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Leadership Roles in Family Literacy Projects

by Jeanne M. Gerlach, guest editor, Dean of Education, University of Texas Arlington

The movement for Family Literacy is becoming one of the most visible educational concepts in American schooling today. “Teach the parent, reach the child” is the slogan of the National Center for Family Literacy. The Center, created over a decade ago, provides programs and classes where adults and children learn to read together. Centers across the country base their missions and work on research that indicates that reading with young children is key to their success.

In an effort to foster student growth and development, these literacy centers, as well as educators in K–12 schools and faculty in colleges and universities, are forming partnerships that focus on language and literacy. These educators realize that the language arts—reading,

writing, listening, speaking, and thinking—are necessary components of learning in all content areas. While this awareness exists, educators know that in order to be successful, they must elicit the help of two other groups—parents and administrators. Thus, the question becomes: how can administrators, teachers, and parents collaborate to provide students with opportunities to develop language and literacy skills that will become the basis for success in lifetime learning?

This issue provides a sketch of what is being done with the Family Literacy movement by the Dean and faculty members from the School of Education at the University of Texas Arlington and administrators, teachers, and parents from the Dallas Independent School District. It is

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important to note here that UTA President Robert E. Witt and Provost George C. Wright as well as DISD Superintendent Waldemar Rojas are committed to supporting university/school partnerships that focus on emergent literacy development. Their leadership has served us well in our efforts to teach all students to read and write. ●

Fostering Literacy: Connecting Families with Schools

by Nancy L. Hadaway, Associate Professor of Reading/Language Arts, University of Texas Arlington

The Importance of Family Literacy

Falling test scores for children in grades K–12 coupled with higher literacy requirements in the workplace have prompted educators to

search for the best ways to impact literacy development. In this quest, school districts have considered intervention plans, instructional programs, and materials for teaching reading and writing. Yet, literacy is

not the responsibility solely of the school; it is a responsibility shared by the school, the community, and the family (Fredericks & Rasinski, 1990; Rasinski, 1995). A study by Marjoribanks in 1972 attributed more

than half the variance in children's IQ scores to the learning environment in the home. Indeed, the positive impact of family involvement in a child's literacy development has been well documented in the areas of reading achievement, vocabulary, comprehension, writing, math, and science; regular school attendance; school completion rates; oral language development; decoding ability; and children's self-esteem and health (Anderson, 1994; Benjamin, 1993; Chall & Snow, 1982; Darling & Hayes, 1989; Greer & Mason, 1988; Mansback, 1993; Mundre & McCormick, 1989; Nurss, Mosenthal, Hinchman, 1992; Ostlund, Gennaro, Dobbert, 1985).

According to Postlethwaite and Ross (1992), family involvement may be the most critical factor in children's literacy achievement. What a powerful role! However, many parents are not aware of their potential impact or how to foster their children's literacy development. In fact, there is often a wide gap between the expectations and practices of the school and those of the home. In order to positively impact children's language acquisition and

literacy skills, schools should examine avenues for collaboration with families and local communities, creating networks of literacy that value and reflect cultural and linguistic diversity. Working from this framework, four professors from the University of Texas Arlington, Sylvia Vardell, Diana Wisell, John Jacobson, and I, partnered with the Dallas school district to develop a training model focused on family literacy.

Forming a Collaborative Effort to Foster Family Literacy

In recent years, Dallas schools have faced problems typical of urban and inner-city districts across the nation, such as lagging public support, meeting the needs of ethnically diverse populations, and high numbers of low-income and at-risk students. Most recently, children's lack of achievement in reading prompted the creation of the Dallas Reading Plan, an innovative program of teacher training aimed at children's literacy development. Additionally, recognizing the importance of home and community-based activities focusing on language/literacy development, the plan encouraged schools to implement

and promote outreach programs and support systems fostering parent participation.

Beginning in August 1998, we met with the Director of the Dallas Reading Plan to discuss opportunities for a collaborative effort highlighting family literacy. Our purpose was to identify district needs and to consider ways to meet those needs. This initial brainstorming session resulted in a draft proposal and our promise to act as coaches. Our role would be to develop and pilot a model in which study groups would explore best practices for establishing community-based programs and activities that promote family literacy. These study groups, established on local campuses, would help to create guidelines for the implementation of campus-based activities that would support the district's reading initiative (i.e., having all students reading at grade level in the language of instruction by the end of third grade).

The next step was to select partner schools for the collaborative effort. Campuses invited to participate in this pilot program were elementary schools serving kindergarten through third-grade students and were identified by the Dallas Reading Department and the superintendents of the nine administrative subdivisions of the Dallas Public Schools. One campus from each subdivision was selected to participate.

A preliminary meeting with principals from the selected schools as well as other key staff from support services (Dallas Reading Plan, Early Childhood Education, Community Relations, Multilingual Education, Adult Basic Education, and Even Start) resulted in further review of project goals and additional feedback. Ultimately, the stated goal for the Family Literacy Project was to focus attention on family literacy through a family, school, and community effort. To accomplish this, the members of the project participated in the following activities during the 1998–1999 school year:

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- a series of sharing and training study group sessions, where participants could investigate and discuss research-based “best practices” for promoting family literacy;

- development of an instrument to determine current levels of parent involvement in literacy in the home and to identify literacy efforts of local schools and community support organizations;

- development of customized pilot models for parent involvement to be implemented at the home campus during the spring of 1999.

With an overview of the project in hand, principals returned to their home campuses to select participants for this year-long venture. Each participating campus sent a minimum of three representatives: one K–3 teacher, one parent from the local Parent Teacher Association (PTA), and one parent currently serving on the School-Community Council (SCC); campus principals were encouraged to attend as well. All meetings were scheduled on Thursday from 4:30 to 7:30 p.m. By this point, the planning and feedback phase had taken three months.

Building Background

Beginning in November, study groups made up of administrators, teachers, and parent leaders from nine elementary schools met monthly with us and selected lead reading teachers to investigate and discuss research-based “best practices” for promoting family literacy. A typical meeting began with warm-up activities and poetry sharing (with examples linked to school and family experiences). This was followed by circuit presentations of family literacy research and information and a discussion of school-based family literacy projects.

The agenda for the first meeting included an orientation to the goals of the Family Literacy Project and a presentation to explain the configuration of the project. The first three meetings, during the fall and winter, were devoted to building a background on family literacy initiatives.

To accomplish this goal in a hands-on, discussion-oriented format, we, as coaches, adopted a circuit presentation technique to share information. The 40 participants were divided into four smaller groups for the information sharing, and each university coach summarized information for a 15-minute participatory question/answer session with one of the small groups. Then, the coaches rotated to another group until all four groups had been addressed. Realizing that, after a long day at work, teachers and parent volunteers would not be interested in a barrage of educational jargon and statistics, we emphasized *involving* the participants, not lecturing to them. The feedback and ideas we elicited from participants resulted in rich conversation and idea sharing.

The information shared in the circuit presentations varied with input drawn from brochures and books on family literacy, as well as research articles reflecting issues surrounding implementation of family literacy efforts. For instance, one evening I chose to discuss a chapter in Robin Scarcella’s (1990) book, *Teaching Language Minority Students in the Multicultural Classroom*. The chapter offered valuable insights about the many obstacles to parental involvement in the school, such as parents’ lack of proficiency in English and the lack of bilingual personnel in schools. To encourage parental involvement in the schools and to foster literacy activities at home, the chapter suggested creating opportunities for family communication with homework activities, such as making a timeline of the child’s life, or having parent volunteers share bilingual books in classrooms. Other articles I presented to the group advocated the use of family stories as a powerful literacy tool at home and at school (Akroyd, 1995 & Buchoff, 1995).

Throughout this background-building process, the other coaches and I compiled a notebook of the research and information shared, as well as other helpful ideas addressing family literacy, including abstracts of

journal articles; journal and informational articles highlighting family literacy in the home, school, and community; and bibliographies of research sources, professional resources (videos, volunteer tutor handbooks, etc.), and children’s literature and poetry addressing families and family literacy. To spur the sharing and dissemination of information, copies of this notebook were given to each of the participating campuses as a resource handbook for their future efforts.

Modeling Family Literacy Ideas

With a focus on involvement, warm-up activities were conducted at each meeting as a means of involving participants and modeling techniques for family literacy at home and in the classroom. A rich variety of activities motivated the participants to reflect and discuss, which contributed to the relaxed tone of each meeting. A brief summary of these techniques follows.

The first night, we began the meeting with a writing prompt, asking group members to reflect on their own early literacy experiences. Many heartwarming and funny examples emerged, including a principal who shared how her early literacy was shaped by growing up with a mother who was deaf.

To help the group members mingle and build a sense of community, we created a “Get Acquainted Bingo” icebreaker. Using a Bingo card with spaces devoted to family literacy activities (e.g., likes to tell stories, remembers being read to as a child, likes to tell jokes, remembers learning songs at home), group members located someone who could sign off on a space. Our Bingo activity was followed by a discussion of the diverse ways that literacy instruction occurs at home (songs, storytelling, etc.).

To demonstrate how school and home could be linked through school activities, we shared a thematic unit on families. Picture books highlighting the family theme were distributed as examples to encourage parents to foster children’s literacy development

through reading high-quality literature. Embedded within the unit were many options for connecting home and school. For instance, we began one meeting with a name interview. With a partner, we shared information about our name and its origin. Then we discussed how children could interview family members about family stories, including ones relating how the children were named.

The power of drama was demonstrated through activities at two separate meetings. First, using the book *Tomas and the Library Lady* (Mora, 1997), a Readers Theater script was created and performed. This wonderful book relates the story of Tomas Rivera as a young Hispanic migrant and the power of reading and books in his life. The Readers Theater script served as both an introduction to the book, available in both English and Spanish, and to the technique of Readers Theater. Next, after a read-aloud from *When I Was Young in the Mountains* by Cynthia Rylant, we involved group members in drama activities and encouraged them to use drama to enhance literacy through participatory activities in the classroom and at home.

Since celebrations such as birthdays and holidays supply rich language opportunities, we turned to a discussion of these special events in December. Reading holiday stories, singing special songs, and relating holiday customs offer many language-building avenues for home or school.

Finally, poems were used to begin each session and as a transition activity. Using a read-aloud and choral response format to model the use of poetry and techniques for sharing poetry, participants stayed actively involved in our evenings of learning and sharing.

Planning and Implementation

In the spring, we put our background-building study group sessions to work as each campus began to build a customized project for family literacy. As an incentive to involve parents more actively in literacy efforts at

home and at the school, all schools were provided \$1,000 in seed money to fund a family literacy project at their school. We, the university coaches, and the Reading Department provided technical assistance and ongoing support for these projects through follow-up meetings. At the end of each meeting, there was time for discussion, clarification, and feedback as each school moved toward a proposal for their own project.

Prior to final submission of their proposals, group members participated in an intensive feedback session. To help fine-tune the projects, we developed a template, based on an article shared earlier in the background-building sessions, that noted the five criteria for successful urban outreach efforts (Come & Fredericks, 1995). Guiding questions followed each criterion. As each campus described its project, participants provided verbal and written feedback.

The Criteria. Successful urban outreach efforts (1) meet the expressed needs and wishes of parents, (2) promote a spirit of shared responsibility, (3) encourage active involvement of parents in decision making and follow-through, (4) establish open lines of communication, and (5) instill long-term commitment to continuous and sustained involvement.

The Questions. To help focus on these criteria, ask these questions: Does the proposal reflect these criteria? If yes, how was the school able to foster each one (e.g., shared responsibility)? How is that goal reflected in the proposal? What feedback can you offer to help the school fine-tune its project?

The next step was to submit a project proposal to us for approval, after which it would be submitted to the Dallas Reading Plan Office for funding. Schools implemented their projects prior to the last April meeting, where they provided feedback to the group regarding the project's effectiveness.

Reflecting the diversity of our family literacy partnership, the campus-based projects mirrored the

variety within our group and the many campus-based needs. Strategies such as book give-aways were included in many school projects as a means of fostering a print-rich environment at home. Additionally, projects incorporated many topics discussed in our background-building sessions (such as drama and games) as literacy-building opportunities. The range of family literacy options included the following school projects.

- A Saturday Parent University Clinic, where concurrent sessions offered a demonstration of playing age-appropriate games with children as literacy activities, a presentation on how to make reading fun, a Food Pyramid Game demonstration by a visitor from the Texas Agricultural Extension Service, and a session on word usage and self-esteem.

- A make-and-take workshop, where parents constructed literacy props for home activities.

- A puppet theater that was followed by a participatory workshop on making sock and paper bag puppets as a literacy activity at home.

- Classes to support the literacy education of parents, such as ESL and GED, as well as a communication workshop, "Can We Talk?" to foster effective communication between children and adults.

- Cultural Awareness Day, where families could secure library cards or information on library services from a library representative, watch a Spanish language radio station crew broadcast an interview with a bilingual teacher talking about strategies to foster family literacy, and hear a motivational Hispanic speaker stressing the importance of reading aloud to children.

Surveying Family Literacy Activity

In addition to the follow-up meetings, the study groups worked collaboratively to develop an assessment of the current levels of family literacy activities taking place in children's homes. Stemming from discussions prior to the beginning of the project

and at early sessions, and the research addressing family literacy efforts, various areas became candidates for the survey. From these initial areas, we drafted a straw document and took it to the whole group for feedback, which was then incorporated into the final version of the survey. Finally, the method for collecting the data was demonstrated to the participating members.

To facilitate the process of K–3 teachers administering the survey to their classes, we suggested using overhead transparencies to “walk through” the survey with their classes and to record the data. After we demonstrated this technique at an early spring meeting, group members were provided with a master of the survey and a box of transparencies, with which they made copies of the survey to distribute to each K–3 teacher. Campus teams coordinated the administration of the assessment instrument during the early spring of 1999. Teachers conducted the survey orally and wrote student responses on the overheads. We set a deadline by which all data was to be collected and submitted to us for tabulation. Once data was tabulated, this information was organized and presented to the Family Literacy Project members at our final meeting.

The survey was composed of 10 simple, open-ended response items centered on literacy activities in the home. Children were asked what literacy activities and materials they witnessed at home, including parents reading aloud or modeling reading and writing, computer use, print matter available, etc. The results confirmed that a range of activities that support children’s literacy development were, indeed, occurring in homes.

Participating in Family Literacy

In addition to our regular meetings, we learned from two other events that were held during our collaborative effort. We discovered that learning can take place in many settings and without direct instruction. For a

March meeting, the group voted to attend a reading by the author Sapphire. The author’s book, *Push*, relates the story of a young girl who has experienced many hardships and who, in her teen years, finally encounters a teacher who uses reading and the literacy/learning process to turn the young girl’s life around.

One of the biggest lessons named was the need to work more closely with families and to listen to their input and feedback, rather than basing programs on only the school’s perceptions.

Next was a visit by storytellers who performed on a Saturday morning at Old City Park in Dallas, an open-air museum featuring old homes and buildings, where they shared a rich, oral tradition with the teachers, families, and children from our collaborative partnership schools.

Gathering Feedback

At the last meeting of the Family Literacy Project, two forms of feedback were used to evaluate the project. First, the group responded to a modified chart modeled after Ogle’s (1986) KWL technique. The idea was to draw the school’s attention back to the criteria for effective outreach and to have them reflect on this year-long effort. Using three columns (what we know, what we did, what we learned), each campus team noted what they knew from the research on urban outreach programs, what each individual campus did at their school in response to the research presented over the course of the project, and what the schools learned from their participation and their efforts back at their campuses. One of the biggest lessons named was the need to work more closely with families and to listen to their input and feedback, rather than basing programs on only the school’s perceptions.

Finally, a summative evaluation was administered to help assess increases in family literacy as a result of the project, increases in teacher/administrator awareness, the effectiveness of the group study model, and useful aspects of the project. Participants gave the project high marks, noting that the study group model had proved very beneficial as a beginning point for awareness of issues and possibilities.

Conclusion

Given increased literacy demands in today’s society, student literacy is a critical area. Family literacy holds great promise in its ability to foster language and literacy development. The collaborative project between the Dallas Public Schools and the University of Texas Arlington worked to connect teachers and administrators with families and community members to discuss the promise and process of family literacy.

The family literacy partners from the Dallas Public Schools were not the only ones involved in the learning process. We learned a great deal as well. A few of our most important findings include the following.

- Collaboration takes time in terms of logistical arrangements and participant ownership.
- Partnership efforts fare better than isolated services directed by the school alone.
- We must strive to include and involve parents in meaningful ways in our discussions and partnership efforts.
- Active involvement of all parties in the collaborative effort—through hands-on activities, field trips, etc.—produces the best results.

For us, the Family Literacy Project was a meaningful connection with teachers, administrators, parents, and children. Families can contribute in powerful ways to a child’s literacy development, but sometimes they need a better sense of direction. We must make sure that every resource is tapped to foster our children’s language abilities. ●

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Looking at Literacy in Urban Families: Surveying the Scene

by Sylvia M. Vardell, Associate Professor of Reading/Language Arts, University of Texas Arlington

Do urban parents read aloud to their children? If so, what do they read? Do they model writing for their children? If so, what kinds? These basic questions come readily to mind when one wonders about literacy practices in the home. But there are other areas of family literacy well worth considering, and questions about the accurate and meaningful assessment of the information we gather. In our partnership with the Dallas Public Schools, described in Nancy Hadaway's article, we wanted to ask and answer some of these questions. This joint project between Dallas Public Schools and the University of Texas Arlington, while focused specifically on literacy

project development and implementation, also included a family survey component.

An initial draft of a survey designed to tap into basic literacy practices in the home was developed and shared through the regular study groups involved in the year-long project. We discussed our objectives in gathering such data, the difficulties in accurately assessing what was happening outside of the school environment, and the complications of administering and collecting survey data from several thousand participants. There were teachers, parents, and administrators from numerous elementary campuses in some of Dallas's lowest socioeconomic

areas involved in this project. These individuals, in turn, represented multiple sections of classrooms from grades K–3. How could we systematically gather accurate information about how many parents were reading aloud to their children on a daily basis, for example? We couldn't; at least not with the time and resources at our disposal. Thus, we decided to shift our emphasis to "casting a wide net" to examine current practices, rather than attempting to establish any exact or comprehensive conclusions. We know from the foundational work of researchers such as Shirley Brice Heath (1983), Gordon Wells (1986), and Denny Taylor and Catherine Dorsey-Gaines (1988) that

truly meaningful data about family literacy practices is gleaned from families and neighborhoods when there is a presence, a dialogue, a relationship, and an investment over time.

Our project was focused primarily on mentoring schools as they developed indigenous projects that fostered family literacy in their own unique school communities. But we also wanted to glean a basic understanding of the status quo. Since we did not have the means for authentically surveying families firsthand, we chose the venue of the classroom for our data collection. Our pipeline of information was the children themselves. Interestingly enough, the whole issue of “family literacy assessment” led to a fruitful debate in our study groups. We discussed the pros and cons of surveying families through paper-and-pencil means, as well as how to get responses back, whether we could trust self-reported data, and the process of making generalizations based on such samples.

We also discussed the survey instrument itself: What kinds of questions were we going to ask? What were we trying to discover? We went back to the kinds of literacy practices we had been reading and talking about in our study groups. The modeling of reading was an obvious priority, but clearly there were other aspects to literacy that we believed were important and worth investigating. We decided to focus on all the language arts: reading, writing, listening, and speaking. We wanted to recognize a range of family literacy options. We even included questions related to the use of nonprint media and computers. We would keep the language clear and simple, with open-ended questions that didn’t necessarily have obvious “teacher pleasing” answers. We had to keep in mind children’s perceptions of the language we were using. For example, instead of asking “Do your parents write at home?” we decided to ask, “What kinds of writing have you seen your

family do at home?” [See Figure 1.]

The next step in implementing this assessment was to determine the method of administration. Study groups decided early on against sending home paper-and-pencil surveys because historically, return rates had not been good. Instead, we relied on teachers to survey their students orally as a whole-class activity. We understood that this would result in a collective perception rather than strictly quantitative data, but it would be a beginning. Having questions asked by the teachers with whom the children were most familiar would create a relatively comfortable and naturalistic setting for talking about families and homes. The questions would be provided on overhead transparencies; the teacher would introduce the question to the class as a whole, jotting down individual and group responses right on the transparency. The method for collecting the data was demonstrated to the participating members during one of our evening work sessions. All of the classrooms in grades K–3 from each school would participate. The study group members disseminated and collected the surveys themselves.

Remember that we merely recorded the *presence* of literacy activities, rather than the *frequency* of each activity. Thus we have a “snapshot” of home literacy from the point of view of the children. As narrow as this perspective might seem, some intriguing findings emerged. The results reflected a range of activities that support children’s literacy development in the home. As the teacher, parent, and administrator representatives on the project presented and discussed these results, it was revealing to note their own reactions to the findings, their surprise at the variety of home literacy activities present, and the pedagogical possibilities for linking home literacy activities and classroom practice.

Results

Do urban parents read aloud to their children at home? Yes, according to

our child participants. “Parents” were cited twice as often as any other reader. However, siblings, grandparents, cousins, aunts/uncles, friends, other children, and day care providers were also mentioned as leaders of read-aloud experiences. What kinds of books were being read? At the moment, the most popular choice was the “Arthur” books by Marc Brown. This may be a tie-in with a new and popular television program based on the Arthur books. It is also gratifying to note, however, that 30 other different titles were specifically mentioned by the children surveyed, including: *Clifford*, *The Three Little Pigs*, *Cinderella*, Dr. Seuss books, *Beauty and the Beast*, *Winnie the Pooh*, Goosebumps books, and the Bible. Children also noted that their families read all kinds of printed matter. The top four favorites, in descending order, were the newspaper, magazines, books, and the Bible.

In addition to these, children reported reading many forms of “everyday” or “environmental” print, including: the mail, cookbooks, instructions, computer text, the dictionary, textbooks, homework, signs and billboards, comics, poetry, diaries, catalogs, *TV Guide*, the phone book, greeting cards, Mapsco, work “stuff,” puzzles, and bills. And where do families get their reading material? From the library, hands down, twice as often as any other source. But also from grocery stores, bookstores, friends and neighbors, bookclubs, bookfairs, through the mail, at the barber’s, at garage sales, at work, at discount and other stores, at church, from school, at the gas station, at the day care center, and at the hospital.

What about writing? We asked children, “What kinds of writing have you seen your family do at home?” Their most frequent response was “letters,” “checks,” and “grocery lists.” Again, many examples of “everyday” or authentic writing activities were also volunteered, including writing on the computer, notes, homework, applications, menus, songs, ad-

dresses, resumes, phone numbers, orders, invitations, poems, journals, cards, money orders, and directions.

We wondered about oral literacies, too, such as storytelling. Did families still share stories orally? What kinds? The children told us that parents, siblings, grandparents, cousins, and aunts/uncles do tell stories at home. What kind? The most popular were ghost stories! But children were also listening to family stories, original stories, bedtime stories, and “once upon a time” stories. Singing and

songs interested us, too. Here was yet another oral venue for developing literacy. Again, in nearly all the classrooms, children reported singing in the home—especially with the radio or religious songs. Other singing at home included holiday songs, songs from TV, bedtime songs, songs from tapes and CDs, and family songs.

What about nonprint media? National statistics tell us children watch plenty of television. Our survey revealed that children generally

prefer cartoons and videos to other forms of media entertainment. They also mentioned, less often, school programs, movies, holiday programs, and television sitcoms.

Homework is a literacy activity that actively links home and school. We wondered whether families were involved in this, too. The results were somewhat mixed. Parents and siblings helped with homework three times as often as any other source of support. Aunts/uncles, grandparents, day care providers, friends, and cousins were also noted as helping with homework. Interestingly, “no one” [helps me with my homework] was cited as often as these latter sources.

Finally, our collaborative group was curious about what activities might bring family members to the school. We were actively seeking meaningful ways to host families on campus. Thus we asked, “What brings your family to school?” Parent-teacher conferences were named twice as often as any other occasion. Next were PTA meetings, special programs, honor assemblies, volunteering, field day, and pick up/drop off.

Although we knew many of the families we worked with would not necessarily own home computers, we wanted to recognize this source of literacy activity in our survey. Thus we also asked the children, “Do you have a computer at home?” and “What kinds of things does your family use the computer for?” Although we do not have exact data on the number of computers in the homes involved, we know the chief use of the computer for this population was games. This application was mentioned twice as often as the next most popular activity—writing. Other uses included: reading, work, typing, math, and homework.

Conclusion

Collecting this data was a powerful exercise in many ways. First, the extensive collaboration in the development of the survey instrument and in planning its administration was

<p>School Teacher Grade level</p> <p>Family Literacy Project Dallas Public Schools in collaboration with University of Texas Arlington</p> <p>QUICK TALLY SURVEY (K–3)</p> <p>DIRECTIONS: Discuss each question orally with your class. Write down their answers as they respond.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Does anyone ever read to you at home? Who? Do you have a favorite book you like to have read to you? What is it? 2. What kinds of things do the people in your family like to read? (Books, magazines, the newspaper, the mail, the Bible, <i>Ebony</i>, <i>Time</i>, etc.) 3. Where does your family like to get their books and magazines? (Public library, bookstores, bookfairs, bookclubs, grocery store, friends and neighbors, etc.) 4. What kinds of writing have you seen your family do at home (Letter writing, grocery lists, messages, checks, writing on the computer, etc.) 5. Does anyone tell stories at home? Who? What kind of stories? (“Once upon a time” stories, bedtime stories, ghost stories, family stories, made-up stories, etc.) 6. Does anyone sing songs at your house? Who? What kind of songs? (Religious songs, Christmas carols, camp songs, bedtime songs, songs from the radio, etc.) 7. What movies, plays, or TV programs do you and your family enjoy watching the most? (Cartoons, videos, programs, theater, holiday shows, etc.) 8. Who helps you with your homework? (At home, at school, at day care, with friends, etc.) 9. What brings your family to school? (PTA meetings, parent/teacher conferences, special programs, field day, honor assemblies, volunteering at school, etc.) 10. Do you have a computer at home? What kinds of things does your family use the computer for? (Games, reading, writing, etc.)

Figure 1.

fairly unique. Many perspectives were represented in the endeavor. Second, the very process of gathering the data was enlightening. In many cases, we broadened the definition of literacy that many held. In this urban setting, it was encouraging to see that many parents were active participants in their children's literacy development, particularly in the area of reading aloud, telling stories, sharing songs, helping with homework, and coming to school for conferences. Environmental print and authentic, everyday writing were consistent vehicles for promoting literacy, as were religious songs and the Bible in many homes.

Our classroom-based surveys attempted to take a "snapshot" of a variety of home literacy activities. As this surveying process evolved, it also

became another means of promoting a more inclusive understanding of literacy, even multiple literacies, among the different participants. One final outcome was a bit of a surprise: as we worked to plan literacy development projects in these various urban settings, it also helped us see the many literacy activities that were already occurring in these homes. Instead of taking a "deficit" view of family literacy, we looked to see what kinds of literacy activities were already in place. So often we tend to view the "glass" of urban literacy as half empty. Our collaborative participation in this investigation helped us all to see this same glass as half full. ●

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CEL Election Results

CEL members elected two new members-at-large at the convention in Denver. Robert Infantino of the University of San Diego, California, and Tom Scott, of the Menomonee Falls, Wisconsin, School District will serve three-year terms.

Taking the Initiative: Dallas Teachers as Parent Mentors in the Literacy Development of Children

by Diana L. Wisell, Assistant Professor of Reading/Language Arts, University of Texas Arlington

The literacy demands placed on children today are greater than at any other time in our history. Children must not only learn to decode words, develop deeper vocabulary knowledge, and comprehend text, but also they must be able to read critically, solve problems, and utilize technology. All of this means that parents must play a larger role in the early reading development of their children. Numerous research studies have demonstrated that children who are read to at home tend to have higher achievement in school (Wells, 1986). Other studies (Epstein, 1986; Topping & Wolfingdale, 1985) tend to show that the active involvement of parents in their children's schooling has a positive impact on their school adjustment and performance. However, in order for parents to be actively involved, they may need some information from and training by teachers. For example, in the 1993

American Teacher Survey (Metropolitan Life), 69% of the teachers rated federal support for developing programs to help disadvantaged families work with their children to prepare them for school as highest priority.

I believe that our teachers need to take leadership roles within the schools and broader communities to teach and mentor parents in how to help their children become better readers. For example, teachers can acquaint parents with the emergent literacy model of reading, in which reading is seen as part of a continuum toward becoming an independent reader.

One program with which I have been involved, the Dallas Reading Program, helps teachers (K-3) to become leaders in literacy within their schools. A basic tenet of this program is that children will have adults or other children read to them

each day; they will read with adults or children each day; and they will read independently each day. Within this framework, what the classroom teacher is trying to accomplish can be doubled if parents become involved in the process.

The Dallas Reading Program, which began in the fall semester of 1998 with approximately 500 teachers, is a huge initiative aimed at retraining all Dallas public school teachers in grades K-3 to teach reading more effectively. The stated goal is that all children within the Dallas Independent School District (DISD) will be reading on grade level by the end of third grade. The professionals within DISD realize that reading is at the heart of all learning, and they also realize that writing has to be coupled with reading in order for complete learning to take place. This program takes a balanced approach toward literacy instruction,

building on the work of people such as Marie Clay, Brian Cambourne, Lev Vygotsky, and Lucy Calkins.

Teachers learn the importance of checking children's understanding of print awareness concepts; recognizing children's knowledge of phonemic awareness and ways to help develop those skills; learning to do running records in order to immediately assess a child's reading level and to locate areas for minilessons instruction during guided reading lessons; valuing writing and conducting Writers' Workshop within their classrooms; seeing firsthand how all of these components, especially phonemic awareness and alphabetic principle, connect with writing to help children develop spelling skills, word knowledge, and ultimately, comprehension of text. And as the teachers become more confident in their ability to assess and instruct children in reading, they are also more capable and confident in helping parents learn what they can do to help their own children.

As Debra points out, "The Reading Academy and my [lead reading teacher] have definitely empowered me. First, so many concepts have been clarified for me—like how to conduct guided reading . . . I can help parents by making them aware of what cueing system the student uses or may need to use. For instance, if a child does not use visual cues when looking at a new word, I will strongly encourage the parent to have the child look at all parts of the word as they read . . . I would suggest that the parent read the text first to become familiar with the vocabulary, and then ask comprehension questions. Most of all, I will encourage the parents to read to their child, with their child, and allow the child to read to them."

Or as Lisa pointed out, "This course has been unbelievably helpful for me! The strategies, ideas, and suggestions have been endless . . . After every session and/or reading assignment, I am eager to give a new technique or strategy a shot in my

classroom. In order to get parents involved in their child's reading progress, I let parents know what story we are working on and have the children take the book home every day. I have had several parents express interest and ask questions about how they can help their child with reading. After reading chapter 12 in *Guided Reading* (Fountas & Pinnell, 1996), I might make copies of page 161 to give to parents. [*Author's note*: Page 161 contains prompts for teachers and parents to use to encourage children to make use of all the cueing systems during reading.] I would also encourage parents to make every trip in the car or to the grocery store, etc. a reading experience."

Carla agreed with the ideas stated above and added, "Since taking this class, I have become more aware of my students' reading abilities. I know that I need help with the strategies and the best help and support comes from the parents. One thing I can encourage parents to do is to read to and with their children. This means not only at bedtime, but also while riding in the car; they can read billboards, ads, and road signs. They can also visit the library and get a library card so that they can make regular visits . . . I try to encourage my students' parents to model reading and to set aside a regular time for reading and storytelling."

Or as Wilhelmina points out, "One way that I am going to reach out to parents to get them involved is to talk with them briefly about the reading and writing techniques that I have learned and make sure the parents read to their students every day at least for 15 minutes . . . I will

also let the parents know that our school library is a place that they can use to check out books, and at any time, they can feel free to use our literacy reading lab to learn reading skills that are used to help our students improve their reading."

These are only samples of the teachers' voices who want to be heard, who feel empowered as a result of what they are learning within the Dallas Reading Academy, and who want to reach out to mentor parents and guardians of the children whom they teach. These teachers realize the importance of the caregivers' role in helping children to become effective readers, and, perhaps most important, these teachers now feel empowered to offer ideas, suggestions, and modeling of reading techniques to parents. What a powerful combination for young readers! ●

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Reading Workshop at Spring Conference

CEL and the Secondary Section present "Secondary Readers Reading Successfully," an all-day workshop, March 15, 2000, in conjunction with the NCTE Spring Conference in New York City. Teachers with extensive classroom experience in teaching reading conduct large- and small-group sessions for all teachers of secondary English language arts. Details are available on the NCTE home page. Sign up on the conference registration form available in NCTE section journals and *The Council Chronicle*.

Building Home and School Literacy Partnerships: A Principal's Perspective

by John E. Jacobson, Associate Dean of Education, University of Texas Arlington

In 1990, U.S. governors convened a national education summit, which set six national education goals for schools, students, and communities to be achieved by 2000. The promotion of school/parent partnerships was one of two additional goals added in 1994. Now, a decade later, the National Education Goals Panel, a bipartisan and intergovernmental body of federal and state officials, reports progress in several areas; unfortunately, building school/parent partnerships is not among them (National Education Goals Panel, 1999).

What role does the elementary school principal play in establishing and sustaining this important partnership? To illustrate how elementary principals can effectively build and support school/home literacy partnerships, the following scenario is offered. It is, in a sense, historical fiction: all events occurred, but not in the order presented or with the same faculty. These events come from a culmination of my personal experiences as a classroom teacher, school principal, university professor, literacy consultant, and, most recently, from the activities associated with the Dallas Family Literacy Project.

The Scenario

As the newly appointed principal of the school, I was surprised by the small number of parents in attendance at one of the first PTA meetings of the new school year. I silently wondered why. Didn't parents at this school care about their children? As the meeting progressed, I pondered the effectiveness and purposes of PTA. I also thought about an article I had read earlier that day that had discussed the importance of parent/school partnerships in children's learning. Convinced of the impor-

tance of such partnerships, I decided to bring the matter up for discussion in the next faculty meeting.

I distributed copies of the journal article on partnerships (Flood, Lapp, Tinajero, & Nagel, 1995) before the next faculty meeting so that teachers could read it and be ready to discuss its contents. The meeting agenda was structured to allow enough time to discuss the article. The teachers were not used to discussing such topics at faculty meetings and were initially tentative in offering their opinions and comments. Nevertheless, the faculty decided to form study groups to explore ways to engage parents in school volunteerism and home literacy activities.

A parent advisory committee, consisting of a parent representative from each classroom and a teacher representative, was formed. The same partnership article was distributed to committee members, read, and discussed. The committee members were eager to explore avenues for increasing parent involvement both at school and at home. A special school-wide ad hoc committee on volunteerism and family involvement was created to merge the efforts of the faculty and parent advisory committees. This new committee met regularly throughout the fall and winter months, seeking and collecting information by visiting schools, reading printed materials, and soliciting help from experts through interviews. After several meetings, family/school partnership plans were developed and presented to the individual faculty and parent advisory committees. The ad hoc committee determined that effective family literacy partnerships must be built upon the expressed needs and wishes of parents (Come & Fredericks, 1995).

To assess parent needs and

wishes, the committee suggested several approaches. First, family input was solicited schoolwide through literacy questionnaires designed for both parents and students. Because many of the parents had limited English proficiency, parent questionnaires were written in both English and the dominant second language (Power, 1999). Second, teachers talked with parents as they dropped off or picked up their children at school. Third, teachers solicited comments from children about home literacy practices through classroom discussions. Fourth, teachers collected additional information by visiting children's homes and talking with their parents and family members. Teachers then constructed individual "family stories" for each child that described children and family literacy circumstances (Edwards, 1999). These served to inform teachers about the children's literacy experiences and helped guide teachers' decisions about classroom instruction. Finally, other individuals were able to offer opinions and ideas through a suggestion box placed in the school's lobby.

The parent survey was devised to identify areas of parent expertise and interests so that parents could become a valuable classroom resource. For example, parents who had traveled widely were invited into classrooms to share information about people and places. Parents also shared customs of their culture, such as childhood stories, games, foods, and holiday celebrations; demonstrated occupational skills and hobbies; and read their favorite stories and books to students. All activities served as a bridge between home and school by involving parents in their children's education.

Using information from various

assessments, the committee determined that many of the parents lacked the necessary literacy skills to help their children. As a result, a family literacy center was established in one of the school's empty classrooms. The center was arranged so that the atmosphere felt homelike rather than institutional. Included were rocking chairs, play centers, computers, and reading nooks with many easily accessible reading materials for children and parents. How-to pamphlets and videos on child care and parenting were also available. After-school and weekend seminars were created and taught by school counselors, classroom teachers, parents, and local college adult education teachers (Ermis, 1996). Seminar topics included Working with Preschoolers, Learning to Speak and Read English, Helping Your Child Learn to Read, Family Activities that Promote Literacy Development, Using the Computer, and Helping Your Child Be Successful (Lewis, 1992). Programs such as Head Start and Home Instruction Program for Preschool Youngsters (HIPPY) that have strong parent involvement components were researched, and ideas gleaned from those programs, such as helping parents learn best practices in selecting books and reading to their children, were incorporated into the school offerings.

After reviewing several research reports, the ad hoc committee learned that the effects of parent involvement on children's reading scores were significant. When parent involvement was low, classroom means averaged 46 points below the national average on standardized tests, and when involvement was high, classroom means averaged 28 points above the national average—a difference of 74 points. Even after adjustment to account for possibly confounding attributes of communities, schools, principals, classes, and students, the association between parent involvement and classroom achievement remained, although the observed gap of 74 points was reduced to 44 points

(U.S. Department of Education, 1996). The committee also learned that children's standardized test scores improved in direct relationship to the amount of time children spent reading (Anderson, Wilson, & Fielding, 1988) and that reading scores also improved if parents were involved (Epstein, 1991).

From this information, a variety of home/school reading programs were created to involve parents with their children's reading. One such teacher-created program was Catch a Teacher in the Library. Every Thursday evening, a teacher from the school was assigned to be in the neighborhood public library. Students who came to the library that evening and found the teacher reading would be given a slip of paper on which to write their names and grades. An additional slip could be given for each family member brought to the library by the student. The slips were then placed in a box located at the circulation desk, collected by the teacher at the end of the evening, and returned to the school. The next morning a student's name was drawn from the box, and the winner's name was announced over the intercom. The winning child was allowed to select a book from a collection donated by a local community organization for this purpose. In addition to connecting home and school, the program fostered public library use. To help encourage children's out-of-school reading, several incentive programs were incorporated, including Pizza Hut's Book-It, ice cream parties, and Reading Bingo (children read from various genres to fill in bingo squares on cards) (Vaughn, 1994).

Perhaps the most exciting, motivational school reading program was the annual April overnight reading marathon for third- through fifth-grade students. At the beginning of the school year, reading marathon qualification requirements were outlined for students during a student assembly and for parents at the first back-to-school event. To qualify for the reading marathon event,

students had to read an average of 20 out-of-school minutes per day beginning at the start of the school year. At home, students recorded minutes read per day on a monthly calendar provided by the school. At the end of each month, parents verified the minutes read by signing their child's calendar, which was then returned to the school and exchanged for a new one. To help ensure that every child qualified for the reading marathon, teachers communicated monthly with parents about qualifying problems and gave encouragement to those students who fell behind.

The reading marathon was held from 6:00 p.m. to 11:00 p.m. on a Friday evening. Children came with preapproved books, pillows, sack lunches, munchies, and pajamas. There were ten-minute breaks every hour, and parents were invited to come read with their children during the 8:00–9:00 p.m. reading period. Then at 9:00 p.m., the books, pillows, and sleeping bags were moved aside and everyone took a one-hour break to eat sack lunches, play games, and prepare for the last hour of reading. (Throughout the evening, any student not reading during the reading periods was given notice for off-task behavior. If the behavior continued, the student was disqualified and sent home. Students wanted so much to be included that none received a second notice.) The sight of having children, parents, and teachers all reading together on a Friday evening was inspiring. At 11:00 p.m., an awards assembly was held, and certificates were issued. Boys and girls were then separated into two rooms where children prepared for bed. In the morning, breakfast was provided and the children were dismissed to return home. This activity not only encouraged home reading, but involved parents throughout the year. It also fostered children's ability to read for extended time periods, provided teacher and parent reading role models, and instilled lifelong reading habits in children (Jacobson, 1998).

Although the ad hoc committee

concluded that parent involvement was critical, they also found through informal assessments that many parents were reluctant to communicate with teachers or even come to school. They explored ways to open lines of communication and help parents feel more comfortable about coming to school. One successful program that fostered positive home/school relationships was the Sunshine Gram. The Sunshine Gram was a positive note to students written by teachers on 4" x 5" two-sheet NCR (carbonless copy) paper. A brightly shining sun at the top of the note reflected its positive nature. Each day teachers identified at least two children from each class who they felt needed and warranted a positive note. Teachers wrote specific comments on how the child had performed well on an assignment, had been kind to someone, or had demonstrated a caring attitude towards others or schoolwork. A copy of the Sunshine Gram was given to me so that I could give additional positive reinforcement to children in the cafeteria, hallways, and playgrounds, or to parents through telephone calls or conversations at school.

Among the most fruitful events in bridging school and home were neighborhood meetings. Instead of having all PTA-type meetings at the school, families from various areas of the school boundaries were asked to host neighborhood meetings. These meetings became popular and were very well attended. In the intimate and less intimidating setting of a home, many parents expressed feelings and ideas that they normally would not have shared in a larger setting. As the principal, I attended all neighborhood meetings, but teachers were assigned to attend just a few. As information was exchanged, parents felt that their opinions and feelings were valued. As a result, the education of their children became more of a partnership as many helpful suggestions and ideas were exchanged.

To promote more writing at home involving the family, a program called

Traveling Tales was adopted in the primary grades (Reutzel & Fawson, 1990). Every Friday, a backpack containing writing materials was sent home with one child from each class with instructions to involve family members in creating a story of their choice. Over the weekend, families worked to create stories, and on Monday, each class was able to hear a family-written story. Some of the stories were fictional; others were more autobiographical. This activity helped to increase students' writing skills, and also helped teachers learn

All of these programs and procedures were established and implemented as a result of the expressed needs and wishes of parents. Both parents and teachers became willing to work together in a spirit of shared responsibility.

more about their students' families.

Through the various assessments, the ad hoc committee found that parents wanted more information about what their children were learning and doing at school and how they could extend the learning at home. Back-to-school nights were held more frequently, and specific information about classroom curriculum was shared. Teachers gave parents suggestions for at-home learning. Bilingual parent newsletters containing tips for parents were distributed monthly. A parent volunteer program was established to allow parents to work directly with children and teachers in classrooms rather than just to perform secretarial activities. Training seminars for parent volunteers provided specific tutoring strategies and suggestions on how to work with children. (An excellent resource on this is Beth Ann Herrmann's *The Volunteer Tutor's Toolbox*.)

In addition to involving parents as volunteers, the whole community was

invited to participate. Students from a neighboring high school (many of whom were siblings of our students) worked once a week in classrooms. A foster grandparent program sponsored by the county government allowed retired volunteers to work with children and provided them with a lunch. Volunteers from church groups, businesses, League of Women Voters, Kiwanis, Lions, Elks, General Federated Women's International, and other community-based organizations read to children, helped them with their writing, and provided general tutoring services. In addition, these volunteers served as great role models and friends to many children. A simple check-in, check-out tracking system was implemented to account for the quality and quantity of volunteer service. This system helped the school be more effective and efficient in using volunteers.

All of these programs and procedures were established and implemented as a result of the expressed needs and wishes of parents. Both parents and teachers became willing to work together in a spirit of shared responsibility. As care was taken to establish and maintain open lines of communication, parents became active participants in making and following through on decisions. With children, parents, educators, and community members willingly participating together in a learning partnership, standardized test scores increased, children read more frequently, and student writing improved. No longer were PTA meetings sparsely attended. Parents at this school demonstrated their long-term, caring commitment to their children's education by becoming involved in the educational programs at home as well as at school.

In reflecting back to the first PTA meeting I attended, I realized that the low attendance by parents wasn't caused by indifference. What was missing were the various vehicles that fostered and facilitated the critically important partnership between the home and school. I

learned that an elementary principal must first desire parent involvement and then become a facilitator in making that involvement happen. ●

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“Best Article” Winner Announced

Kathleen Siegfried was honored at the November CEL meeting in Denver as the recipient of the Conference on English Leadership’s “Best Article” award for items published in the *English Leadership Quarterly* during 1998. Henry Kiernan, editor of the *Quarterly*, presented the author with a plaque during the CEL luncheon.

The award honors the author of the best article, so chosen because of its value to the department chair, the quality of its writing, and its originality. Siegfried, who is the K–12 Humanities Supervisor at Bordentown Regional High School District in New Jersey, addressed the staff development and curriculum implications of implementing block scheduling. In “Breaking the Bonds of Time: Block Scheduling as a Pathway to Change” published in the May 1998 issue, she wrote: “What this plan for block scheduling had given us was time to focus on change, as well as on one other critical element: a felt need for change.”

Honorable mention went to Richard P. DuFour for “The Thunder of What You Do Versus the Whisper of What You Say” (October 1998) and Robert Perrin for “Opportunities to Succeed: Guiding Students through the Process of Scholarship Application” (August 1998).

The judging committee included: Jacqueline Brown Frierson, Maryland; Tohru Inoue, Wisconsin; and Don Woodruff, Virginia.

Call for Manuscripts

Guest editor Timothy Dohrer is seeking manuscripts for the February 2001 *ELQ* issue on Best Practices in Curriculum Integration. In light of recent interest in curriculum integration and interdisciplinary curriculum (including an issue of *ELQ*), it would be useful to explore specific accounts of teachers engaging in integrated lessons, units, and courses. How are teachers and schools turning research into actual classroom practice? What pitfalls should school leaders be aware of in implementing integrated or interdisciplinary curricula? In what ways does English connect with a variety of disciplines or topics? How does integration effect coverage, especially in regard to literature? How are students reacting to our interdisciplinary and integrated curriculum efforts?

Send manuscripts by **October 15, 2000**, to: Dr. Timothy Dohrer,
New Trier High School,
385 Winnetka Ave.,
Winnetka, IL 60093.
Phone (847)446-7000, ext. 2671;
e-mail: dohrert@nttc.org.



Call for Manuscripts— Future Issues

The *English Leadership Quarterly*, a publication of the NCTE Conference on English Leadership (CEL), seeks articles of 500–5,000 words on topics of interest to those in positions of leadership in departments (elementary, secondary, or college) where English is taught. Informal, firsthand accounts of successful department activities are always welcomed. Software reviews and book reviews related to the themes of upcoming issues are encouraged.

A decision about a manuscript will be reached within two months of submission. The *Quarterly* typically publishes one out of ten manuscripts it receives each year.

Surveys of our readers reveal these topics of interest: leadership studies, class size/class load, support from the business community, at-risk student programs, integrated learning, problems of rural schools, and the whole language curriculum philosophy. Short articles on these and other concerns are published in every issue. In particular, upcoming issues will have these themes:

August 2000 (deadline April 28, 2000)

Block Scheduling

Guest editor: Elizabeth Howard

October 2000 (deadline June 15, 2000)

Mentoring New Leaders

February 2001 (deadline October 15, 2000)

Best Practices in Curriculum Integration

Guest editor: Timothy Dohrer (see call, p. 14)

Manuscripts may be sent on 3.5" floppy disks with IBM-compatible ASCII files or as traditional double-spaced typed copy. Address articles and inquiries to Henry Kiernan, Editor, *English Leadership Quarterly*, West Morris Regional High School District, Administration Building, Four Bridges Road, Chester, NJ 07930; phone 908-879-6404, ext. 281; fax 908-879-8861; e-mail kiernan@nac.net. ●

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