Supporting Families as Collaborators in Children’s Literacy Development

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TOWARDS A FULLY LITERATE CANADA

“Children are born into a world of language. They are immersed in the words of their parents, their siblings, and those who care for them. Their speech emerges gradually and naturally as they learn to respond to those around them. . . . Lives of literacy begin in a family setting.” (p. 35)¹

Many families are unaware of the valuable role they play in apprenticing their children into literacy. When asked what they do to support their children’s literacy development, they often think in terms of school-based tasks, rather than the things they do each day: singing a lullaby, playing card games, talking at the dinner table or checking email. Because there is no evident academic or school connection, families undervalue what they do that fosters literacy. It is essential, then, that educators help parents understand the important role they play in their children’s education. As the Ministry of Education points out, “When parents are engaged and involved, everyone – students, parents, and families, teachers, schools, and communities – benefits, and our schools become increasingly rich and positive places to teach, learn and grow” (p. 5).²

What We Know

Families spontaneously engage in meaningful and purposeful literacy, regardless of socioeconomic, cultural and linguistic differences.³ Research demonstrates, however, that there is often disparity between what is valued at school and what is practised at home, which may marginalize some families, particularly those whose literacy levels may fall below the norm or who may

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¹ Cited in the text.
² Cited in the text.
³ Cited in the text.

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be engaged in learning English.\textsuperscript{4,5,6} Educators, therefore, need to (a) examine their assumptions about linguistic, cultural and socioeconomic diversity, literacy, and family resources\textsuperscript{6,7} and (b) reinforce the significance of literacy activities – including multilingual and culturally diverse literacy practices – in which children and families are already engaged.\textsuperscript{3,6,8}

Our schools are rich with cultural, linguistic and familial diversity. Yet in working with a predominantly English-language curriculum, many teachers struggle to infuse this diversity into classroom practice,\textsuperscript{3,6,9} which may limit the opportunities for collaboration and corresponding levels of family engagement.\textsuperscript{7} Each family has a unique set of literacy practices, ways of knowing and expectations that contribute to their children’s school success and academic achievement, particularly in literacy.\textsuperscript{3,7,11} When these differences are viewed as “resources” and invited into the classroom, children can make connections between what happens at home and what happens at school.\textsuperscript{5,6,10} Complementary home and school practices, such as the collaborative creation of multilingual texts, signal to families that reading, writing and talking – in any language, with any text – contribute to overall literacy development.\textsuperscript{5,6} Even more critical is the validation and legitimation of family literacies.\textsuperscript{5}

To engage families as partners in literacy, we must find ways to implement collaborative practices that validate families’ significance in children’s ongoing literacy development, build on and extend existing family literacy practices and affirm the cultural and linguistic identities of families.\textsuperscript{5,6,8}

**Ways to Engage Families as Literacy Collaborators**

**At the beginning of the year...**

*Get to know your families by taking a family literacy inventory*\textsuperscript{10} – Focus on what families already do to help them understand their role as collaborator and model in their children’s education. Reinforce the importance of multilingual, culturally diverse and multimodal practices; encourage families to talk to their children about what they are doing. Model how to do this by briefly sharing your own multilingual, culturally diverse and multimodal practices. Questions such as those suggested in “A Family Literacy Inventory” (below) can be adapted for use with diverse families.

### A Family Literacy Inventory

**How often and in what languages ...**

- are you seen reading a newspaper, magazine or sales flyer, viewing a website or talking about the latest film or music release?
- do you communicate through text messages, emails, letters, thank-you cards, phone or video calls or face-to-face communication?
- do you tell and retell family stories, sing songs or share cultural or bedtime stories, poems or rhymes?
- do you encourage your children to join in or make up new stories, rhymes or songs?
- do you read, write and talk for different purposes in your home (e.g., making grocery lists)?

Let families know that you are interested in getting to know their children and what they bring to the classroom – Send home a questionnaire or schedule a conference to ask about children’s favourite stories, poems or songs, and their special interests, talents, strengths and goals for the year. Alternatively, design and display an “All About Me poster,” using photos, images or words in multiple languages.
All Year Long…

**Acknowledge families as collaborators in children’s literacy development** – Find ways to keep the communication lines between home and school open. When necessary, engage the services of a translator or encourage families to bring along a relative or friend who can serve as a translator.

- **Touch base.** Commit to communicating with five families a week, through notes, email or phone, whichever is best for the family. Let them know that you’ve noticed something interesting or exciting or send home an interesting work sample. Surprise families with a “caught you being good” call or note.

- **Invite input.** Schedule just five minutes more for each parent-teacher interview. Let families speak first. Ask them to tell you what they noticed and then fill in the gaps. Use samples of students’ work and exemplars to help families understand exactly where their children are and provide them with specific suggestions of how to support and extend this learning at home.

- **Plan for involvement.** School initiatives such as kindergarten orientations, beginning-of-year barbeques and curriculum nights provide an informal contact point for families and schools. You may also facilitate extended conversations with families that address issues families consider significant (e.g., Ministry policies).

**Reinforce the modelling of literate behaviours** – Invite families to extend the exercise by sharing their stories through a series of images (drawn, painted or photographed). Engage families in workshops or add brief “family tips” to school newsletters to ensure that parents realize that their role as literacy models continues long after school entry.

- **Help families to understand that reading, writing and talk in any language contribute to literacy development.** Create multi-language texts with children, families or communities. Use texts, such as David Bouchard’s *Nokum is My Teacher*, as models to create new multi-language children’s stories. Visit websites, such as Thornwood Public School’s Dual Language Showcase (http://www.thornwoodps.ca/dual/index.htm) and Family Treasures and Grandma’s Soup – A Dual Language Book Project (http://www.duallanguageproject.com), for tips and inspiration.

- **Make connections between family traditions and literacy.** Show families how their children’s favourite family stories, songs or rhymes can be recorded – in more than one language, if possible – illustrated, sung, read and dramatized. Encourage children and families to share these texts at school.

- **Model reading aloud, no matter what age, language or text.** Encourage parents to establish a read-aloud routine. Demonstrate how planning questions prior to reading will allow parents to discuss the text with their child. Remind them that younger children like to reread the same texts and will at some point join in or turn the pages – sowing the seeds for reading on their own. Show them how to extend texts through fun activities (e.g., paint a picture, act it out, follow a recipe).

**Implement fun and meaningful activities that families can’t help but do again just for fun** – Invite families to engage in home practice that incorporates and extends skills and strategies previously introduced at school.

- **Adventure with journey animals.** Choose a stuffed or plastic animal that will travel to each family’s home. Find a text that will inspire interesting adventures (e.g., *Adventures of Cow* by Lori Korchek or *Flat Stanley* by Jeff Brown). Pack a bag that includes a journal, a camera or markers/crayons, writing instruments, etc. Model one journal entry and ask each family to add another.

- **Turn homework into family literacy practice.** Ensure that what you send home can be done independently. Challenge children to teach parents
how to do something and to come up with ways to share what they have done at home in class. It’s a subtle shift, but far more fun and indicative of what a child can do!

**Acknowledge students as collaborators in home-school communication** – Encourage families to talk about their days, goals and accomplishments (in their language of choice).

- **Give them something to talk about.** Often children don’t talk because they can’t isolate something to talk about. Send home something small to stimulate talk!
- **Use daily family message journals as an alternative to agendas.** Messages about school activities or homework written by students to family provide an authentic purpose for writing and reinforce the idea that writing is writing in any language.
- **Write Friday letters.** Encourage students to write a letter that summarizes what they learned, found most interesting or liked best at school that week; younger students can co-construct the letter through shared writing, adding images to personalize texts. Compile each student’s letters in a journal, or folder, leaving room for parents to respond.
- **Co-construct classroom newsletters.** Encourage students to gather interesting articles and bits of information in a file that will be used to prepare the highlights of the class’s month. Don’t forget to reserve space for upcoming events.

**In Sum…**

Families are the first and most powerful teachers of their children. What children learn prior to entering the school doors, without formal instruction, is worthy of recognition and appreciation. The goal of school initiatives should, therefore, be to weave together diverse family literacy practices and academic/schooled literacy practices. Acknowledging families as collaborators in their children’s literacy development, and validating cultural, linguistic and familial practices, ultimately sets the stage for lifelong engagement with literacy and learning.

**REFERENCES**


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