

Amy M. Kay, Andrea Neher, and Lindsey Hall Lush

Writing a Relationship: Home-School Journals

The literacy practice discussed and explained in this article centers around three teachers' use of journals in creating and maintaining a two-way dialogue with families and some of the results of this communication.

"We all carry worlds in our heads, and those worlds are decidedly different. We educators set out to teach, but how can we reach the worlds of others when we don't even know they exist?"

—Delpit, 1995, p. xiv

What appears to exist in many schools today is the attitude of "come to us, we'll tell you what you need to know, and if you listen and learn, then you can be successful in helping your child." Counter to this belief, Freire (1992) posited that "Unless educators expose themselves to the popular culture across the board, their discourse will hardly be heard by anyone but themselves" (p. 91). If teachers speak and are the only ones listening, what need is there for us to speak? Communication becomes effective when teachers listen with respect, so that the stories and wisdom of families can be heard, acknowledged, responded to, and valued. Listen . . .

Allen (2007) noted the importance of understanding family perspective through dialogue when she wrote about personal encounters with her children's teachers and recounted the stories of other parents who yearned for and benefited from increased dialogue with the school. According to Allen, "Dialogue is the foundation of creating welcoming schools and family-child-teacher partnerships, especially when teachers and families do not share the same culture" (p. 79).

In the following accounts, three teachers—Amy, Andrea, and Lindsey—describe their experiences as they engaged in active listening with the families of children in their classrooms by using home-school journals. Through their use, each teacher realized how these journals began to build bridges and relationships between the worlds of home and school. Amy taught for ten years in a public school system in a southeastern university town. Her first five years were in a Pre-K classroom, with the following five years

in Kindergarten. All of her teaching occurred in schools in which 80–85% of the school's population qualified for free or reduced lunch and a majority were African American and Latino. Andrea taught first grade in a Title 1 urban elementary school in the same southeastern university town. All of her students received either free or reduced lunch, and her class was comprised of Latino (Mexican, El Salvadorian, and Costa Rican heritage) and African American students. Lindsey is a fifth-year teacher in a rural school district near the same university town; her students are Latino, African American, European American, and Laotian.

USING JOURNALS TO SPEAK WITH FAMILIES: AMY'S PROCESS

As I entered my first year of teaching, I recalled an idea from a book on family involvement. Prior to the first day of school, I located Shockley, Michalove, & Allen's (1995) *Engaging Families: Connecting Home and School Literacy Communities*, and opened it to the page with the introductory statement for a home reading journal. "Dear Parents, It's always exciting to start a new school year with a new group of students. I look forward to working with your child. Please take a few moments to tell me about your child. Thanks, Barbara Michalove" (p. 19). I readied the journals by adding a printed page with a similar invitation and a few sheets of notebook paper to a 3-prong folder. I did adopt the "Dear Parent(s)" greeting and recall giving intentional thought to the use of the (s), as I was fairly certain some of my students would be in one-parent households, and I wanted to be respectful of that. What I came to realize upon using the dialogue journals was that there were often other family members, not just parents, who were a part of the children's lives, and these other adults became active participants in the use of the journals. In reflecting on this choice of greeting, and

were I to enter into a classroom again, I would adopt a more inclusive invitation, such as “Dear Families” rather than “Dear Parent(s),” or simply omit the two-word greeting altogether.

As they were, with the adapted “Dear Parent(s)” introduction, I distributed the journals at our Open House and briefly explained to the parent, grandparent, aunt, uncle, or other caregiver that “This is a journal for us to use throughout the year. It does not serve as a replacement for any conversations, phone calls, or conferences, but rather as another space where we can talk with each other.” For anyone who was unable to attend Open House, I sent the journal home with the student on the first day of school. I continued to invite families to dialogue through these home-school journals across a 10-year teaching career.

The two-way dialogue of the home-school journals served as a tool for speaking *with* the families, rather than just *to* them. As Freire (1992) noted, “Even when one must speak *to* the people, one must convert the ‘to’ to a ‘with’ the people. And this implies respect for the ‘knowledge of living experience’” (p. 19). The dialogue within the journals helped establish relationships between the families and me as we communicated with each other and respected each other’s experiences, opinions, and contributions to the conversation.

Similar to Shockley, Michalove, and Allen (1995), I intentionally “did not provide initial models of how to respond . . . as [I] wanted each family to construct a functional format and ways of dialoguing that were personally meaningful” (p. 21). I also wanted what I wrote to be in response to issues the families raised, and a preformed model would not have encouraged this responsive dialogue. This dialogic interaction was acknowledged as a partnership in which all participated:

As a result of our partnership, nobody was alone anymore. The teachers no longer felt the sole responsibility for educating the children. The families had concrete ways to participate that were meaningful and generated trust. The children knew their school and homes were united with purpose and position, and they developed trust in the compatibility of learnings (Shockley, Michalove, & Allen, 1995, p. 7).

The journals helped me build relationships with families that supported open communication and allowed me entry into parts of their lives.

The initial invitation to the families to share some written information about their child demonstrated that they were valued and respected as partners in their child’s education as well as appreciated for their home knowledge. From that initial response and throughout the school year, these journals served as a space for ongoing dialogue and provided a link between home and school.

Evidence of Relationships: Given Entry into Families’ Lives

The journals helped me build relationships with families that supported open communication and allowed me entry into parts of their lives. Most of the journal writing at the beginning of the school year held the child as the focal point. This was understandable, as the child was the initial connection between the family and me. However, as the year progressed and relationships developed, the dialogue within the journals broadened

to include more personal information shared by the families. One mother wrote, “The packet of items that he is selling has not been sold. We having hard time. Our wedding planning has been constant

and time consuming.” This brief written explanation of why fundraising items were not being sold provided personal information that allowed me to bring this child’s home life into the classroom setting through conversation with him about the upcoming wedding.

The journals also gave entry into painful instances within some families’ lives. When I wrote in a student’s journal about her unusual behavior on one particular day, her mother wrote:

Our family has been traumatized. We lose a nephew (20 years 10 months) Sunday morning—I’m not sure (she) comprehend it all right now. The older children are busy but are voicing hurt/pain. More involved. Funeral schedule for Friday. We will be going to candle light vision tonight and “wait.” I’m wordless. I will explain more later. We are ok.

This explanation of a family tragedy helped me to better understand the uncharacteristic, challenging behavior of this five-year-old student, which allowed me to be more understanding and responsive to her needs. In talking with the older siblings’ teachers, I realized that this information had

not been shared with them. The journal and the relationship that had been created through its use resulted in this mother feeling that she could comfortably share this information with me and honestly respond to my inquiry.

Events such as funerals, weddings, and other experiences are significant parts of children's lives outside of school, and as such have a significant impact on what is brought into the classroom. By developing trust- and respect-based relationships, I was given entry into the families' lives and these events.

Evidence of Learning: Literacy at Home

Often, conversations in the journals were academically related, focusing on student thinking, achievement, and learning, as is evidenced in this Kindergartner's journal.

Amy (teacher): *Did she share her library book with you? Get her to go through and find all the words she can read and point them out to you. Have fun!*

Mother: *The true story of the 3 little pigs. Well that's a spin off, tonight she will read to the family. I am looking forward to the reading of the library book.*

A few days later . . .

Mother: *(She) ran home from the bus and began reading as soon as she stepped into the door. Now she is trying to read anything she can get her hands on.*

Amy: *Yea! This is great. I want to jump with excitement. I am so happy she's this into reading. She is doing incredibly well in our reading group, and with her attitude and excitement, I just know she'll keep going up. What do you do to encourage her to read?*

Mother: *Our favorite hobby is collecting movies. So whatever family title she can read, sometimes with some help, she can watch before bedtime. Now we rent more subtitle movies, and she tries to keep up with each dialogue. I also ask her about hair products. Reading the labels are becoming more common now than just grabbing a familiar bottle. (She) also has a 30-minute study time during the day—15 minutes of us reviewing her school day and 15 minutes on the phonics pad.*

It is not possible to say absolutely that this conversation would not have occurred without the

journal, but I sincerely doubt that it would have been as extensive or as informative.

In the excerpt that follows, I had asked another parent how she felt about using the journal. She wrote:

I like the journal. I am able to express my cares and concerns with you and not worry about if he will lose the note because it's in his binder in his bookbag. And with your normal procedure of reading it daily, I know you will be able to react to any issue I need resolved. It works for me and I like it. Because reading and writing are fundamental tools of life.

What is particularly interesting about this response is that in her acknowledgment regarding the benefits of using the journal for her personal use and correspondence, she also speaks to the importance of the literacy basis and learning that is occurring for her child "because reading and writing are fundamental tools of life." I find myself wondering, "Without our journal, our relationship, how would I have been aware of the specific value of literacy in this home?" While I did not assume that literacy was not important or valued, the mother's response and my self-questioning of an awareness of these values caused me to become more cognizant of the benefit of our journal.

NEW VERSION OF HOME-SCHOOL COMMUNICATION: ANDREA'S PROCESS

As a white, middle class woman, I continuously reflect on how my language, class, and culture impact my classroom and pedagogy. I have tried to infuse the mandated curriculum with critical perspectives that focus on equity and social justice, examining multiple perspectives and questioning which voices are represented or absent. I look for multiple perspectives in children's literature, field trips, and guest speakers, but have come to realize that, until recently, I rarely considered the viewpoints of my students' parents and families.

During my first five years of teaching, I thought I had been doing an adequate job communicating with the parents and family members of my students. I faithfully wrote short notes in each student's agenda that went home Monday through Thursday. These notes served as reminders about

students' homework or returning a permission slip, and sometimes would even include information about what a child had done in our classroom, such as writing a particularly thoughtful story. I had this agenda-writing routine down to a science and was able to complete this task every day during my lunch period—which meant that approximately 45 seconds was spent on each of my 15 students' agendas.

Recently, I began to reflect on my daily “parent communication” with a group of teachers interested in school–family partnerships. I read about Weekend Journals in *Parents and Teachers Working Together* (Davis & Yang, 2005) and decided to adapt this idea for use with my students and their families. I purchased 15 sewn composition books to serve as our Weekend Journals. I wrote a letter explaining the journals, including my vision for our journal routine, and glued a copy into the inside front cover of each journal. I had the Family Engagement Specialist for our school translate the letter into Spanish because, for more than half of my students' families, this was their home language. I asked families to respond to what their child wrote to them, return the journal on Monday so the children could share their families' letters with the class, and use print rather than cursive so the children could easily read their writing.

Evidence of Learning: Purposeful Writing

When I introduced the Weekend Journals, the children were very excited. Naturally, they had lots of questions. I explained that on each Friday, our Writers Workshop would be devoted to writing letters that would contain at least one question for families to respond to in the Weekend Journal. During the first few weeks, the letters were crafted through shared writing, so support would be in place for all writers to successfully participate. We began by discussing what we had learned during the week and what information we wanted to include. I listed key words and ideas from our week and, with the students' guidance, crafted our letter. Students could choose whether or not to use the shared writing for their journal, which almost every student did during the first few weeks. On Mondays, the children would share the families' responses during our Morning Meeting. Then, during the week, I would write a response to both the

student's and family's letters, and the cycle would begin again on the next Friday.

One benefit of using the Weekend Journals was the opportunity for students to learn more about each other, as well as to become teachers for one another. One student consistently wrote to her parents in Spanish and became a valuable resource to her classmates because she helped other students write their messages in Spanish. Other Latino students chose to write in their Weekend Journals in English and asked the Family Engagement Specialist to translate. The Weekend Journals became a fabulous language teaching resource by giving us multiple opportunities to explore English and Spanish together as we wrote

I explained that on each Friday, our Writers Workshop would be devoted to writing letters that would contain at least one question for families.

about and shared our lives.

Evidence of Relationships: Bringing Families and School Together

The Weekend Journals provided me with a glimpse into my students' unique relationships with their families. In the first letter home in Weekend Journals, one child wrote about what he had been learning in school.

I learned about snakes, Play-Do, and music. I learned a whole bunch of stuff. What was your favorite activity in first grade?

His mother responded:

Wow, the first grade! Although it was such a long time ago, thoughts of the first grade still brings a smile to my face. . . . I remember learning about and planting beautiful flowers for our butterfly garden. At the time, I did not realize that this would lead to my very first paying job in my life.

What makes this exchange especially meaningful is this student does not live with his mother. She was very young when she gave birth to him, so his guardians are his great-aunt and uncle. His mother visits him frequently, and these notes provide one example of the love of schooling both mother and son share. In February, when he wrote about his nervousness in preparing for our upcoming standardized tests, his mother wrote

Anywho fella, no matter how you feel about the CRCT [Georgia's state standardized curriculum

test], I want you to do your absolute best. If you plan on becoming the President of The United States of America, doing great on this test is the best start for reaching your dreams.

It became clear during the first few weeks of our Weekend Journals that the children wanted to learn about their parents' school experiences in order to make connections with their own. Each week their letters ended with a wondering question and invitation to respond, such as, "Did you ever do anything like this in school?"

In many instances, the Weekend Journals served as a means through which families learned about their child's inside-school lives. However, there are just as many examples of Weekend Journals helping me understand students' outside-school lives. During my second year using Weekend Journals, William wrote to his father about our social studies unit on maps and location. He asked his father about important places and locations in his life. On Monday morning, this was written in his Weekend Journal:

Nosotros nacimos en Guatemala nuesta cultura es muy bonita pero en nuestro paiz es muy violento nosotros emigramos hacia aqui porque no podemos vivir en nuestro paiz y no queremos que William ni mi esposa les pasara nada malo mi niño apesarde sucorta edad precensio un crimen de su tio que esta solo tenia 9 anos el y William eran como hermanos el nombre del niño era Tomas mi niño de tan solo 4 anos cuidaba a William como su hermano mayor y para nostotros era nuestro hijo por eso mi niño William tenia mucho mi de vivir en Guatemala y nos vinimos para aca yo le comente un dia a William si queria regresar pero el me contesta y me dijo que no porque le da miedo y a nosotros tambien Gracias

[English translation] We were born in Guatemala. Our culture is very beautiful, but our country is very violent. We migrated here because we could not live in our country and I didn't want anything to happen to William or my wife. Even though my son is very young, he was aware of a crime that occurred against his uncle that was only nine years old. The name of the child was Thomas; my son of only four years always took care of William like his older brother. For us he

It became clear during the first few weeks of our Weekend Journals that the children wanted to learn about their parents' school experiences in order to make connections with their own.

was our son, and for that reason William was very scared of living in Guatemala and we came here. I asked William if he ever wanted to return but he answered no because he is scared and so are we. Thank you.

This information helped me better understand William. His extreme quietness and resistance to extensive activity or verbal interchange seemed more logical, and I was able to respond more compassionately to his withdrawn nature. His father gave me insight into their lives in a way that I do not believe would have occurred through a parent-teacher conference or a face-to-face conversation utilizing an interpreter. As a teacher, this level of understanding about the lives of my students guides me toward being more critically reflective and responsive to my students and their families.

I believe the Weekend Journals have given my students and their families a conversation space that allows them to make connections between past and present experiences. The children have been able to learn about their parents' childhoods and school experiences, and the shared literacy experience of telling and writing stories together has become part of these families' lives. I am reminded of this every Monday morning when the children enthusiastically race into the classroom, clutching their Weekend Journals, ready to share with the class.

Another way the Weekend Journals have helped build and enrich relationships is by facilitating an ongoing dialogue between the families and me. I was unsure how Spanish-speaking parents would view the journals, but my uncertainty quickly disappeared when I saw how much they were writing in the journals. Each message written in Spanish became a learning opportunity for me and my students. We would read the note aloud in Spanish and then translate it together.

During Latino Heritage Month, students invited their parents to our class to share their cultural heritage. We were thrilled to have parents from Costa Rica, Mexico, and Colombia teach us about their countries. One mother from Mexico taught us how to make tamales. I had never eaten tamales before, so I was full of questions about them as well as other traditional Mexican

foods. The next few letters in this student's Weekend Journal were related to food and special family recipes. These notes between the mother and me not only deepened our relationship, but also revealed the strong relationships of the family. She wrote:

All the Mexican foods are special for me, especially when we eat in a family. And maybe one day you can come to our house and make enchiladas with us.

Although I have had the privilege of dining with many of my students' families over the years, this invitation stood out to me because it stemmed from a positive experience that a parent had in sharing her culture and knowledge with our class, connecting the home and school lives of us all.

TEACHER AS LISTENER: LINDSEY'S PROCESS

Davis and Yang (2005) describe how the first conference can be used to open the door to parents. In this first conference, referred to as a "listening conference" (p. 35), the teacher turns to the families as experts on the child and, as its name implies, the teacher listens to learn about the child and his/her family. The teacher's questions of the family include requests for information on who the child is socially, emotionally, and intellectually. This conference is also a time for teachers to ask the family member(s) in these children's lives to share goals for their child in the upcoming year.

The first conference of the year for my new fifth graders took place after only a few weeks of school during the first-quarter midterm; it provided a powerful opportunity to open the door to family involvement early in the year. A short letter confirming the time and place for the conference also included some guiding questions to consider prior to the conference, such as: What play/activities does your child enjoy? How does s/he cope with frustration? What do you think is the most important thing for your child to learn this year?

I met with the mothers, fathers, grandparents, and guardians of the students in my class. Of these families, three were Latino and bilingual,

two were African American, seven were European American, and one was Laotian. Happily, 100% of my students' parents attended this first conference session, but this was not achieved by chance! I began to communicate with my students' families long before this first conference. I initiated contact by mailing personal postcards to each student, and I made at least one phone call per child to check in with parents and make a positive initial connection. I also sent home a newsletter of what was happening in our classroom, including questions to ask the children. My intent through these actions was to communicate clearly that families are critical to children's success and that I valued their role in their child's education.

After conducting this first "listening conference," I wanted to communicate to each parent and family that their voice was important to me and was a resource I hoped to utilize throughout the year. The home-school journal seemed to be an excellent avenue for continuing this dialogue. At the close of each conference, I presented the family with a new journal. I had chosen half-sized, colorful composition notebooks, hop-

[T]his invitation stood out to me because it stemmed from a positive experience that a parent had in sharing her culture and knowledge with our class.

ing these would elicit a more positive response due to the nonthreatening length of the pages. (Several office supply stores will cut full-size composition notebooks in half for a small fee.) Initially, I was concerned with giving the students yet another notebook because we already had a writer's journal and a reader's response journal in our classroom.

I wanted to make clear that this journal was more casual and personal than the others.

Evidence of Relationship: Patience and Understanding in Building Trust

My class of sixteen fifth graders was part of an Early Intervention Program (EIP). All of my students had failed the CRCT, the statewide standardized test, in previous years and were identified as "at risk" of failing again. The class was organized using a reduced class-size model based on research that indicates this strategy offers better opportunities for positive academic achievement. My students did not have a history of positive academic gains, and many had experienced repeated failures. Most students and their families entered the classroom essentially terrified and understandably distrustful of the educational

system. Beginning fifth grade meant two things to them: CRCT tests in math and reading; they knew they must pass both in order to graduate. The primary goal of the students and their families was to achieve this objective, but I knew that to do this, our focus had to extend beyond just filling in the correct bubbles on the test. When I heard about the idea of home-school journals, I realized this could be an opportunity to expand the students' and families' foci, as well as my own.

When I presented the journal to each family at the conclusion of our first conference, I explained that it would serve as a link between school and home. Anyone could put entries into the journal. We would all contribute to the written dialogue in the journals without prescribed rules about how they were to be used. I did not initially establish a required journal time, but suggested that it be used whenever convenient for families.

Journals usually passed between the students and me, but occasionally another adult from the student's home would interject. From casual meetings and phone conversations, it seemed that various family members were eager to write in the journals, but were often rebuffed by their adolescence-approaching children. When they could get their hands on the journal, their voices expressed the constant care and concern they had for their children.

During the first few weeks, journals received from home reflected careful thought toward the challenges the children were experiencing in school. School-related topics, such as academic struggles, school attendance, homework and class work issues, were often brought to my attention through the journal entries. My initial thoughts were that I had perhaps misrepresented my purpose or that the idea behind the journal had been misunderstood, as this was not what I had envisioned. *Didn't the families want me to get to know them? Didn't they want me to learn more about their child on a personal level? Why all this talk about reading and math? Didn't they realize I was working on all these things all day, every day at school?*

Taking into consideration the makeup of my class, I realized that the responses I was receiving were much more significant than I was giving

them credit for initially. This could be the first time these families were feeling like participants in the child's school experience, rather than just receivers of information. After repeated experiences of being told by a teacher or administrator what was wrong with their child, what needed improvement, what they should be doing, I realized that the opportunity to tell *me*, the teacher, what *they*, the families, were doing right and what they would like to see me doing could be quite empowering.

I believe that the combined efforts of the listening conferences, phone calls and notes home, and the existence of the journal built the trust between the families and me. They knew I was ready to listen and willing to take their advice seriously. In other words, I realized that the purpose of the journal was,

in fact, to support parent voice. Perhaps school-related issues would have gone unsupported or even unnoticed by me without the accessibility provided by the journal. I realized I was witnessing and participating in increased dialogue and developing partnership between home and school.

Over time the relationships continued to build, and the information shared in the journals began to relate to personal issues experienced by the families. Several entries addressed job struggles and family support systems during times of hardship. As one parent shared:

It has been an emotional week—my husband left his job of 12 years Friday. But he already has a job lined up, we are so blessed.

Evidence of Learning: Continuing Conversations

The following year, I left my fifth-grade classroom to teach an academically diverse group of third graders. As I began the new school year and reflected on the use of the journals during the previous year, I was constantly reminded of how my students' families had spoken with such confidence by the end of the year. They were active participants in their child's educational experience and knew they were valued and respected as such. I began the school year in the same manner, capitalizing on the first conference as an opportunity to speak a little and listen a lot. I wrote down each

Over time the relationships continued to build, and the information shared in the journals began to relate to personal issues experienced by the families.

expressed goal and concern on a quarterly grid. Later, I made a copy that was sent home for parents to keep. I introduced the home-school journal, each with its own personal message to each student. I felt like the personal message would make a more powerful initial contact than the form letter I had typed and posted to the inside of the journal the previous year.

Students, families, and I wrote back and forth, with journals coming back once every week or so. Based on my struggles the previous year to get children to allow their parents/families access to the journals, I made an effort to increase the journal suggestions for children. For instance, when we wrote about our names in class, I suggested students ask someone at home where their names came from. When I wrote to students, I included families in the greeting, asking questions to encourage discussion.

Even as I wrote to my young third graders, reveling in the different types of responses in comparison to my fifth graders, I reflectively acknowledged how special the conversations were that had occurred in the previous year when anxiety, pressure, and fear about mandated academic requirements dominated much of my conversation with the families. How long did we have to work for trust before those parents and families felt safe enough to voice their concerns and suggestions to me, or to openly ask for help? How much time was lost in the process?

Today, I look at my current third graders and their families and hope that by opening that door with conversations now, I can help establish a trust for teachers that will last through the challenging years ahead. However, I also realize that part of that responsibility will also lie with these students' future teachers, who I hope will extend similar invitations to families.

WHAT WE'VE LEARNED AND QUESTIONS THAT REMAIN

According to Freire (1970), "Dialogue must require an ever-present curiosity about the object of knowledge. Thus, the dialogue is never an end in itself but a means to develop a better comprehension about the object of knowledge" (p. 18). The home-school journals have begun a dialogue

between students, their families, and teachers leading to a better understanding about each other. As Allen (2007) noted, "the journals became places for expressing family values, beliefs, and practices" (p. 110). In these dialogic spaces, home and school were able to connect and respectfully learn from and with each other.

Amy used the parent-teacher journals with every classroom of students across ten years of teaching. Andrea and Lindsey were using the journals for the first time in these accounts and have continued their use. We all agree that the journals allowed relationships to develop with families and students that would not have existed within the typical school-coordinated events, such as Open House, holiday programs, and twice-a-year parent-teacher conferences. Numerous studies have spoken to the importance and benefits of communication and family involvement in children's education experiences. After analyzing 51 studies, Henderson and Mapp (2002) noted, "The evidence is consistent, positive, and convincing: families have a major influence on their children's achievement in school and through life" (p. 7). Other studies (Delgado-Gaitan, 2004; Edwards, 1999; LeFevre &

[T]he journals allowed relationships to develop with families and students that would not have existed within the typical school-coordinated events.

Senechal, 1999; Shockley, Michalove, & Allen, 1995; Swap, 1993) have reached similar conclusions. In our experience, home-school journals provide the opportunity for meaningful family involvement resulting in trust- and respect-based relationships.

By using the home-school journals, our perspectives about the out-of-school lives and relationships of our students has been changed. We share Allen's (2007) realization that, "A serendipitous result of the . . . written dialogue was the tremendous support teachers and parents provided for each other" (p. 111). An additional benefit that Henderson and Mapp (2002) speak to is based in the connection between family involvement and student learning and achievement. "When schools, families, and community groups work together to support learning," as is demonstrated through the use of home-school journals, "children tend to do better in school, stay in school longer, and like school more" (p. 7). While we do not have the longitudinal data to quantitatively support this claim, we collectively believe that the connection

established between school (teacher) and home (families) resulted in a more positive educational experience for our students.

As with any initiative or practice, there have been some challenges. We tried to meet the challenge of being monolingual by using multiple resources. Latino family liaisons or other bilingual coworkers proved to be an incredible resource, but we also built relationships by presenting ourselves as language learners to the families. The families and students themselves were ultimately our most valuable resource as they were present and available on a more regular basis.

For some families, other demands on their lives were such that they did not feel they had time to use the journals regularly, as was evidenced in the following entry, "I'm not trying to be mean but I have three kids I don't have time to answer your question. I work full time and am a full time mother so if it's important or something I need to know I will write back." Amy immediately expressed her appreciation for the openness and honesty in this mother's response and realized it could possibly be the voice for many who were silent and whose journals remained unreturned. In all of the classrooms, a few of the journals went home and were never seen again, usually without any explanation. Care must be given to not rely solely on the home-school journal as a panacea for healthy home-school relationships. As each teacher represented here realized, other means were sometimes needed to connect with families for whom the journal was not a preferred means of communication. These instances were few in number, but could not be overlooked.

Detractors could take the position that involving families in such a dialogic, participatory way in their children's education could in some way cede the authoritative power of the teacher. In their case study of African American and White parents, Lareau and Horvat (1999) found that educators wanted supportive parents, but liked parents who deferred to their authority and accepted their opinions unconditionally. Additional evidence of the expectation of these hierarchical relationships was given by Gonzalez, Moll, and Amanti (2005) when they noted that "although parental involvement is the mantra of every educational reform program, it is often categorically and narrowly defined as parents (usually the

mothers) entering the classroom to facilitate the teacher. This is the barometer of parental interest and support. Yet, if educational institutions are serious about creating partnerships with the community, the relationship cannot be an asymmetrical alliance, with one component defining and limiting the role of its counterpart" (p. 42).

Freire (1992) supported this need for partnership and stated that the presence of others in the educational setting "does not mean denying the indispensable need for specialists. It only means not leaving them as the exclusive 'proprietors' of a basic component of educational practice" (p. 94). The teachers are crucial to the relationship, but they are not the sole determinants of the relationship or its purpose. Just as "dialogue between teachers and students does not place them on the same footing professionally" (p. 101), dialogue between teachers and families does not enable either to act in place of the other. Instead, a successful sharing of information takes place. Freire explained this by saying that "dialogue does not *level* them, does not 'even them out,' reduce them to each other. Dialogue is not a favor done by one for the others, a kind of grace accorded. On the contrary, it implies a sincere, fundamental respect on the part of the subjects engaged in it" (p. 101). Through continued engagement in the home-school dialogue, respect can grow, understanding can be deepened, and trust-based relationships can be formed.

References

- Allen, J. (2007). *Creating welcoming schools: A practical guide to home-school partnerships with diverse families*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Davis, C., and Yang, A. (2005). *Parents and teachers working together*. Turner Falls, MA: Northeast Foundation for Children.
- Delgado-Gaitan, C. (2004). *Involving Latino families in schools: Raising student achievement through home-school partnerships*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin.
- Delpit, L. (1995). *Other people's children: Cultural conflict in the classroom*. New York: The New Press.
- Edwards, P. (1999). *A path to follow: Learning to listen to parents*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Freire, P. (1992). *Pedagogy of hope*. New York: Continuum.
- Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. New York: Continuum.
- Gonzalez, N., Moll, L., & Amanti, C. (2005). *Funds of knowledge: Theorizing practices in households, communities, and classrooms*. Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Henderson, A., & Mapp, K. (2002). *A new wave of evidence: The impact of school, family, and community connections on student achievement*. Austin: Southwest Educational Development Laboratory.

Lareau, A., & Horvat, E. M. (1999). Moments of social inclusion and exclusion: Race, class, and cultural capital in family-school relationships. *Sociology of Education*, 72(1), 37-53.

LeFevre, J., & Senechal, M. (1999). The relations among home-literacy factors, language and early-literacy skills, and reading acquisition. In M. Evans (Chair), *Home literacy practices: Precursors, dimensions, and outcomes in the early school years*. [Symposium presented at the biennial meetings for the *Society for Research in Child Development*]. Albuquerque, NM. Retrieved October 1, 2005, from <http://temagami.carleton.ca/cacr/chomelit.pdf>.

Shockley, B., Michalove, B., & Allen, J. (1995). *Engaging families: Connecting home and school literacy communities*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Swap, S. (1993). *Developing home-school partnerships: From concepts to practice*. New York: Teachers College Press.

Amy M. Kay is a doctoral candidate in Language and Literacy Education and Director of the Child Development Lab at the McPhaul Center at the University of Georgia. **Andrea Neher** has taught first and second grades in Athens, Georgia, for the last nine years. She is working on her doctorate in Language and Literacy Education at the University of Georgia. **Lindsey Hall Lush** is a master's student in Language and Literacy Education at the University of Georgia and a third-grade teacher in the Jackson County School System in Athens, Georgia.