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Reducing the Risks: Reflections on Bridging Home and School Communication

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Recent scholarship on literacy development has focused on studying young at-risk learners (Allen and Mason, 1989; Clay, 1982; Taylor and Dorsey-Gaines, 1988; Swap, 1990; Teale and Sulzby, 1986). Marie Clay (1982) has defined "at-risk" children as students who have not had the kinds of early language experiences which lead to success in school. She contends that limited experiences in oral language and book language can impair the child's ability to grasp concepts of how print "works." This gap impedes the child's ability to predict or connect meaning with print.

More recently researchers have begun to reexamine the lens from which at-risk children can be viewed. Rather than focusing on what children cannot do, researchers have challenged educators to examine school practice to focus on how teachers can reduce the risk for students (Allen and Mason, 1989; Taylor and Dorsey-Gaines, 1988). It seems to us that this more recent perspective encourages a qualitatively fresh look at what teachers can do to enhance the literacy development of children. Rather than focusing on children's deficits we believe this viewpoint challenges us as teachers to examine our own practice to search for means

to build bridges between children's home lives and their early school experiences.

As kindergarten and first grade teachers we worried about many of our students whose families were not in the cultural mainstream and whose literacy backgrounds appeared different from those of our more successful children. As we thought about how we might better teach our children we began to consider how we could improve our communication with the children's parents to begin to build a partnership between home and school literacy experiences. We wanted to be supportive and invitational with the parents. We hoped to provide the parents with information which they could use in helping their children interact with print, and, importantly, we wanted to learn from the parents. We valued their input and welcomed information that they could provide which would allow us to build our program to support the home. We wished to begin to build a two way bridge that would connect home and school literacy practice.

Moving from goals to practice is not easy. In this article we describe what we have learned during the past three years and are still continuing to learn as we build communication with parents through our Literacy Outreach Program. We hope our reflections will be helpful to other teachers attempting to communicate with parents in new ways.

The Literacy Outreach Program

The Literacy Outreach Program (LOP) is a summer program developed by the first author, who is a first grade teacher, and a kindergarten teacher, Suzanne Fitzpatrick, to provide support for students entering first grade the following fall. We hoped that by providing a specialized summer program and by working cooperatively with parents we could reduce the risk for our students who were already

struggling with literacy development. The program, funded through the Jennings Foundation, has operated during the past three summers.

The LOP contains two components, an emergent literacy instructional component and a parent participation component. Briefly, our goals for the emergent literacy strand include providing a print and literature rich environment, providing oral language activities which focus on pre-reading and prewriting experiences, providing mini-author units which feature minority authors, and integrating writing experiences with play. The program runs half-days for six weeks. Ten students meet with one teacher and one teacher-aide. Through student participation in this program we hoped students would develop confidence, build self-esteem and, importantly, come to perceive themselves as readers and writers.

Our goals for the parent participation component, on which this article focuses, include direct teacher to parent and parent to teacher communication, parental empowerment, and the building of parental confidence, within an atmosphere of mutual respect. We wished to include home visits as well as encourage parental classroom visits. In the spirit of Lisa Delpit's work (1988) we wished to increase our knowledge as to how we could best work with the parents of our students. We recognized that this would require subtle, but significant, shifts in redefining our roles.

Our reflections on the program

At the completion of each summer we've reflected on our experiences. We acknowledge that with each summer we've learned and grown along with our students and families. Our learning has especially concentrated on parental participation. As a result of our self reflections we have

made small but important changes which have increased parental involvement. These changes involved a different approach toward home visits, parental classroom visits, and the use of "Story Book Kits." During our third summer we felt secure that we were more successfully able to meet our parent involvement goals through these revisions.

Home visits revisions. We had wished to make one home visit for each child. The purpose of the visit was to demonstrate interest in the child's home culture and to model strategies that involved the child in reading and writing. During the first summer we simply announced that we'd be calling to schedule an appointment. We were fairly assertive about obtaining this appointment because we believed that our good intentions would be perceived and trusted. We were wrong. As Taylor and Dorsey-Gaines (1988) acknowledge about their work with Shay Avenue families, gaining access to the homes was not always easy.

Further, once successful in scheduling a visit, we sensed that several parents were uncomfortable. Although we believed that the story reading we did with the child during the visit, in which we modeled strategies for actively involving the child with the story, went well, we had the feeling that we had been intrusive. Although the children seemed very eager to share their home space with us, we observed that the parent or guardian seemed to be more comfortable in interacting with the teacher aides. This seemed reasonable because the aides came from the same community as the parents. In hindsight, we believe that as teachers we represented the "school authority" and we were viewed as outsiders who might be critical or judgmental. We learned that trust takes time and comes from multiple connections between home and school. Swap emphasizes that this kind

of trust demands “long term investments of time and energy from families and educators...” (1990, p. 64).

As a result of our reflections we made two small changes in our patterns of visiting. First, in place of our asserting ourselves as visitors we asked the parents to choose between a home visit or to visit us at the school. In this way, the time and place were controlled by the parents. Second, we encouraged the teacher aides to take a greater leadership role during the visit. With the aides taking a more prominent role, we believe the visit was better received. The interaction between the aide and the parent/guardian was more that of a friend-to-friend, than that of an outsider who might be considered an authority. Furthermore, this change in roles allowed us to be listeners. This provided us with a greater opportunity to learn from these family visits.

Revisions in parent school visits. Initially, we requested the parents to visit the classroom once during the six week session. We soon began to change our minds about just one visit and began to encourage the parents to visit more frequently. We learned that through an increased number of visits parents became increasingly more active and participated more within the classroom.

Classroom visits became an important vehicle for two-way learning. We learned about our families. As we observed adult-child interaction we grew to appreciate different interactive styles between adults and children, to learn of outside family interests, and to address concerns and provide school community resources for problem solving of family concerns. All of this was mutually satisfying and helped in reaching our goal of a joint mission to support children.

Not only did the increased number of visits allow us to learn about the families, they also provided increased opportunity for us to model interaction with children and texts. Parents had opportunities to observe and interact with children in an instructionally supportive manner. It was pleasurable for us to share both the social and the instructional context of a classroom and to observe the parents' growth in confidence as they learned specific ways to support their children's literacy development.

A second major change in facilitating school visits involved providing the parents with access to school bus transportation. Through the cooperation of our department of transportation, we were able to offer parents the opportunity to ride the bus to school with their children. This increased the frequency of school visits as well as the length of time the parents were able to stay. The parents stated that this simple change in policy provided the support and freedom to make the school visits.

The story book kits. Based on the work of McCormick (1989) we ordered simple predictable books for our children to use. We used these often in a variety of contexts in the classroom. Each day the children selected one or two books to read to someone at home. We believed this frequent and successful encounter with print strengthened the child's self perceptions of being a reader.

In reflecting on how we might further engage families in literacy events, we decided to continue the home readings, and to add in a response to literature activity. As Goldenberg (1989) and Henderson (1987) emphasize, we wished to mobilize home resources. During the second summer we developed two take-home kits, one based on the book *Good-bye House* (Asch, 1986) and the second

one on the book *Corduroy* (Freeman, 1968). We chose *Good-bye House* because so many of our children moved frequently and we believed they could relate to the events of the story. We included precut flannel pieces in the kit, to help the children retell the story. The *Corduroy* kit contained the book and material for making a small stuffed bear. The kits were put together by a parent volunteer. This was a valued labor intensive process and we were fortunate to be able to reimburse the parent for her time and talent.

The children enthusiastically took home these special kits. However, as we talked with children, we perceived that little was being done with the *Corduroy* project. Therefore, we talked more actively with parents as they brought their children to school or attended a class session. This additional one-on-one communication encouraged participation. We also scheduled a final day for a bear parade based on the *Corduroy* kit. As a result of our increased communication each child took part in this individual project, and the parents enjoyed adding their individual creative fashion statements to our generic *Corduroy*.

Improving communication. Our final area of reflection focused on how we believe we improved our over-all communication with parents. We began our six week session with an orientation session. We recognized that our first meeting with the parents was very important. We wanted to tell them a lot about our program and to listen to their concerns. Although we had mailed reminders of the meeting to each of the homes, we began to be afraid that the letters would not reach parents or that the parents would not feel personally invited to attend. Because of this concern we decided to place individual phone calls. In this initial call we introduced ourselves, reminded parents that babysitting would be available, and offered to provide

transportation assistance. We also responded to individual questions and concerns. As a result, attendance was high at this important initial meeting. Furthermore, several parents said they appreciated the personal phone reminder.

Building on this successful experience we decided to phone parents before each meeting. The parents again responded that they appreciated the phone reminder more than a written reminder. Furthermore, it seemed to us that through phone calls we were able to establish a warmer personal relationship with the parents than if we had relied solely on written messages.

Implications

In this article we have summarized our own reflections about how we might better support our “at-risk” students’ learning through attempting to build bridges between the home and the Literacy Outreach Program. We believed that parents would both be motivated and able to participate in their child’s literacy development. Through our project we learned of the importance of inviting parents to join us, as well as modeling for them appropriate strategies involving children’s literacy learning.

Although we wanted parents to attend our literacy meetings and to share our teaching strategies with them, we learned that these events must be invitational, not mandated. For example, we believe our initial policy of mandated home visits was perceived as too intrusive. Through changing our policy by allowing parents to decide when and where we would interact, we received more favorable responses. We further learned of the importance of personal invitations. Our phone calls, a seemingly minor innovation, seemed to communicate to the parents that we really did want and expect them to attend. Furthermore our attention

to details of their lives, providing baby sitting and transportation to meetings and class sessions, allowed the parents to participate actively and confidently. Although we wished to implement an invitational approach from the beginning, we were able to do so much more fully during the second year. As we continue to listen to and learn from our parents we hope to further our ability to build interpersonal relationships and to redefine our roles.

Second, we realized how valuable modeling literacy strategies were in involving parents successfully with their children and literacy. As we actively demonstrated interaction possibilities for parents, we observed that they became more enthusiastic and confident within the classroom. The classroom became a collaborative setting where we all became risk-takers as we grew in our abilities to interact with children and print. We were able to extend our scaffolding of interaction with print through the specific activities we designed as part of the take-home kits. These kits allowed parent and child to experience a successful home literacy event.

Our program is now in its third year. We believe we have much more to learn in developing home school literacy relationships. However, we do believe that by using an invitational approach, providing models for literacy instruction, and listening to our parents' voices, we have begun to build bridges between home and school in our community. We asked our parents to talk about their perceptions of the program. We believe one mother's description illustrates her growing feeling of connection and empowerment with her child's literacy learning:

I want all the good things for E.J. He is my first. I got so many ideas. I learned about how much he has

retained. I learned how I can help with vocabulary. He always ask me "What does this mean?" It just all helped me... it helped his self-esteem. He can get lost in a crowd and get discouraged. He is a busy little guy. The one-to-one attention helped him to focus. I like how he says "Now I can do this" (reading).

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