parent meeting, the principal and writer had discussed whether or not there was a relationship between the reading success of our students and limited outside-the-home literacy activities. Analyzing the results of the reading component of the standardized California Achievement Test revealed that many students scored low in vocabulary knowledge. The vocabulary strand of the test is designed to measure a student's ability to gather, organize, and analyze information as it relates to vocabulary building and language development. It is widely known that

vocabulary building is essential for effective reading, writing, and speaking. Vocabulary knowledge is more than word definitions and simple recall. Daily life experiences, reading independently, listening to stories, and attention to vocabulary in the content areas develop and expand children's vocabularies. Language is acquired primarily through shared experiences. Vocabulary growth occurs when children are provided opportunities to observe and comment on their experiences. Shared experiences such as nature hikes and visits to the zoo are ways to help children build vocabulary. The principal and writer agreed with the results of a study by L'Allier, Purcell-Gates, & Smith (1995) that found:

“...some children from low-SES homes do not have the opportunity to experience literacy use in the same ways as others do. This surely will affect their abilities to take from formal literacy instruction and to develop as readers and writers in the same ways and to the same degrees as children from more literate homes. It is family literacy practices which determine young children's experiences with print in the home” (p. 577).

Individual conferences were held during school hours on the two consecutive days following the evening meeting. The live-in girlfriend of one family attended the first conference. She briefly described the family's living situation indicating that the father of the family had sole custody of the children after the mother left the family. The girlfriend indicated that she had developed a loving relationship with the children

and had a major role in establishing a family routine that included many literacy activities such as cooking and eating meals together, helping with homework, and reading together. The second individual conference was attended by the mother of a two-parent family. At the beginning of the meeting, the mother revealed that she and her husband had recently separated. She and the children were temporarily living with her mother. She said the new living arrangements made it difficult to maintain a daily routine; however, she was trying to make the transition from the previous home environment to the new one as comfortable and stress-free as possible for the children. The mother planned to keep the children in the same school, and she was communicating with her children's teachers about the events outside of school so they could understand and support the children in school. When asked to complete the weekly literacy activities checklist, the mother indicated that she helped her children with homework, read with them, and discussed their classroom and school activities. Outside-the-home activities included attending school activities and visiting the public library and the zoo and then discussing what they saw. The mother said she modeled these literacy activities for her children: reading books, newspapers, and magazines for her own pleasure; buying books for her children; and writing them notes.

At the conclusion of the evening meeting and individual conferences,

parents were congratulated by the Title I teacher for their efforts to engage their children in home literacy activities on a regular basis. They were reminded of the importance of modeling literacy activities for their children. The parents were encouraged to provide more outside-the-home experiences that would help their children build and expand language and literacy competence. Finally, the parents were asked to record the daily reading/writing activities they completed on a monthly calendar and to return it to school at the end of the month for a three-month period. A list of Daily Reading Activities was provided to assist parents in completing the calendars (see Figure 1). Parents were told that the calendars were a tool that could help them foster their children's reading and study habits at home. This documentation would provide feedback that would assist the Title I teacher in developing better ways to communicate with parents and involve them in their children's literacy development (see Figure 2).

Approximately three weeks after the meeting/conferences, parents were sent a follow-up letter by the Title I teacher (see Appendix C). In the letter, parents were again thanked for attending the meeting/conference and sharing literacy ideas. They were reminded to return the first calendar documenting the literacy activities they completed during the month. Two families returned calendars for the first two months. When the children of the other two families were asked if they were recording daily literacy activities, they said they were completing

Figure 1
Daily Reading Activities

Daily Reading Activities

Please write the corresponding number(s) of the activities that you complete daily on the calendar. At the end of each month, return the calendar to Ms. Scully.

- | | |
|---|--|
| 1. Read to my child | 21. Played a game together |
| 2. Listened to my child read | 22. Used the computer for corresponding or writing (e-mail or word processing) or to gain information (internet) |
| 3. Listened to a book on tape together | 23. Played a game together on the computer |
| 4. Read silently together | 24. Selected TV shows to watch together |
| 5. Looked at the newspaper together | 25. Discussed what we watched on TV |
| 6. Read the school newsletter and other notes from school together | 26. Attended school activities |
| 7. Asked my child about his/her interests | 27. Visited the public library |
| 8. Discussed my interests with my child | 28. Borrowed books from the public library |
| 9. Asked my child about his/her interests | 29. Helped my child locate resource materials in the library for a school report |
| 10. Discussed my interests with my child | 30. Visited a bookstore |
| 11. Helped my child with homework (daily assignments and studying for tests) | 31. Went to a play or movie together and discussed what we saw |
| 12. Helped my child with a special school assignment (science project, report, speech) | 32. Visited an Omaha historical site |
| 13. Wrote with my child (poems, stories, journals, greeting cards, invitations, thank you notes, or letters to friends and relatives) | 33. Went to a museum or other cultural event and talked about the exhibits |
| 14. Helped my child with writing | 34. Went on an outing to the zoo or on a nature hike and talked or wrote about what we saw |
| 15. Drew pictures together | 35. Visited a place outside the Florence area and discussed what we saw |
| 16. Made shopping lists together | 36. Did reading or writing for my work |
| 17. Made a household chore list or schedule together | 37. Read the mail |
| 18. Completed a project together by following directions | 38. Worked on the household budget |
| 19. Cooked together by following recipes or written directions on packages | 39. Read my own book for pleasure |
| 20. Sat down together as a family for a meal and conversation | 40. Read a newspaper or magazine |
| | 41. Used the dictionary, telephone directory, or other resource to locate information |
| | 42. Wrote a note to my child |
| | 43. Bought my child a book |
| | 44. Other (please specify what activity you completed) |

Figure 2
Daily Reading Activities Calendar

February 1999

Sun	Mon	Tues	Wed	Thurs	Fri	Sat
	1	2	3	4	5	6
7	8	9	10	11	12	13
14	15	16	17	18	19	20
21	22	23	24	25	26	27
28						

some of the activities, but they were not recording them on the calendars.

The daily reading activities recorded on the calendars that were returned by the two families were the same as the events that were shared at the meeting/conference. The parents continued to help with homework, read with their children, and cook meals and sit down as a family for meals and conversation. No outside-the-home activities were recorded on any of the calendars that were returned.

Conclusions

The writer believes that the families who attended the meeting/conference gained a greater understanding of their role in supporting school programs and providing literacy activities at home. It was stressed that parents are children's strongest role models during the school years when attitudes about learning and language abilities are developed. By their example, they can encourage and guide their children to find fulfillment in their school life.

In the months following the meeting, the writer and three of the four families (one family moved to a different school district) kept in close contact. A fourth-grade student from one family received tutoring in reading from the writer one hour a day every day for a four-week period during the summer. The parents were kept informed about the progress their child made during the tutoring sessions. Suggestions were made to the parents as to how they could continue to practice and reinforce the strategies that were learned by their child during the tutoring sessions.

The same student (who is now in fifth grade) will participate in after school tutoring with the writer one hour per week for a six-week period in the spring semester. A third grade student from another family who attended the meeting is currently being mentored by the writer. A student from the third family, who is now in the seventh grade, returned in the fall to seek academic advice from the writer. His mother and the writer have also communicated about his academic progress.

It is believed that the meeting/conferences established a partnership between the parents and writer that reinforced the idea that:

“...every child in every family has the power to succeed in school and in life, and every parent, grandparent, and caregiver can help. The most important thing we can do is be involved with our children’s education even before they are in school, then stay involved once they are in school”
(Rich, 1992).

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Appendix A

Invitation to Parent Reading Meeting

February 2, 1999

Dear Parents,

It is important for students in the intermediate grades (4, 5, and 6) to develop good reading and study habits so they are prepared for the changes and challenges they will face in junior high and high school. Even though students are needing to accept more responsibility for their schoolwork, they still need your guidance.

With this in mind, please accept my invitation to attend an informal meeting to share and discuss ideas with other parents about literacy activities you are promoting in your home and to receive additional activity ideas and suggestions that will encourage and foster your children's reading and study habits at home.

The meeting will be held at Florence School in Portable A at 6:30pm, Tuesday, February 9, 1999. The meeting should last approximately thirty to forty minutes.

Please complete the form below, and return it to me by Monday, February 8, 1999.

Sincerely,

Ms. Laura Scully
Title I Reading Teacher

Parent Reading Meeting
February 9, 1999

_____ Yes, I plan to attend the meeting.

_____ No, I will not be able to attend the meeting.

_____ I would like to schedule an individual conference.

Student name

Parent Signature

Teacher

Grade

**Please return this form to Ms. Scully by Monday, February 8, 1999.

Appendix B
Weekly Literacy Activities
Informal Inventory

February 1999

Check the activities listed below that you have completed with your child or children during the past month.

Inside Our Home

- _____ Read to my child
- _____ Listened to my child read
- _____ Listened to a book on tape together
- _____ Read silently together
- _____ Looked at the newspaper together
- _____ Read a magazine together
- _____ Read the school newsletter and other notes from school together
- _____ Asked my child about classroom and other school activities
- _____ Asked my child about his/her interests
- _____ Discussed some of my interests with my child
- _____ Helped my child with homework (daily assignments and studying for tests)
- _____ Helped my child with a special school assignment (science project, report, speech)
- _____ Wrote my child (poems, stories, journals, greeting cards, invitations, thank you notes, or letters to friends and relatives)
- _____ Helped my child with writing
- _____ Drew pictures together
- _____ Made shopping lists together
- _____ Made a household chore list or schedule together
- _____ Completed a project together by following written directions

- _____ Cooked together by following recipes or written directions on packages
- _____ Sat down together as a family for a meal and conversation
- _____ Played a game together
- _____ Used the computer for corresponding (e-mail or word processing) or to gain information (internet)
- _____ Played a game together on the computer
- _____ Selected TV shows to watch together
- _____ Discussed what we watched on TV

Outside Our Home

- _____ Attended school activities
- _____ Visited the public library
- _____ Borrowed books from the public library
- _____ Helped my child locate resource materials in the library for a school report
- _____ Visited a bookstore
- _____ Went to a play or movie together and discussed what we saw
- _____ Visited an Omaha historical site
- _____ Went to a museum or other cultural event and talked about the exhibits
- _____ Went on an outing to the zoo or on a nature hike and talked about what we saw
- _____ Visited a place outside the Florence area and discussed what we saw

Literacy activities I modeled for my child

- _____ Did reading or writing for my work
- _____ Read the mail
- _____ Worked on the household budget
- _____ Corresponded in writing with friends and family (greeting cards, thank you notes, letters, e-mail)
- _____ Read my own book for pleasure
- _____ Read a newspaper or magazine
- _____ Used a dictionary, telephone directory, or other resource to locate information
- _____ Wrote a note to my child
- _____ Bought my child a book

Appendix C

Parent Follow-up Letter

Florence Elementary School
7902 N. 36th Street
Omaha, NE 68112
February 28, 1999

Dear Ms. Lambro,

I would like to take this opportunity to thank you for attending our informal Title I meeting on February 9. I was pleased to see that you are currently providing a variety of literacy activities in your home on a regular basis. I believe it really helps to get together and share ideas with other parents.

I hope you have had time to document the literacy activities you have completed on the February calendar. Please send the February calendar to school with Amanda next week. The calendars are an important way for you to give input, and they provide me with the necessary feedback I need so that I can develop better ways to communicate with parents and encourage them to become involved in their children's literacy development.

Parent/teacher conferences are scheduled for Thursday, March 18. I look forward to talking to you then.

Sincerely,

Laura Scully
Title I Reading Teacher