



Reading Horizons: A Journal of Literacy and Language Arts

Volume 42
Issue 4 March/April 2002

Article 3

4-1-2002

Literacy Liaison: Sending Literacy Home and Back to School

Nicki McCullough Calabrese
Canisius College

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/reading_horizons



Part of the Education Commons

Recommended Citation

Calabrese, N. M. (2002). Literacy Liaison: Sending Literacy Home and Back to School. *Reading Horizons: A Journal of Literacy and Language Arts*, 42 (4). Retrieved from https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/reading_horizons/vol42/iss4/3

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Special Education and Literacy Studies at ScholarWorks at WMU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Reading Horizons: A Journal of Literacy and Language Arts by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks at WMU. For more information, please contact wmu-scholarworks@wmich.edu.





Literacy Liaison:
Sending Literacy Home and Back to School

Nicki McCullough
Calabrese

Canisius College

A pilot project, conducted in a pre-kindergarten classroom, set out to evaluate the effectiveness of sending literacy bookbags home. The classroom teacher provided children with a variety of literacy bookbags to be taken home on a weekly basis. These bookbags contained books, journals, and writing tools along with activities for family/child interactions. Children shared their home experiences with classmates when they return to school. Parents were surveyed to determine their opinions regarding the project.

Each day, some of the children in Mrs. Dyce's pre-kindergarten class leave their early childhood center with a smile and a bookbag. At least once a week, their families know that they will be bringing home a literacy activity in which the entire family can participate.

Benefits of Home-School Connections

Early childhood educators recognize that the relationship between families and schools can be powerful (Saracho, 2002). Important to this study are the findings that parents play a key role in nurturing children's early literacy development (Brock & Dodd, 1994; Cline, 2001). A survey by Chira (1993) identified parent involvement as the greatest priority for improving education. This notion is supported by a variety of studies that support the positive relationship between schools and families and its positive impact on young children's achievement (Seldin, 1991; Marcon, 1993). When school and family communicate and work together, children reap the benefits academically, socially, and emotionally (Kelley-Laine, 1998).

According to Taylor (1983), the home environment has a direct influence on children's early literacy development. The availability of reading and writing materials, the modeling of literate behaviors by adults, siblings, and others, and the verbal interactions between children and adults impact language and literacy growth in different ways.

According to Eldridge (2001), nurturing home-school liaisons not only benefit children, but parents and teachers as well.

1. *Children* of involved parents have a more positive attitude about school, improved attendance, and show better homework habits than do children whose families are less involved.
2. *Parents* involved with school related activities show increased self-confidence in parenting, more knowledge of child development, and an expanded understanding of the home as an environment for student learning.

3. *Teachers* who involve parents in children's learning are more likely to report a greater understanding of cultures, an increased appreciation for parental interest in helping their children, and a deeper respect for parents' time and abilities.

It is in everyone's best interest to consciously promote home-school liaisons (Eldridge, 2001).

Formats for Parent Involvement

Often, early childhood educators focus on increasing or improving parental involvement with their students through participation in school activities. However, teachers sometimes have inappropriate assumptions that can create barriers to family involvement (Kieff & Wellhousen, 2000). These assumptions can be the result of cultural unawareness, differences in socioeconomic factors, or diverse family structures. Some parents have a variety of reasons for limited attendance at school functions. However, this should not preclude participation in other ways. "The most powerful form of parent involvement has the parent actively involved with the child *at home* in all ways that relate to optimal learning and growing" (Workman & Gage, 1997, p. 49). Perhaps we should consider incorporating more strategies that bring school into the home in ways that provide families with specific suggestions that allow them to extend school learning. Workman & Gage (1997) state that the family is a crucible for the growth and development of children. The home environment and culture deserve significant support, and the family should have access to resources that foster its growth and wellness. Teachers and schools need to construct effective school-to-home connections for young children and their families.

Purpose of the Project

Most teachers seek ways to strengthen the bond between school and home. This study focused on the use of literacy book bags as a vehicle for increasing home connections and reinforcement of classroom literacy goals. These bookbags were filled with age-appropriate literacy materials and activities. These literacy bookbags were designed with the specific interests of

the children in mind. Students, parents, and teachers contributed to the selection of the books and materials by orally sharing ideas.

Setting and Sample

This pilot project was conducted in an early childhood center in a large urban school district. Seventy percent of the school's population receives either free or reduced lunches. There were 18 children in this class, 10 boys and 8 girls. There were no children with IEP's, although two children have been referred for special education screening. One child is receiving special services for counseling. English is the native language of all classmates. The classroom teacher has been an early childhood educator for 31 years.

Literacy Bookbags

This section contains descriptions of literacy bookbags designed and used in this pre-kindergarten classroom. Literacy bookbags are a simple and effective tool for teachers to provide parents with suggestions and materials that enhance the language development of young children. Bookbags used in this study contained a variety of books, props, and activities that children shared with their families. They also included instructions for the parents to help them use bookbags effectively.

Mrs. Carole Dyce, an educator in an early childhood center in an urban school, has developed the following literacy bookbags for her pre-kindergarten students. Each bookbag fit a prototype and contained activities matched to the literature and materials included. Suggestions for interactions focused on children's development in social, emotional, language, and/or literacy skills. Extensions led to further engagement in literacy related interactions.

The following chart outlines the contents and focus of bookbags used:

Bookbag Prototype	Description	Activities	Child Development	Extension
Storybook and prop	Bookbag contains: storybook (<u>Clifford</u> , <u>Madeline</u>) matching doll/stuffed animal, bound teacher-made character book of blank pages.	Children read story with families; write a story describing the doll/stuffed animal's adventure with them at home.	Children encouraged to read and listen to stories; reflect on their experience with the prop; create personal stories in print.	Lends itself to multitude of other bookbags using different storybooks and props.
<i>Where the Wild Things Are</i>	Bookbag contains story, <i>Where the Wild Things Are</i> and a teacher-made character book of blank pages.	Children read story with their families; discuss the character Max; write a story about how they resemble Max.	Promotes reading, listening, and pre-writing skills. Provides opportunity to be self-reflective.	Children can illustrate their stories.
Blocks with storybook	Bookbag contains variety of wooden blocks and a storybook about building.	Children invited to read storybook with family and use blocks to build their masterpiece.	Enhances reading and listening skills; encourages families to participate in a block building experience; can promote problem-solving, decision-making, and fine motor development.	Variety of books can present different styles of building with blocks.
<i>Rainbow Fish</i>	Bookbag contains <i>Rainbow Fish</i> storybook; a rainbow fish; stuffed animal.	Teacher reads book in classroom before sending bookbag home. Children asked to tell story to their families.	Children practice listening skills in classroom; teacher can facilitate literacy development and social skills through discussion. At home, they practice recall re-telling the story.	Activity can be duplicated with a variety of favorite storybooks and props.

Bookbag Prototype	Description	Activities	Child Development	Extension
My Favorite Recipe	Bookbag contains teacher-made class cookbook of blank pages.	Families asked to write favorite recipe in the class book; include all ingredients. Parents invited to participate in school cooking activity.	Children practice decision-making in choosing a recipe to share; class reads recipe with teacher and practice basic measuring concepts.	Food festivals can celebrate with variety of cultural themes.
<i>Me First</i>	Bookbag contains a piggy stuffed animal and the story, <i>Me First</i> .	Children read story with family; then discuss if they ever have a "me first" attitude; recite a story about how they might change this attitude into a more positive one.	Children use language to discuss personal experience; problem solve and see their words in print as well as being read.	Children may illustrate their stories.
Birthday Book	Bookbag contains teacher-made blank paged birthday book with birthday crown.	On the day of their birthday, children compose a story describing their birthday celebration. This story is shared with classmates when they return to school.	Bookbag reserved for a birthday child to help make his/her day very special and promote self-awareness; for child to use oral language and recall events of their birthday.	Families may create birthday book for all members of their family.
Stuffed animals	Bookbag contains variety of stuffed animals of special interest to children.	Children choose a stuffed animal and tell a story about the animal to their families.	Children make choices which animal to discuss; gives them an opportunity to use imaginations and practice oral language.	Selection of stuffed animals may be rotated.

Bookbag Prototype	Description	Activities	Child Development	Extension
<i>The Little Engine that Could</i>	Bookbag contains <i>The Little Engine that Could</i> , and a blank teacher-made train shaped writing book for children to keep!	After reading story to the children they share their personal version of the story which is copied into their blank book.	Children will create personal storylines about the little engine encouraging them to use imaginations and be original in thought. They see their words being set to print and then read.	Children may role-play the little engine.

This literacy project did not end with the family, but was further facilitated by the classroom teacher. Upon returning to school, all of the children were invited to share their stories and activities with classmates during morning circle time. Young children had wonderful opportunities for developing their literacy, social, and emotional skills as a result of the multiple language and literacy interactions that were stimulated.

Data on Parent Reactions

To determine the effectiveness of this literacy bookbag project, two separate questionnaires were sent home to the families of all 18 children in Mrs. Dyce's classroom. Each survey was sent home with a teabag and instructions to sit down with a warm cup of tea and relax while completing the form. The first questionnaire had an 80 percent return rate. The second questionnaire had a 70 percent return rate. The first questionnaire, which was sent home in December, asked six basic questions regarding the activities:

1. Did you enjoy the activities?
2. How long did you spend with your children doing the activities?
3. Did your reading time with your children increase?
4. Did you write the story about the home visit with your child?
5. What was your child's reaction?
6. What are your suggestions for future literacy bookbags?

The following data was collected from this first questionnaire:

Questionnaire #1

Questions	Responses and Comments
1. Did you enjoy sharing our take home books and stuffed friends? Why or Why not?	YES, 100 percent Great sharing Made my child feel special Unique Taught my child responsibility Led to more conversation It was a nice change in our routine Gave us something to talk about It was a nice way to spend time together
2. How long did you spend with your child while doing the reading activity?	Range: 10 minutes – 1 hour Average: 30 minutes
3. Did the time spent increase your usual reading time with your child?	YES, 75 percent It did not increase our time, but it enriched it.
4. Did you write the story about the home visit with your child?	YES, 80 percent It was also mentioned that older siblings and grandparents participated.
5. What was your child's reaction to having the visitors and stories?	Made sure they had somewhere to sleep It was like having a real guest (person) join us for the night Very excited Loved the stories Wanted to play "dress it and feed it" Enjoyed the play acting of "entertaining" Interesting We talked about everything Took it seriously Took it everywhere we went Made my child feel special She showed off her stuffed buddy to everyone
6. What suggestions do you have for future literacy bookbags?	Encourage more artwork School night visits are tough - weekends are best Keep bookbags for more days Have children include personal data such as address, phone number, etc. Include live pets Please continue this project

In reviewing the data of this first questionnaire, particular points of interest emerge. They include enjoyment of the activities, increased opportunities in the home for literacy development, inclusion of other family members, and suggestions for future bookbags.

The second questionnaire, which was sent home in May, asked the families to offer their opinions on the individual literacy bookbags.

Questionnaire #2

Bookbag	Opinions
1. Stuffed animal with matching storybook	50 percent identified this one as their favorite We enjoyed reading the other children's stories as well as writing our own Always a great pleasure, I mean pleasure! Let's the overachievers shine Great cuddling time with the stuffed buddy My child loved helping me write I'm glad you chose well-known stories
2. <i>Where the Wild Things Are</i>	We now read this story all the time Thumbs up. We had to read this story over and over Our favorite since my child is "King of the Wild Things" My son was very proud of his picture It was nice to see my child get so involved It was time for my son's artistic ability to shine It is a good idea to send home familiar stories
3. Blocks	My child was counting a lot This is the only one Dad was involved with It was a good counting tool Nice It could be done with any member of the family Wonderful My daughter loves to build and be creative
4. <i>Rainbow Fish</i>	Didn't do much for me She left this one alone He didn't remember the story Great, she enjoyed telling us her story We had fun thinking of funny things to say She liked being able to do all the talking This was a family favorite

Bookbag	Opinions
5. Recipe Book	We needed more time She enjoyed having me come to school and cook with her classmates Okay, but there was not as much child participation We didn't have enough time
6. <i>Me First</i>	He thought the story was about his brother not himself This book was a great learning story Great Nice
7. Birthday Book	A wonderful way to make the children feel special It enabled her to share her special day with classmates Too bad, he is an August birthday! This started her day off in a special way We enjoyed reading how other classmates celebrate their birthdays She loved to re-tell her classmates' birthday stories
8. Stuffed Animal	The story must have changed 10 times It was hard to keep them clean! Great Whenever she gets to express herself, it is wonderful Sweet! I just loved my son's imagination about the monkey It makes his imagination work better We had fun coming up with a story together
9. <i>The Little Engine That Could</i>	This was a new bookbag that was created after the second questionnaire was sent home.

In reviewing the data of this second questionnaire, parents' comments expressed the greatest approval with prototype number 1 (Stuffed animal and matching storybook) and prototype number 8 (Stuffed Animal). Prototype number 2 (*Where the Wild Things Are*), prototype number 3 (Blocks), prototype number 6 (*Me First*), and prototype number 7 (Birthday Book) were also popular for a variety of reasons. The poorest responses were received for prototype number 5 (Recipe Book) and prototype number 4 (*Rainbow Fish*). It seemed that these last two activities required more time and that created difficulty.

Discussion

The following *unsolicited* comments from families convey a positive relationship between the teacher and parents. It appears that the parents not only enjoyed and valued the activities, but also appreciated the teacher's efforts.

"Each activity is different and lets you spend valuable time with your child after a busy day. I liked the variety and cannot really tell you which one I liked the best or the least. We loved them all!"

"You've done a great job, thank-you."

"Please, more, more, more!"

"I hope you will continue with these home activities."

"I hope you have her sister!"

Although the children and families did not like every literacy bookbag, there was an overwhelming positive response to the project. One hundred percent of the families stated that they enjoyed the activities leading to children's increased motivation to engage in literacy tasks. Seventy-five percent of the families stated that it increased reading time with their children. These two statements alone validate the effectiveness and success of using literacy bookbags in a classroom of young children to promote literacy. According to Routman (2003), children read a lot more when they have easy access to books. After reviewing the data, the following general themes seemed to emerge:

1. Families appreciated the effort of the classroom teacher in promoting a school/home liaison (e.g., Lets the overachievers shine).
2. Families and children enjoyed most of the books and activities (e.g., We enjoyed reading other children's stories as well as our own).
3. These bookbags increased the family time spent with reading (e.g., Led to more conversations).

4. Participation in bookbag activities at home and then reporting on these at school made the children feel special (e.g., Made my child feel special).
5. The bookbags provided families with novel ideas to reinforce children's literacy skills (e.g., It was like having a real guest join us for the night).
6. Families liked the variety of books, props, and activities (e.g., I liked the variety and cannot really tell you which one I liked the best or least. We loved them all).
7. Families identified strengths and interests of their children (e.g., Sweet! I just loved my son's imagination about the monkey).
8. Children enjoyed sharing their stories with both families and classmates (e.g., We enjoyed reading the other children's stories as well as writing our own).
9. Families identified different forms of literacy: reading, writing, listening, artistic expression, and speaking (e.g., My child loved helping me write).
10. Families and children wanted to continue with the literacy bookbags project (e.g., Please, more, more, more!).

Conclusions

As early childhood educators, we are forever seeking developmentally appropriate ways to promote all areas of young children's development. The practice of using literacy bookbags allowed children to engage in literacy tasks with the support of family members. It also allowed them to share their experiences with peers.

This project adopts some of the basic tenets of Developmentally Appropriate Practices, a concept identified by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC): young children learn through experience and schools need to connect with families. This strategy also aligns with standards of the NAEYC. These include: promote child development and learning, build family and community relationships, connect with children and families, and use developmentally appropriate approaches (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997).

In promoting the NAEYC Standards, teachers need to develop innovative ways to build bridges between families and schools. Linder and Foote (2002) urge teacher education programs to include strategies for involving parents in meaningful ways that support children's growth and development. Literacy bookbags are a tool that helps to achieve this goal. Although the concept of literacy bags for families is not new (Dever, 2001), the findings of this project further validate its usefulness in promoting literacy for young children. It appears that the use of literacy bookbags is a wonderful vehicle for supporting and guiding young children and their families towards success in literacy.

References

- Bredenkamp, S. & Copple, C. (1997). *Developmentally appropriate practices in early childhood programs* (Rev. ed.). Washington, D.C.: National Association for the Education of Young Children.
- Brock, D. & Dodd, E. (1994). A family lending library: Promoting early literacy development. *Young Children*, v. 45, n3.
- Chira, S. (1993). What do teachers want most/help from parents. *New York Times*, 23, June 7.
- Cline, Z. (2001). Reading parties: Helping families share the joy of literacy. *Reading Teacher*, v.55, n3, p.236.
- Dever, M. (2001). Family literacy bags: A vehicle for parent involvement and education. *Journal of Early Education and Family Review*, v.8, n4, p.17.
- Eldridge, D. (2001). Parent involvement: It's worth the effort. *Young Children*, pp. 65-69.
- Kelley-Laine, K. (1998). "Parents as partners in schooling: The current state of affairs." *Childhood Education*, v.74, n6. The Association for Childhood Education International.
- Kieff, J. & Wellhousen, K. (2000). Planning family involvement in early childhood programs. *Young Children*, v.55, n3.
- Linder, P. & Foote, M. (2002). Why should we care about family literacy? *Journal of Reading Education*, v. 27, n2, p.8.
- Marcon, R. (1993). Parental involvement and early school success: Following the "Class of 2000" at year five. Paper presented at the

- biennial meeting for The Society of Research in Child Development, New Orleans, in March, (ERIC, ED 357881).
- Routman, R. (2003). *Reading essentials*. N.H.: Heinemann (p.64).
- Saracho, O. (2002). "Family literacy: Exploring family practices." *Early Child Development and Care*, v. 172, n2, p.113.
- Seldin, C. (1991). Parent/Teacher conferencing: A three-year study to enrich communication. Report no.140. (ERIC, ED 338597).
- Taylor, D. (1983). *Family literacy*. Portsmouth, N.H.: Heinemann.
- Workman, S. & Gage, J. (1997). Family-School partnerships: A family strengths approach. *Young Children*, v. 52, n4.

Nicki McCullough Calabrese is a faculty at Canisius College in Buffalo, New York.