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Promoting literacy : the parent link

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Promoting literacy : the parent link

Abstract

This article is written for beginning teachers of the primary grades to provide tools for empowering parents as co-educators in the reading curriculum. Parents play a crucial role in the development of their child's learning. By inviting them to take joint ownership in their child's education, a teacher can build a bridge of communication that will stimulate success for both parent and child.

An overview of how to begin to build the bridge with parents and empowering those parents to become involved is presented. Then, several strategies for decoding text and boosting a child's sight word vocabulary will be discussed. The final component of this article will present comprehension boosting strategies.

Promoting Literacy - The Parent Link

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Submitted to the

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Masters of Arts in Education

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by

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Promoting Literacy--The Parent Link

Promoting literacy with the emergent reader can bring about rewards that range from exciting to exhausting. While teachers struggle to get children reading, and especially reading for enjoyment, there is an important element which may often be overlooked. Parent involvement with an emergent reader can have a significant impact on the gains the child makes in developing reading abilities. Morrow and Strickland (1989) suggest children who have been given frequent opportunities to read and write at home tend to be more likely to enter conventional literacy as confident and risk taking readers and writers.

Once reading instruction begins formally in an educational setting, parents may begin to feel hesitant or resistant about participating in their child's reading development. McMackin (1993) believes there are many reasons, but primarily, parents may feel that they do not have enough knowledge about reading to help their child develop reading fluency.

Purpose

This article is written for beginning teachers of the primary grades to provide tools for empowering parents as co-educators in the reading curriculum. Parents play a crucial role in the development of their child's learning. By inviting them to take joint ownership in their child's education, a teacher can build a bridge of communication that will stimulate success for both parent and child. The suggestions offered in this article stem from my two years of teaching at the primary level in private and

public education in Cedar Rapids, Iowa. I obtained an Early Childhood Education degree and ventured into the teaching profession with little experience or knowledge of how to incorporate parents in the reading fundamentals of the early primary grades. Once I realized how important parents are in reading education I began to implement a parent partnership with reading. The results included parent support and involvement that helped boost student achievement and excitement for reading.

An overview of how to begin to build the bridge of communication with parents and empowering those parents to become involved is presented. Then, several strategies for decoding text and boosting a child's sight word vocabulary will be discussed. The final component of this article will present comprehension boosting strategies.

To Begin Opening the Lines of Communication

You will need to let parents know the importance you believe they have in educating their child. Parents need to be affirmed that they are a crucial link in the chain. My suggestion to you is that you make the effort of reaching out to parents and inviting them into your classroom. Obviously, you wouldn't want to invite the entire room of parents in for one afternoon. If your school has a parent information evening at the beginning of the year this would be an ideal opportunity to explain your intent to invite parents in, and to provide the support they may need in feeling confident as coeducators. If your school does not have such an evening, you may wish to establish one for your class, or

to phone parents and explain your intentions with reading instruction.

Invite parents to schedule a visiting session for approximately one hour. If possible, invite them to visit during reading instruction. A parent visitor should observe you teaching a mini lesson on using a reading strategy right before moving into readers workshop. That parent could observe you modeling the adult role when facilitating reading using the strategy. Or, a parent could visit the classroom during a time that includes a shared reading or guided reading session. If you schedule a time which includes a recess break or other break in the schedule you would be able to make yourself available to answer questions they may have after having observed for the hour.

You may wish to phone parents individually to invite them to your room. Keep in mind that not all parents will want to visit. Many will not be able to visit due to work obligations. I would caution you against attempting to persuade them at that point. You want parent support. You do not want to come across extremely assertive and turn parents away. Simply making your desire known for them to be in your room will, if nothing else, plant a seed.

By putting yourself on the line you not only indicate your confidence in your teaching, you send a message to parents that they are a welcome addition in your classroom. Remember, not all parents will be available to visit. Also, simply because you invite them to your room does not mean they will come. It does not mean they are not in support if they do not come. Be ready to be met with some opposition and questioning by parents who may feel assertive enough to inquire about your methodology or

reason for following certain procedures in your room. By mentally preparing yourself ahead of time you can be ready to meet those questions with ease. Remember that you may not have all the answers and it is acceptable to admit it. Know that some parents may visit to examine you and your teaching while others visit because they have a genuine interest in being a coeducator.

The strategies described can be presented to parents in a variety of ways. Perhaps one of the most efficient and easiest ways to do so is to include them in a weekly newsletter to parents which includes the purpose, steps, and probable outcomes as well as telling them when to use the strategy. For example, using the strategy prior to reading a text, during the text reading, or after the completion of the reading. Ensure that you have taught the strategy in your classroom prior to sending it home in the newsletter so your students are familiar with its use.

You may feel as though you've given the best description of how a strategy works in your newsletter. Ask a colleague to read your explanation to see if it reads smoothly and makes sense. You also need to make yourself available to parents for hands on training of the suggested strategies, should they desire. Make yourself available over the phone or in person. Keep in mind, you may not know if they want additional training or guidance unless you ask. As the teacher you have to consistently put forth the first effort to build this bridge of communication with parents.

Should you schedule a hands on training session with one or more parents, know not all will be able to attend, nor will you be able to accommodate all of your parent's schedules. Some suggestions you may wish to consider...

1. Have a simple ice breaking activity planned to help the parents feel comfortable with one another and with you. Gibbs, (1994) author of TRIBES: A New Way of Learning Together, offers several suggestions for building community among new groups of people. Selecting a brief activity from this text would be sufficient if you did not have one of your own. For example, Page 352 of the TRIBES text gives complete instructions for the community building activity titled *Community Circle Metaphor*. In this activity parents and teacher alike share the following sentence, inserting a metaphor which most describes how they feel. "When I am working with my child on Reading (or any other subject) I am most like a _____ (insert a metaphor) _____ because I _____ (insert a metaphor. _____." For example you might say, "When I am helping my child with writing I feel like a rabbit because I have difficulty slowing down enough for my child to try and decipher how to spell a word before I jump in to help." This could be shared orally, or in written form anonymously and shared aloud by a reader.

2. Ensure you schedule ample time to go over the strategies in detail. Make sure you've allotted enough time for parents to ask questions. Rushing can make parents feel anxious and may inhibit them from asking questions.

3. Engolf (1994) suggests you take breaks and provide some sort of nourishment.

Parents which accept your invitation may not know what kind of an environment or tone to set for their child in the home setting. Clay (1993) suggests encouraging parents to simply observe their children reading. In doing so they will let their

children show them, naturally, what they already know about books and reading.

Once you share with parents the virtue of simply observing their children "reading" you can invite them to make these reading moments learning opportunity. Encourage parents to treat any piece of literature as a learning and reading experience they can share with their emergent reader. For example, parents can share mail they receive with their child. If a parent shares a letter he or she has received with their youngster there will be a wealth of opportunities for literacy learning. A parent can point out names in print, dates, places and other general components of letters. Clay (1995) indicates that children will begin to see how letter writing is a way of communicating with people. Suggest writing a letter together to a loved one. This will reinforce the virtue of letter writing and express another angle of the communication process.

Often when children enter school there is apprehension associated with reading and word identification. Butler and Clay (1995) express parents may need some instruction as to what their role can be to help children feel secure and confident enough to know success with reading is NOT beyond their reach. Butler and Clay (1995) also indicate it would be wise to convey to your students' parents that most children do learn to read despite the fact teachers may use differing methods to teach reading. They may also find comfort and reassurance in knowing that very few children learn to read without some struggle.

You may wish to suggest Dorothy Butler and Marie Clay's book titled Reading Begins at Home: Preparing Children for Reading

Before They go to School. This text offers numerous easy to read suggestions for how parents can foster a child's reading at home such as, providing reading and writing materials in a convenient, accessible location for their child to use. By making it readily available you allow for the child to be spontaneously creative.

Two sets of strategies are presented next. The first category deals with word identification and vocabulary. The second category presents comprehension strategies.

Strategies for Decoding Text and Building a Sight Word Vocabulary

One of the first battles in teaching children to read is to help the child build a sight word vocabulary--words that are instantly recognized, or sight. As a child's sight word vocabulary grows and they begin to learn how to decode words in text, there needs to be a move to help boost a child's comprehension. Reading fluently is only beneficial if the reader is able to understand what they have read. The next portion of this article is designed to provide you with strategies for decoding text and building a reader's comprehension ability. These strategies are intended to be taught in the classroom and then shared with parents to use at home with their children.

Systematic Word Attack Technique

Routman (1988) developed the Systematic Word Attack Technique (SWAT). This strategy is most beneficial when used in a text the child has had no exposure to. The Systematic Word Attack Technique strategy can be photocopied onto card stock and cut into

bookmarks to be sent home for parents to refer to when reading with their child. The six steps to Systematic Word Attack Technique strategy are listed and defined below.

If you come to a word you do not know...

1. Skip it.
2. Use the Pictures to Give you a Clue.
3. Ask yourself, "Does the word you think it is make sense in this sentence?"
4. Put the parts of the word together.
5. Read on and come back.
6. Ask for help.

Step One instructs the reader to skip the word and read on. Perhaps the most fundamental reason for step one being to "skip" the word is to prohibit the reader from becoming frustrated right from the start. If other steps of the SWAT strategy do not aid the child in decoding the word there will be another opportunity for the child to reevaluate the sentence in step five to help determine what might make sense in the blank.

Step two invites the reader to use the pictures on the page (if available) to help determine what the undecoded word might be. Frequently in beginning readers words can be determined by relying on the pictures. This may not be the case with more difficult reading materials.

Step three coaches the student to ask if the word they think goes there would make sense? It could be that the child read a word that was inaccurate, or hesitated when reading. A good self check is to ask if the word makes sense. In the early stages of

reading fluency it is advisable not to correct a child's reading error if the word is inaccurate, yet the sentence still makes sense and the substituted word still holds the author's intended meaning. The reasoning behind that is to keep the child's confidence high and to push it upward. If a child is frequently stopped, corrected and reminded of their reading errors there may be evidence of a decreased desire to read.

Step four tells the reader to put the parts together. This is also known as "chunking". When a student chunks a word, or puts the parts together, they look inside the word for part which they may recognize. For example, if the word is "together", the child might know the word "to". They may have the knowledge of what sound the ending "er" makes. The hope is that in knowing the beginning and the ending of the word they will be able to determine the middle portion using phonics or logical thought processes.

Step five instructs the reader to read on. This step is similar to step one, yet step five wants the reader to do more than just skip the word. The reader is then suppose to think about what the rest of the sentence is saying and think of a logical word that could fit in the blank..

Step six is a last resort for the reader. If they have tried all five steps with no success they are instructed to ask for help. If a reader jumps to step six before trying all five other options the adult should encourage the reader to try another step within the SWAT strategy. If a child is decoding more words than he or she is reading it is likely that this text is too difficult. Depending on the age of the child you may wish to invite them to

use a dictionary to help determine the word. If children do not have an understanding of the pronunciation cues given in a dictionary, this may not be as helpful. In this instance you may wish to provide a picture dictionary.

Linking

Cunningham (1995) offers a simple strategy that may help boost a child's sight word vocabulary, known as linking. Linking is simply providing some sort of link from the written form of a word to a picture, prior knowledge or experience. For example, a child may know what a bee looks like, but not know how to spell the word. If you provide a picture for the word "bee" the child is more likely to internalize the spelling of the word. Or, if a child has been stung by a bee, they may be able to relate their prior experience and knowledge with the spelling of the word "bee".

While linking can be time consuming, as well as taking a great deal of space to organize, it is a beneficial strategy for young children to use. Using the linking strategy with words that are more case specific for a child is perhaps the most beneficial. For example, a small chart could be constructed for a child with the pictures of their family. Next to each person their names could be written. If displayed at home and referred to the child would be encouraged to internalize the spelling of family member names. A family may wish to include pets, and other words that are unique to their home. This chart would not have to be limited to names, it should include other high frequency words which a picture clue could benefit the reader.

Chant and Check

Chant and Check is an activity that students may use to help build their sight word vocabulary in conjunction with the word wall words a class is currently work with or with word wall words a class has already learned. Patricia Cunningham's book titled Phonics They Use Words For Reading and Writing (1995) has a complete section devoted to defining the uses of a word wall and how to set one up.

The goal for using Chant and Check is for students to listen for and identify certain spelling patterns. (e.g.- "ed" or "at") The materials needed and procedures for using Chant and Check are as follows.

In order to use this strategy you will need scratch paper, wipe off boards or mini chalk boards and some sort of writing utensil.

1. The adult says the word and names the spelling pattern. For example, the adult might say, "The word is hat and the spelling pattern is "at"
2. The child attempts to write the word down.
3. The child underlines the word pattern.
4. The adult and child chant the spelling of the word together.
5. If the child has a different spelling, decide as a team what the correct spelling is. (Use a dictionary or book to verify.)
6. Say the word as a whole.
7. Use the same spelling pattern for another word.
8. Read other stories which have these spelling patterns.

Letter Sorts in Words

Cunninghman (1995) also endorses the use of this activity, which is designed to help students become aware of the individual use of letters in print and the frequency of specific letters being used in our language. The goal with using this activity is for students to graphically see the relationship of specific letters and the frequency of their use in a text. A portion of a text should be written on cards. Each word from the selected portion should be written on a separate card. Two to five sentences is an ideal sampling.

1. Pass out all the words from a specific text. Make sure the child has heard the text read orally by a fluent reader.
2. Use a large piece of paper which has been divided into twenty-six sections. (One for each letter A-Z)
3. Start with "A". Ask the child to find all the words that have the letter "a" in them. Then count the number of times the letter appears in this portion of text. Record the number of times the letter "a" appears in this portion of text on the chart.
4. Proceed with the entire alphabet.
5. Discuss the results.

This is an appropriate activity to use when beginning to focus on vowels and the numerous sounds vowels make. An alternate idea would be to create a bar graph using graph paper and color one square for each time each letter appears in a portion of text. This visual representation may be easier for the younger child to determine at sight which letters have the highest frequency.

Reading comprehension is the primary goal in reading instruction. After a child has a strong enough basis to decode words and knows enough words at sight to begin tackling new text on their own they are ready to focus on reading for comprehension and enjoyment. Independent readers have a basis for decoding words and for constructing meaning from what they have read. For example, in this stage a child can read new material and gain new information. They can transform that information to new learning by applying what they have read or by broadening their understanding of the concept of a subject matter. It is more important that a child be able to read a lower level text with comprehension than a child be able to read a higher level text with no recollection of it's content or how to use what they have read in the higher level. If a child can relate a story he or she has read to an experience they have had, or be able to retell what they have read there is a connection made that tells the adult this child has the skill and strategies necessary to help boost their reading comprehension. This is the ultimate goal with reading.

The following strategies are designed to help readers reach this ultimate goal. Again, these strategies should be taught in the classroom. Teacher modeling and reteaching of these strategies is critical prior to inviting parents in to learn about their use. It is crucial that the teacher expose the students to these strategies before asking parents to use them at home. The teacher acts as the resource to the parents and must have the experience using the strategies prior to asking parents to use them. It is important to help the child activate prior knowledge

before reading a text. Since reading for meaning often requires the reader to infer and relate what they are reading to past experience you may wish to suggest simple mapping or webbing activities to generate prior knowledge of a topic which you are planning to read in a text.

Say Something

The Say Something strategy is a technique offered by Harste (1988) to foster personal responses to a selection of literature by having students say something at different intervals during the reading of a text. The overall goal for the Say Something strategy is to encourage students to become active readers.

The text selected for this strategy needs to be especially engaging to the reader. A narrative text works most effectively. The text should also be one with which the child will need to spend minimal time decoding words. This is so the child can maximize their time building meaning from the reading. The Say Something strategy steps are as follows.

1. The student or adult selects a text following the above mentioned guidelines.
2. The adult reads a portion of the text. (Text can be one paragraph to one page.)
3. The adult makes a personal response to what has been read. This could include a reaction to what has happened or mentioning a similar situation the reader has experienced to what is being read from the text.
4. The child then reads the next portion of the text and says something.

5. Continue taking turns through the text.

There are no correct or incorrect responses to a portion of text. By simply responding to what is read the reader is making a connection to how they feel about the text, an experience they have had which is similar to the text, or other connection.

Invite the child to make predictions or question the characters motive for certain actions. In doing so you will have given the child an opportunity to broaden their repertoire of responses for this technique.

Five W's

The five W's strategy is a basic story mapping exercise offered by Kerr, n.d., a Title One instructor from the Marion Independent School District in Marion, Iowa. This technique is designed to help the reader identify the elements of a story. The goal is for the reader to develop the ability to identify the main elements in a text when reading on their own. In turn, a reader's comprehension is given the opportunity to be boosted to a higher level.

When preparing to use this strategy the adult should write the words "who", "when", "where", "what" and "why" on separate cards. If you provide these cards for parents to use at home you will have alleviated some of the parental responsibility and may foster the willingness to use this strategy since no preparation will be required of the parents, other than learning how to use the strategy itself. The strategy procedures are as follows.

1. The child or adult selects a text.
2. Review the five W's. (Ask the child to define what each

word means.)

3. The adult or child reads the story.

4. Draw one of the five W cards and tell about the main element listed on the card.

5. Proceed through the other four cards.

The parent and child may wish to alternate turns drawing so that the parent can model responses for specific elements. With increased exposure to this strategy a child can be expected to use it without guidance from an adult, or with siblings.

Hidden Word

The Hidden Word strategy, designed by Cunningham (1995) is used to help boost comprehension by having students recall what was read to determine what piece of the story is "hidden". In this exercise the students become dependent on recall, or the use of the text to boost their comprehension of a specific text. It is also the goal of the Hidden Word strategy to promote logical predictions.

The procedure for using the Hidden Word Strategy are as follows.

1. Select a text to be read by the adult or child.

2. Write sentences from several pages of the text for shorter books and a handful of sentences from a page of a longer book on sentence strips. Cut the sentences apart into word cards.

3. Display the cards face up in the correct reading order.

4. Have the child close their eyes while you flip one or more words over to "hide" them.

5. The child is invited to read the cards and determine what

the flipped word is by relying on recall.

6. Check to determine accuracy and flip one or more additional words.

An alternative idea to the Hidden Word strategy is to begin the process with the entire set of word cards flipped upside down. The child then begins to read the cards as they flip them over. Invite the child to stop at predictable points to make predictions about what is coming next. (Cunningham 1995 p20)

RAP

The RAP strategy is another strategy to help boost a child's comprehension of a text they have read. The RAP strategy can also be used to help a child become a better paraphraser and reteller. The goal with the RAP strategy is for the reader to develop the ability to comprehend (reading or listening) as they paraphrase a selected text, or portion of text.

The steps for using RAP are as simple as one, two, three.

1. The student Reads a page, or selected portion of a text.
2. The reader Asked them self what they learned in the reading.
3. The reader then Puts what they have read in to their own words.

After this strategy has been taught in your classroom, you may wish to invite students to try "rapping" an entire book at the end of the reading. Doing so would be an ideal introduction to a book talk, which shares many similarities of the RAP strategy. (K. Dewulf, personal communication, April 1997)

Book Talks

O'Brien-Palmer's book titled Book-Talk Exciting Literature Experiences for Kids offers a host of different methods for engaging children in book talks. Book talks give students the opportunity to retell a text in their own words. In doing so comprehension may be boosted. Students are forced to rely on recall and sequence of a text to accurately convey the authors intended meaning to others who may not have read the text. The overall goal with using a Book Talk is for students to include important details of a text in retelling. The procedures for a Book Talk can take many forms. The following is one way I have used them when teaching first grade.

1. The reader selects a text.

2. As the child reads the selected text they should jot down the main ideas in the text. The Say Something strategy could be used in conjunction with this step for skilled readers.

3. The reader should practice retelling the story in their own words asking themselves if they included the main ideas and supporting details from the text.

4. The reader can share the cover of the book and retell the text with their classmates at school and with their family at home.

Depending on reading strengths and age of students, this strategy requires several sessions of teacher modeling and direction prior to inviting students to use it at home.

Prediction Guide

The Prediction Guide is designed to help students focus on

their interests as well as helping them establish a purpose for reading a particular selection, or portion of text. The Prediction Guide strategy utilizes a reader's prior knowledge of a topic to help them be better prediction makers and comprehension constructors. The Prediction Guide works as follows.

1. The adult compiles statements from a selection to be read. (Some statements are true about the selected text. Some are false. These statements are then written down.)
2. The child then reads the statements and sorts them into YES and NO piles prior to reading the selected text.. The YES pile holds the statements that the reader believes will be true. The NO pile houses the statements that the reader predicts to be false.
3. The child reads the selection.
4. The reader then checks their predictions and makes the needed corrections.

An alternative idea with this strategy is to allow students to make general predictions about a text prior to reading. For example, the reader can predict the time of year, setting and what kind of characters they think will be in the text. These basic predictions alleviate the need to write down statements prior to reading the text. This may be a more beneficial route to take with skilled readers. (Anonymous, n.d., available from the North Kansas City School District Chapter One Department, Kansas City, Missouri)

Johnson, Johnson, Harms, and Lettow (1997) suggest a reader of picture books is required to make inferences in order to

assemble meaning from the text. Readers have to make many different inferences during the course of a reading, many which must be made in conjunction with one another. For example, the reader might have to infer the location of a storyline. This information may not be provided and the reader must use picture cues and be attentive to the storyline to pick up on other cues which may indicate the era or time of a particular story. Readers are often required to make a "cause and effect" inference. The reader has to infer a certain effect was caused by an earlier mentioned chain of events, or rely completely on prior knowledge and personal experience to determine what might have caused a specific effect.

Skilled readers can do this because they have enough experience reading to make the inferences. When helping emergent readers become better processors of the text they read we must address the need to infer. As a skilled reader you need to point out instances where you must infer to the young reader. Stopping and talking at points in a text where obvious inferences are required will help the emergent reader do so when they are reading on their own.

Conclusion

Parent involvement with emergent readers can be valuable to teachers of the primary grades, as well as to teachers of all reading instruction, regardless of grade level. Hayden (1995/1996) concurs that parents have spent time listening to their children practice reading books they bring home for several decades. The practice of doing so is widespread across our

nation. It seems as though teachers may have fallen into the rut of embracing this practice for only poor readers. The benefits of encouraging parents to not only listen to their children reading, but making them coeducators in the reading process for ALL students could bring radical changes in the way teachers teach reading and the speed at which they progress through the reading instruction in their classroom.

Not only do children benefit from the direct attention of parents who have been trained in using specific strategies to help boost their child's ability and desire to read and learn, the families who choose to participate in these exercises and make the reading component of life a priority are building memories which will remain with the members for years to come.

While teachers may struggle with the notion of inviting parents to be in the classroom, and are fearful of empowering them as coeducators, it is a practice which can build communication bridges and a sense of responsibility for both parents and teachers working together.

Empowering those who are responsible for youngsters, whether it be the child's legal guardian or other, will no doubt spark an interest in their children and bring about reading gains which might once have been thought of as unreachable for certain students. While it requires you, the teacher, to put yourself and your teaching style on the line, I encourage you to take advantage of this free, readily available resource for your students. Even though it is possible you will not have full support of all parents, it is likely that whatever percentage of your parent population you do get involved will be grateful and appreciative

for your efforts of including them in their child's journey down the road of learning to read.

Suggested Parent Readings

1. Reading Begins at Home: Preparing children for reading before they go to school. Portsmouth, N.H. : Heinemann. Butler, D. & Clay, M. (1979)

2. Writing begins at Home: Preparing children for writing before they go to school. Hong Kong, China : Heinemann. Clay, M. (1987)

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