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Parent Communication in a Whole Language Kindergarten: What We Learned From a Busy First Year

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Among recent developments in literacy research and practice is the increased recognition of the critical roles that parents play in the education of their children (Rasinski and Fredericks, 1989). For example, in her review of research on parental involvement in educational programs and student achievement, Henderson (1988) found that parents have a highly positive impact on the achievement of their children and that "involving parents when their children are young has beneficial effects that persist throughout the child's academic career" (p. 15). Durkin's (1966) seminal work on early literacy learning found that parents played the key role in the literacy development of children who learned to read prior to formal school-based instruction. In a more recent study, Taylor and Dorsey-Gaines (1988) described the rich literate home environments which initiated and supported the successful early literacy development of inner city children whose SES environments would not predict great achievement in reading. Clearly, parents do play one

of the most important roles in the development of their children as young readers.

Involving parents in their child's literacy learning is particularly important for kindergarten teachers. The kindergarten literacy curriculum should build upon what children have begun to learn at home, and, continue to involve parents in supporting their child's literacy development. Communicating with parents on how they can continue to give active support to their children's literacy learning is an important task for kindergarten teachers.

Although teachers may be eager to inform parents about their whole language literacy program, communicating with parents about how children develop literacy may be difficult. This difficulty may occur because a whole language approach may bear little resemblance to traditional readiness programs which the parents or their older children have received in school. In an interview study to determine parents' perceptions of how reading and writing develop in kindergarten children Bruneau, Rasinski, and Ambrose (1990) found that many parents believed that reading develops through check-point, systematic skills-based instruction; e.g., learning letter names and sounds and practicing the reading of simple words in isolation. Although the interviewed parents were pleased with their children's excitement and the enthusiasm for books which was emphasized in their child's whole language kindergarten, they also expressed concern for what they perceived as a lack of attention to necessary systematic skill development. Thus potential exists for miscommunication, because parents expectations may not match the description of a whole language program provided by the kindergarten teacher.

A parent education program concerning whole language instruction appears to be necessary to inform parents about recent research on early literacy development and how this is translated to sound classroom practice and also to advise them about ways they can continue to be actively involved in their child's literacy learning. Following is a description of what we learned when a classroom teacher not only initiated a whole language program, but also attempted to inform parents about the program.

Parent communication in one classroom

A newly hired kindergarten teacher in a university-based child development center planned and initiated a whole language literacy program, a significant change from the skills-based program which had previously been in place. Twenty-five children were enrolled in the kindergarten classroom. The children were primarily of middle SES families, families highly concerned about their children's early success in reading development. Although initially the kindergarten teacher's attention and energy were channeled into building her new program and getting to know her students, she also realized she would have to explain this new program fully to the parents. She decided to begin this communication through the traditional parent orientation session held in early October.

Parent orientation meeting. At this meeting the teacher focused almost entirely on the new literacy curriculum. She emphasized three important components of her reading program: surrounding the children with a print-rich environment, using children's literature and experience stories as a means of involving children in reading meaningful text, and facilitating children's writing development through engaging children in invented spelling. She explained that

children learn to read and write when they are placed in environments that encourage them to experiment with literacy and where they can use their literacy abilities in functional tasks such as writing notes to and reading notes from others, creating and listening to stories, using recipes, and charting results from science experiments. She illustrated her talk with examples of experience charts already constructed with the children, described and displayed her well-stocked and attractive library corner, and talked about children's work in the writing center. Although the teacher had expected "hard questions" from the parents, there were none. Individual parents talked with the teacher about their child's enthusiasm for kindergarten. The teacher felt the evening had been successful because she had communicated the important goals for her program and the parents' responses to the program had not reflected concern or criticism.

With the parent orientation completed, the teacher again focused primarily on the children and their learning. Literacy experiences were subsumed within content areas. For example, the children predicted and charted results of science experiments such as listing objects which would sink or float. They prepared for a Thanksgiving feast by listing individual job responsibilities, things to remember to do, and recipes for their food preparation. Favorite songs and fingerplays were written into a class music book. Each week a different author was highlighted. Soon the children began to bring in library books from home written by favorite authors. The classroom teacher wrote regularly to parents describing these activities. However, as she wrote, she focused on content, the science or social studies unit, rather than on the development of reading ability. This seemed congruent with basing literacy activities in a functional print-rich environment.

Parent conferences. The second major opportunity for the teacher to talk with parents about literacy occurred through individual conferences held at the close of the first semester in December. The teacher had developed individual portfolios of each child's writing. These portfolios were shared with the parents and became a basis for talking about the development of invented spelling. The teacher was able to show parents where children had attempted to spell words on their own and to suggest encouragement for such risk taking.

During these conferences, some parents expressed their concerns. For example, one mother reported that her child who had been "a writing maniac" was becoming frustrated. She reported her daughter would say, "I don't like writing because the teacher won't tell me how to spell the words." The mother then described how at home the child had been told how to spell words correctly. The child was getting mixed messages from home and school. As part of the conference the teacher was able to help clarify how both home and school could work together. The parents could help the child begin to listen for sounds and the teacher could work on developing the child's confidence. The mother reported that as a result of the conference her daughter became less frustrated and more enthusiastic toward early writing.

The teacher reported answering many specific questions within these individual conferences. As the school year progressed, more parents appeared concerned about literacy instruction and would often "drop in for an informal chat." After such a conference one mother suggested to the teacher that it would be helpful to have specific information on literacy development written in a letter. The teacher decided this would be a good idea. In this way she could reach

cided this would be a good idea. In this way she could reach all of the parents, explain her approach to literacy instruction and address concerns that many parents seemed to share.

The literacy letter. In early spring the teacher wrote a letter to the parents in which she described how she read stories to the children, encouraged children to read on their own, facilitated their use of invented spelling, and offered suggestions for extending literacy activities at home. The teacher was pleased with the letter because she was able to articulate her belief that there was no one correct way to help a child, but that a number of strategies could be used depending on the child and the situation. (A copy of this letter is included in Appendix A.)

Several parents reported they found the letter helpful in not only understanding literacy instruction at school, but in also supporting their child's enthusiasm and growth for literacy at home. They mentioned that the letter allayed many of their concerns and they appreciated the permanent nature of the letter. They could refer back to the letter when a question about instruction in literacy arose. A few parents commented that they wished they had the information earlier in the year and suggested that the letter could have been presented in shorter segments throughout the year. Some parents mentioned that the length of the letter did not make it conducive to a thorough reading.

The first year's experience: What we learned

This paper describes one kindergarten teacher's attempt to establish communication with parents during a very busy year in which she was very much engrossed in developing a whole language curriculum. For the most part, the teacher's initiative was successful. Through using sev-

parents and to provide information to help them in working with their children in ways that were satisfying to parents, teacher, and children.

Initially the teacher had hoped that the orientation session combined with parent-teacher conferences would suffice to inform parents and gain their involvement. However, we learned these limited and verbal communications were not enough. Although parents appeared to have accepted the initial message, as time passed other questions and concerns were raised. The teacher wisely responded to the parents' concerns and followed one parent's suggestion to give the information in writing. The letter was received by the parents as valuable in content, but several stated the letter would have been more valuable earlier in the year. In retrospect, it seems that frequent communication, in which segments of the letter would be presented, would make the most sense. Using this format, the teacher would be able to communicate with parents about the kinds of strategies she was using with children in the classroom.

Parent communications need to be a continuous part of a holistic literacy curriculum. In the case described here, it took a follow-up letter in the spring to complete communication with the parents. An ideal situation, perhaps, would have been to send information contained within the letter at more frequent intervals in which the information could be presented in readable chunks that reinforce and build on one another. For example, one letter could deal with reading instruction and home extensions, a second with writing and others dealing with supporting invented spelling, and connecting the content areas with literacy. A final letter might focus on vacation literacy activities. Although the teacher did write monthly

activities. Although the teacher did write monthly newsletters, these emphasized content activities. Highlighting how the children used reading and writing during these activities as well as perhaps including information on how the teacher was helping children engage in their own writing would be helpful. When parents are kept informed of what is happening in the classroom, they are more likely to identify with and support the teacher's/school's curriculum.

Not all parents read the written communications and not all parents attend conferences. The use of a variety of communication vehicles (e.g., group presentations, personal conferences, frequent newsletters, informal chats both in person and through the telephone) helps insure that parents are kept informed of classroom developments. Gaining parental involvement in ways that are congruent with the whole language curriculum can be achieved only through an aggressive approach to parental communication. We have learned the importance of maintaining a constant flow of communication to parents and providing variety in the media that are used to carry the communication.

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Appendix A

Text of Teacher's Letter to Parents

Dear Parents,

Many of you have asked me to describe how I've been teaching and encouraging the children to read and write. The foundation of my literacy program was developed in the fall. The children were immersed in a print-rich environment from the first day of kindergarten. As we made group charts and stories, they began to understand that what they say can be written down and read back to them. From these charts and stories we discovered the many purposes of writing. Together we wrote not only stories, but letters and recipes; we put labels on objects all around the room; we wrote up our classroom rules and jobs; and we made many kinds of charts: lists of ways to describe our feelings, lists of words to describe foods that we used our senses to examine, lists of things we needed to do before parties and field trips, sequencing events from a story, steps of a science experiment, directions for a recipe, and making predictions and charting the results.

The children are continually allowed the opportunity to write for themselves. A variety of paper, markers, crayons and pencils are always made available to the children. Some of the writing they have done includes making up their own stories, writing notes and letters to me and to each other, making signs for the buildings and forts they create in the block corner, and in the dramatic play area writing checks and bills in their "office" and taking orders in their "restaurant."

The children enjoy keeping journals as their own personal books. Some like to try to write their own words for their pictures, and others prefer to ask me for help. Most children do a mixture of both. Either way is wonderful. They are interested in writing, seeing their words written down and hearing them read back to them. At least once a day we do a writing activity in their journals, on a chart, on the computer, or in a class group story.

Reading to the children is another important aspect of my program. There are two bookshelves in the kindergarten packed with all kinds of books: fairy tales, legends, myths, picture dictionaries, children's encyclopedias, poetry, fiction and non-fiction books and wordless picture books. I read quality literature to the children at least once a day. They often ask to have their favorites read over and over again. They like to read the books back to me from memory, or by looking at the pictures and making up their own words.

The shelves also contain "easy" readers, which are also available at the library! These are beginning "I Can Read" books with limited vocabulary, few words to a page and lots of repetition. The children have a lot of success with these books, especially if I read it once through first to them. They are so proud to be able to read a "real" book, as they see it.

During our morning center time, I am able to spend individual time with the children reading books together and writing in their journals. There are different approaches I use when reading depending on the child's needs and interests on that particular day:

- I read the whole story to the child without stopping*

- *I read a page, pointing to the words as they are read, and the child repeats the page after me*

- *I read most of the sentence, but stop and let the child read a word that I know he or she can read*

- *They'll read the whole story to me, only paying attention to the pictures and making up their own words*

- *They'll read the story to me, sometimes without any help at all*

When they are reading to me and get stuck on a word, there are different things I may do:

- *I wait a second to see what the child does*

- *If they are trying to sound it out, I may encourage it as long as they are not becoming frustrated*

- *I'll tell them to skip the word and read the rest of the sentence. Then they'll go back and figure out what word would make sense there*

- *They'll stop and look at the picture and try to find the word through what is happening on that page*

Most times I will just tell them the words they don't know so as not to disrupt the continuity of reading and risk losing the meaning of what was already read. I don't believe that there is one right or wrong way to approach such a situation. What's most important, I feel, is to keep it positive! I want the children to think of reading as fun, not as a difficult chore.

When writing with the children I use a lot of the same approaches as described, but applied to pen and paper:

- *I may write the whole story from dictation, writing down the child's exact words*

- *I may write most of it, but pass the pen over to the child to write a word or two that I know they can write*

- *Sometimes they want to write the whole thing and just have me there for support and encouragement*

Even when I am doing all of the writing, I keep the children involved verbally. If they dictate to me, "Dear Mom," I may say something like, "Dear" – what do you think that begins with?" By using this strategy I am encouraging the children to think about sounds in words, and putting their knowledge of letters and sounds into actual use as children write their very own words.

The most exciting thing happening in the kindergarten right now is children reading to each other and helping each other read and write. They love bringing in books from home that they can read and being able to sit in front of the room and share that book with the whole class, or individually with a friend or with me.

Here are some ideas I have for you to continue working with your child at home and all summer long:

- *Keep going to the library and allowing your child to browse and choose books.*

- *Show your child how to research topics in the library: If you're getting a new pet, look up information on how to take care of it; if you see a shooting star, read to find out more about them; if you are going on a trip, look in an Atlas to find out where the place is located.*

- Put simple notes and pictures in your child's lunchbox or under their pillow. Writing notes on the bathroom mirror with lipstick is always fun!
- Read to your child daily (poetry, too!).
- Do simple follow-up activities together after you read a story. If it is a story about plants, visit a greenhouse or plant some seeds; if it is a story about airplanes, make a paper or model airplane, or go to the library and research about the first airplane; if it's about friends, write a letter to a friend.
- Set an example: have a family reading time every night when you read a good book, too.
- Be aware of print wherever you go. Discuss signs on buildings, along roads and in the supermarket. Talk about why those words are important and needed at the particular place.
- When they are reading to you, KEEP IT FUN! Give them the words that they don't know and praise them for the ones that they do know.
- Write stories together, taking turns making up the adventure that the character goes through.
- When reading, talk about the author, the illustrator, the dedication, the publisher, and the title page. Discuss the illustrations and find other books by the same illustrator to compare and find similarities in pictures and style.
- Make labels for things around the house.
- Write a story yourself and let your child be the illustrator, and you illustrate one of your child's stories.
- Tape record a story while riding in the car and transcribe it later to be illustrated.
- When taking dictation, keep them involved, writing a word or at least a beginning letter or two per page.
- Write for a variety of different purposes; write letters to friend and relatives, invitations to a party or sleep over.

This has been a wonderful year. The children have shown enthusiasm and an "I can do it" attitude toward reading and writing. Please let me know if you have any further questions.

Sincerely,
Martha Shehan

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