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The Family Literacy Initiative: Creating Outreach and Partnerships with Parents

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Some of our most meaningful experiences as teachers of writing have taken place while we were sitting on the sidelines of soccer fields or leaning against cold gymnasium walls waiting for our children's gymnastics, basketball, or volleyball practices to end. With an hour or more to watch and wait during these practices, we've enjoyed countless conversations with other parents about topics ranging from birthday parties, to vacation plans, to schools of choice, to homework assignments, and more. On a number of occasions, when we have been asked about what we do—besides driving our children to various after-school activities—and we respond that we teach writing, parents inevitably begin talking to us about their concerns about their children's writing.

As we both thoroughly enjoy writing and the teaching of writing, we welcome these opportunities to listen to parents share their concerns, struggles, and joys about writing. Because we truly believe that parents¹ are their children's first and most important teachers, we listen with great respect to the issues they raise. We usually hear comments like these:

You teach writing? Oh, I am so concerned about my son. He's in third grade, and he doesn't like to write at all! When he comes home from school with an assignment, I try to help him, but it just becomes a battle between us. He loves to read, but we just can't get him to write anything!

My daughter has trouble with spelling. We practice her spelling words each week, and she does well on her spelling tests, but she still misspells words in her writing. We don't know what to do.

My son's handwriting is atrocious. Should we be concerned about that?

And in the sharing these stories and concerns, some parents even confess, “*You know... I'm a terrible writer. I've never liked it. I don't know how to help my child write.*”

These parents, like all parents, love their children and want to help them succeed in school and in life. As a nation, we have made a concerted effort to teach parents how to raise lifelong readers: Read to your child. Read with your child. Read in front of your child. Magazine articles, television programs, commercials, books, pamphlets, school bulletins, and more underscore this important message. While much support is available to help parents raise readers, we've found that little support is available to help parents raise writers.

Family Literacy Initiative: Background

As teachers and parents ourselves, we began to wonder: How can we help parents understand the importance of writing? How can we help them raise lifelong writers? How can we help parents understand why writing is taught differently now from when they were in school? How can we help parents feel more confident helping their children with writing at home? How can we help families share and experience writing in a positive way?

Over the years, these discussions with parents have led the two of us—separately and together—to work with various groups of parents to help them in slightly more formal ways understand how they can contribute to raising writers. Kim, a former high school teacher, made the decision to stay home with her small children for several years. During that time, she began working with the homeschooled children of some of her friends and acquaintances, running a small writing class for these students. Cathy, a former high school teacher and now English education professor, sat on the School Improvement Team at her sons' elementary school and began to develop some evening sessions for parents and families in response to questions raised in the SIT meetings. As the

¹ While we use the term parents throughout this essay, we are using it merely as shorthand for parent, grandparent, aunt, uncle or other interested adult.

two of us started talking about these experiences and sharing our concerns about what was available for parents in the area of writing, we had a brainstorm: What if we could develop something more formal for parents and kids that offered them some thoughtful support on this complicated issue of how parents can help their kids as writers.

As teachers, we are increasingly aware that partnerships with families give us increased knowledge about our students...an insider knowledge that is invaluable in understanding what makes students tick and what ways of teaching might work best.

Partnerships: Working Together with Families

The Eastern Michigan Writing Project Family Literacy Initiative grew out of our conversations. To reach out to parents and families, we have developed three different workshops: (1) a ninety-minute workshop for parents about how to help their children write, (2) a ninety-minute workshop for parents and their children to write together, and (3) a four-session series for parents and children to draft, revise, polish, and publish a piece of writing.

We believe this kind of parent outreach is tremendously important for a variety of reasons. As teachers, we are increasingly aware that partnerships with families give us increased knowledge about our students. It is one of those truisms that working together with families and learning from them about their children give us a kind of insider knowledge about our students' learning styles and backgrounds—an insider knowledge that is invaluable in understanding what makes students tick and what ways of teaching might work best. And as a predominately white middle class teaching force meets an increasingly diverse and multicultural student population, we need these kinds of partnerships more than ever—so that we can approach the challenges of teaching with as much knowledge, as much understanding as possible.

Partnerships also help families understand *why* we teach in the ways that we do. Because the ways we teach literacy now are quite different from the ways most of our

students' parents learned to read and write, these parents sometimes—and understandably—feel confused about what literacy instruction is all about: both the terminology of writing instruction (*process writing, mini-lessons, craft lessons*) and the best ways they can help their children with their writing. Given this potential gap between teachers' practices and parents' understandings, it seems particularly important for teachers to establish partnerships with parents. Especially in an age in which many in the community get their primary information about pedagogy from newspaper accounts and legislative mandates, we think it is vital for us to reach out to parents and communities to help them understand the kinds of research-based practices we know work.

What many teachers have found is that parents who come to understand *what* we teach and *why* we teach in particular ways are more likely to be both more engaged in their children's learning and more supportive of our work. We want parents to be both informed consumers of what they read as well as potential advocates for change. (For more information on how some teachers have developed a variety of strategies for forming partnerships with parents, see Fleischer, *Teachers Organizing for Change*.)

While this is a tall order, we know that we have begun to make some inroads. Since the Family Literacy Initiative began in 2006, we have reached out to nearly 1,000 family members and educators in more than forty workshops based in schools, libraries, and other venues, including *826michigan* (www.826michigan.org), a non-profit writing center based in Ann Arbor. As we explain in more detail below, although the stated purpose of each workshop is slightly different, all the workshops are designed with two main goals in mind: first, to demonstrate to parents some specific ways they can help support their children's writing and, second, to explain what research-based *best practice* tells us about writing instruction.

How the Workshops are Structured

As previously mentioned, the Family Literacy Initiative began with three different workshop models available: one workshop for parents on how to help their children write at home, one workshop for parents and children to experience together the joy of sharing and writing stories about growing up, and a series of four workshops for parents and

their children to experience different stages of the writing process: brainstorming, writing, collaborating, revising, editing, and publishing their writing.

The first workshop, “How to Help Your Child Write,” is a workshop just for adults. After brief introductions, we begin by asking parents to write in response to a focused free write. Because we want parents to become more familiar with the language that we use with our students in the classroom, we purposely incorporate and explain a variety of writing terms, such as *free write*, *prompt*, and *process writing*.

Cathy leads: “Imagine a time recently when you were in the midst of writing something. It can be anything...a card, a report, a shopping list, an email... anything. Where were you at the time? How did you feel? Spend the next four minutes writing about that time. Don’t worry about your spelling or punctuation. You won’t be required to share your writing with anyone. This focused free write is an opportunity for you to just think about this topic for a few minutes and let your ideas flow from your mind onto the page.”

Just as teachers of writing model for their students, we write while the parents write. When the four to five minutes have passed, we ask volunteers to share their writing experiences with the group. We explain that they may either read aloud or talk from what they have written. Each time we participate in this discussion, we discover with the parents that each person has his or her own unique process and approach to writing. While one prefers to work early in the morning at home on the computer, another prefers to write at the local coffee shop mid-day with her favorite purple pen. Some writers find outlines essential; others find them burdensome. For many parents, the idea that each person’s writing process and style is unique is surprising. We invite them to consider the uniqueness of each child and the challenge of how they, as parents, can best support their child in creating an environment that works best for him or her.

Already in these brief beginning moments, we have introduced parents to some significant notions, theories and best practices about writing. Through the discussion that arises from their initial jottings, we have demonstrated and articulated some of the “language of

writing”: that a *freewrite* is one way of getting started as a writer; that issues of *spelling and grammar* are not all that important in this prewriting stage; that *writing process* is not a linear, lock-step idea; that *revision* is a significant part of the process. As parents nod their heads, listening to other parents and to us, we know they are receiving some very important messages about writing.

We next explain to the parents how the ways in which we teach writing have changed over the years. We introduce them to what writing teachers have come to know through extensive research about the qualities of best practice in teaching writing (adapted from the Zemelman, Daniels, and Hyde’s book *Best Practice*), and we then further this discussion to include the implications of those findings for parents working with their children on writing at home. For example, we share with parents the research-based best practice belief that all children can and should write. We then talk about what that implies for parents: that from the time their child can hold a crayon, they should encourage him or her to draw, scribble, and write. We explain to the parents that in order for children to become successful and fluent writers, students need to know they can write—even if it doesn’t look perfect. We go through many of these familiar best practice beliefs with the parents, adapting each one to what it might mean for them as parents.

After introducing best practices in the teaching of writing with parents, we segue into sharing various ways in which they can create a home that “drips with literacy”—from making sure that children have all of the supplies that they need easily accessible, to modeling the different kinds of writing that they do as adults, and to writing to their children. We share ideas for *everyday writing* (writing for one’s self or family members only, no revising necessary) and *polished writing* (writing that goes out to the public and might need to be revised and edited). In making these distinctions, we help parents better understand the writing process and how the purpose and audience of a piece will necessarily affect the kind of feedback we give our children about their work.

As we talk about these concepts, we share multiple examples taken from the writing we’ve done at home with our own children over the years. We offer samples of everyday writing (such as travel journals, family journals),

polished writing (stories submitted for a writing contest, gift writing), and I-Search projects. And because we are parents who understand the realities of working with our own kids, we laughingly talk about the experiments in writing in our own homes that weren't quite so successful! We assure parents that they know their child best. If one writing project doesn't reach its final stage, we encourage parents and children to celebrate that which they did accomplish.

For example, when Cathy's son Jesse learned that he had to have a kidney removed, he was understandably concerned. Cathy encouraged and joined her son in learning more about kidneys and the surgery he was about to have. He began an I-Search project of his own. He read articles in magazines and online. He took notes. He developed questions to ask his surgeon just prior to his surgery. While he intended to write a book for other kids who might have to go through this procedure, once he recovered from the surgery, felt better, and got back into his usual, busy routine of playing soccer and going to school, he never followed through with making the book. Instead of feeling concerned about not completing the project, though, both Jesse and Cathy value the reading and writing that Jesse did, as it was meaningful, authentic, and valuable to him. And when we share moments like this, we can sense the visible relief of the parents! Anything they try with their own kids, we assure them, is a wonderful start.

Make Way for Writing: The Family Writing Workshop

The second workshop we offer, "The Family Writing Workshop," begins with family members sitting together at tables filled with markers, colored pencils, pens, pencils, drawing paper, and lined paper. We invite all of the children to come sit on the floor to listen to two stories about favorite play places, *In My Treehouse* by Alice Schertle and *Soft House* by Jane Yolen. After reading the stories, Kim asks the children, "How many of you have ever played in a tree house?" A few hands wave in the air.

"How many of you have ever played in a soft house made of big blankets, pillows, and sofa cushions?" Many more hands are raised.

"Now, turn around. Let's look at your parents and ask them if they have ever played in a tree house." The children grin and look at their parents.

"How many of you parents have played in a tree

house?" As we watch the looks of surprise on the faces of the children as some of the parents raise their hands, Kim asks another question. "How many of you parents have made and played in soft houses?" Again, a number of parents raise their hands, much to the delight of the kids. "Think of the stories you'll have to share with each other when you return to your tables!"

Kim then invites the children to help brainstorm a list of their favorite play places. As the children call out ideas, she creates a list on a large white board: *backyard, swing set, park, beach, basement, Grandma's attic, soccer field, my bedroom, the field*, and more.

We ask the children to return to their seats and for both parents and children to draw a picture of their favorite play places. The children and their parents begin to draw, sketch, and color. While they work, we walk around the room, noticing family members leaning in, listening, giggling, and asking each other questions about the pictures. We lead the families through a series of questions, encouraging them to write in the margins words to describe what they see, hear, smell, feel, and taste in their favorite play place.

We then read two poems about play places from *Secret Places* by Charlotte Huck and explain that writers can choose different genres in which to write about topics that matter to them. We invite the audience to consider writing a story or poem themselves. We offer other ideas, too. We describe how participants at previous workshops have written songs and letters to brothers, sisters, cousins, and friends, reminiscing about favorite play places.

Participants begin writing. While some parents use their workshop time to help younger children write, others choose to write pieces of their own alongside their older children. During this time, we walk around the room greeting more families and conferencing briefly with each child. We want to encourage each participant to write as well as model for the parents how to conference with children about their writing, noticing details, offering praise, and asking questions.

With only ninety minutes to work, the time passes by quickly. Before the workshop ends, we encourage everyone to continue writing at home. To make this offer more tangible, we share with the parents a "Tip Sheet" on how to help their children revise their writing. We then

invite anyone who would like to share their initial writing to come to the front of the room. At every workshop we have had, the children line up at the microphone to read the start of what they've written.

We bring the workshop to a close by explaining to the parents how the Family Writing Workshop demonstrates best practice in the teaching of writing and by encouraging them to continue finding ways to read, write, and talk about writing at home with their children. This moment of stepping back to reinforce with the parents how we've approached writing instruction in this setting is a key component of the workshop. Yes, the family members and children have had fun (sometimes we have siblings attend as well), but they also have learned a lot about the kinds of writing support they can offer their children at home—both by being immersed in actual writing and by having us highlight what we (and they) did. We remind them how we began the writing process with some prewriting strategies (reading aloud, talking, drawing); we offered time for writing; we offered support (by reading the kids' work and delighting in what they had accomplished); and we "went public" with the writing (by having the students read their works out loud). As parents leave, we hope that they are thinking about ways they can use these strategies at home.

Make Way for Writing: The Family Writing Project

The third workshop, The Family Writing Project, is intended to offer families a more in-depth immersion into the experience of writing, culminating in the production of an anthology of family writing. Beginning the first night with activities similar to the play places of the Family Writing Workshop, we go on to meet three more times—each time letting families have first-hand experience in the various practices and strategies that help writers take a piece from idea to publication. In the second session, we focus on revision techniques, introducing students and families to Barry Lane's *snapshots*, *thoughtshots*, and *exploding the moment*. In the third session, we focus on the finer points of polishing, introducing students and families to self and peer evaluation and offering checklists based on their own school's grade level expectations.

On the fourth and final night of the project, families come together for a celebration of writing. That night each family receives an anthology of students'

and parents' writing collected and published by the Eastern Michigan Writing Project. Participants enjoy a read-aloud and autograph each other's books. Again, a key component to these multi-session workshops is the time for the parents and family members to step back and reflect on what they've learned about supporting their young writers. Each week's session ends with a discussion about the kinds of strategies we modeled and how they might adapt those strategies at home.

Follow-up Opportunities

For parents who have attended our workshops, we offer a variety of follow-up opportunities and resources. Many parents who have attended the Parent Workshop sign up to attend the Family Writing Workshop when it is also offered at their school. We encourage parents to visit the EMWP website (www.emichwp.org) to read Family Writing Tips submitted by other families attending our workshops. We also share a variety of other resources for parents, such as:

- NCTE's resource for parents: <http://www.ncte.org/parents>
- The Read/Write/Think website: <http://www.readwritethink.org/beyondtheclassroom/summer/>
- The National Writing Project website: <http://www.nwp.org>
- *Because Writing Matters: Helping Your Children Become Confident, Skilled Writers In and Beyond School*, a booklet published by the California Writing Project (Berkeley, CA, 2008) (for more information, see <http://www.californiawritingproject.org/Documents/PBOrderForm.pdf>)

How does the EMWP Family Literacy Initiative grow from here?

Based on feedback that we have received from our workshops, we are currently developing more workshops to address the concerns of parents, teachers, and administrators. We are creating a workshop for parents of young writers in grades K-2, as well as workshops for parents of middle and high school students who want to learn more about writing on demand for high stakes tests

and young adult literature.

During *Inkstains*, a week-long summer writing camp for middle school students on EMU's campus, we offer a two-session workshop for parents. Our goal in this workshop is to help parents find ways to support their child as a writer, especially during their child's camp experience: by learning about best practices in writing instruction, by discovering specific strategies that they can use to help student writers, and by doing a little writing themselves.

With demand for our workshops growing, we continue to offer training for EMWP Teacher Consultants to help us present these workshops. In addition to serving as workshop presenters, these teachers are also involved in helping us develop new workshops. Without the commitment of their time and talents, we could not have reached out to as many families as we have this past year through the Family Literacy Initiative.

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Appendix

Helpful Resources

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About the Authors

Kimberly Pavlock (kpavlock@emich.edu), a former high school English teacher, teaches first-year writing at Eastern Michigan University and serves as Family Literacy Coordinator for the Eastern Michigan Writing Project. Her interest in family literacy has grown out of reading and writing with her own three children, as well as teaching writing to home-schooled students.

Cathy Fleischer (cathy.fleischer@emich.edu) is Professor of English at Eastern Michigan University where she teaches courses in English education and writing. In addition, she serves as a co-director of the Eastern Michigan Writing Project, coordinating the Teacher Research Group and the Family Literacy Initiative. Author of several books and numerous articles, she is currently Special Imprint Editor for NCTE where she is developing a new book series entitled *Principles in Practice*.

Family Writing Workshop

How to Help Your Child Begin a Writing Project

For apprentice writers like our children, the name of the game is encourage, encourage, encourage. Just as you didn't correct every word that came out of your child's mouth as he or she was learning to talk, you don't want to correct every word that emerges on paper—even if it's spelled wrong!

- Discuss your child's ideas. Ask questions.
- Help your child organize the writing by creating a web, a list of ideas, or even an outline. Make sure, though, that content comes first!
- Delight with your child over specific words, creative ideas, captivating images.
- Ask questions about content if you have some.
- Most of all, help your child to feel as if writing is fun!

How to Help Your Child Revise and Polish His or Her Writing

- Talk to your child about the writing. Tell him or her what you enjoyed about it.
- Make sure the focus is on content. Help your child expand ideas by asking him or her real questions that show your real interest. Encourage your child to think, talk, and write a lot just to get ideas flowing.
- Help your child revise by asking him/her to read aloud. Tell your child your favorite parts—a place where you could really picture a character or a setting. Ask your child questions to help him or her expand ideas, explain more clearly, and make the writing come alive!
- Help your child edit by teaching some conventions like spelling, punctuation, and capitalization as needed. Remind your child that an outside audience will need help reading—and standard conventions will help others understand the fabulous ideas that he or she is composing! Remember, teaching these ideas in the context of writing is the best way to help kids remember the rules.
- And remember—this is the kids' writing and not yours! There are adult opportunities for publication, too!

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