Supporting Families as Collaborators in Children’s Literacy Development

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Supporting families as collaborators in children’s literacy development requires:
• helping parents and caregivers recognize the many ways literacy is fostered on a day-by-day basis at home
• working collaboratively with families – talking with them, not at or over them – and building on their strengths
• engaging in ongoing dialogue that respects cultural, linguistic and familial identities
• planning family literacy activities that are fun, meaningful and engaging

TOWARDS A FULLY LITERATE CANADA

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

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

What We Know

Families spontaneously engage in meaningful and purposeful literacy, regardless of socioeconomic, cultural and linguistic differences.3 Research demonstrates, however, that there is often disparity between what is valued at school and what is practised at home, which may marginalize some families, particularly those whose literacy levels may fall below the norm or who may
be engaged in learning English. Educators, therefore, need to (a) examine their assumptions about linguistic, cultural and socioeconomic diversity, literacy, and family resources and (b) reinforce the significance of literacy activities – including multilingual and culturally diverse literacy practices – in which children and families are already engaged.

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

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

Ways to Engage Families as Literacy Collaborators

At the beginning of the year...

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

A Family Literacy Inventory

How often and in what languages ...

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

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

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

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

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

• **Plan for involvement.** School initiatives such as kindergarten orientations,
  beginning-of-year barbeques and curriculum nights provide an informal
contact point for families and schools. You may also facilitate extended
conversations with families that address issues families consider significant
(e.g., Ministry policies).12

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

• **Give them something to talk about.** Often children don’t talk because they
can’t isolate something to talk about. Send home something small to
stimulate talk!

• **Use daily family message journals as an alternative to agendas.** Messages
about school activities or homework written by students to family provide
an authentic purpose for writing and reinforce the idea that writing is
writing in any language.

• **Write Friday letters.** Encourage students to write a letter that summarizes
what they learned, found most interesting or liked best at school that
week; younger students can co-construct the letter through shared writing,
adding images to personalize texts. Compile each student’s letters in a
journal, or fold, leaving room for parents to respond.

• **Co-construct classroom newsletters.** Encourage students to gather
interesting articles and bits of information in a file that will be used
to prepare the highlights of the class’s month. Don’t forget to reserve
space for upcoming events.

**In Sum…**

Families are the first and most powerful teachers of their children.1,2 What
children learn prior to entering the school doors, without formal instruction,
is worthy of recognition and appreciation. The goal of school initiatives
should, therefore, be to weave together diverse family literacy practices and
academic/schooled literacy practices. Acknowledging families as collaborators
in their children’s literacy development, and validating cultural, linguistic
and familial practices, ultimately sets the stage for lifelong engagement
with literacy and learning.15

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