December 2012

Family Literacy: Building Meaningful Relationships with Parents

Evie Burk

Vanesse Titus

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/mrj

Recommended Citation

Burk, Evie and Titus, Vanesse (2012) "Family Literacy: Building Meaningful Relationships with Parents,"
Michigan Reading Journal: Vol. 44 : Iss. 2 , Article 5.
Available at: https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/mrj/vol44/iss2/5

Family Literacy: Building Meaningful Relationships with Parents

BY EVIE BURK & VANESSA TITUS

*H*ow many times have we as teachers heard or even said about students' families, "They don't care" or "Literacy is not a priority to them" or "They don't have books" or "They don't take care of books"? Unfortunately, stereotyped beliefs about students' family literacy practices may lead teachers to make unfair conclusions and assumptions about their students' families and literacy practices at home (Au & Raphael, 2000; Delpit & Dowdy, 2002; Gonzales, Moll, & Amanti, 2005). As experienced classroom teachers, some of us may have uttered these very words. Yet, our students still struggle, families are disconnected and continue to search for help. In our quest to better understand family literacy practices, we reviewed several research articles and found that there is a mismatch between how educators may view literacy and how families may view literacy. Our goal is to take our findings from our literature review and provide suggestions for educators who want to bridge this gap between teachers and families in order to scaffold family literacy in ways that are impactful to literacy success in school.

Schools typically view literacy as reading text for meaning, as an assignment, or to improve student reading (Longwell-Grice & McIntyre, 2006). Families often view literacy differently, as a functional process in authentic contexts (Au & Raphael, 2000; Delpit & Dowdy, 2002; Heath, 1983; Gonzales, Moll, & Amanti, 2005) For example, authentic literacy events that occur frequently in daily home life include reading recipes, television program guides, listings of movie times in newspapers or online, music reviews, letters to family, institutional paperwork like job applications, school-related forms, government papers, and schedules (Elish-Piper, 1997). Klassen-Endrizzi's (2000) found that parents often frame literacy as a means of communication, similar to a conversation or as a means to communicate ideas long after you've gone—a sense of history, identity and knowledge. This isn't always aligned with the typical school view of literacy as a tool for thinking and learning in the content areas. This mismatch of ideas held by teachers and families may contribute to a barrier to successful school literacy for children whose home literacy practices aren't a close match for those at school (Au & Raphael, 2000; Delpit & Dowdy, 2002; Gonzales, Moll, & Amanti, 2005). This is problematic given that family literacy practices have a strong relationship with school literacy achievements (Hart & Risley, 1995; Heath, 1983; Neuman, 1999, 2001; Sulzby &Teale, 1986). Although the Michigan Department of Education Grade Level Content Expectations present six modes of literacy (reading, writing, speaking, listening, viewing, and visually representing), we have found in our schools and districts that classroom focus is often on reading and writing, with listening and speaking receiving much less emphasis. This focus on written texts may be a mismatch for home literacy practices that emphasize oral and aural literacy.

As educators, we have the responsibility to build on the home literacy practices of our students and their families. In order to do this, we often ask families to do things like read aloud with their children, play literacy-based games, practice sight words, and complete packets of worksheets. Additional schoolwide initiatives often include having reading nights that plan for reading a story and completing a fun activity. Often, we plan these opportunities from an educator's viewpoint with minimal input from families. This is problematic because a consistent theme emerges in research related to family literacy: parents want to be heard, included

Evie Burk is a K-8 reading specialist at Laurus Academy in Southfield, MI. She holds a master's degree in literacy education.
Vanessa Titus is a dean with with National Heritage Academies in Canton, MI, and has a master's degree in literacy education.

and informed in bridging the gap between home and school literacy (Compton-Lilly, 2009; Cook-Cottone, 2004; Elish-Piper, 1997; Jay & Rohl, 2005; Klassen-Endrizzi, 2000; Longwell-Grice & McIntyre, 2006). For example, Longwell-Grice & Mcintyre (2006) found parents didn't feel they were heard when they had requested that their children be included in after-school family literacy workshops, but teachers preferred that workshops consist of only parents. Elish-Piper (1997) found that parents felt more connected to a literacy program when it was based on their needs. This research suggests that effectively supporting family literacy means shifting away from talking *to* parents about family literacy and to talking *with* them. Teachers need to engage parents in dialogue about home literacy, which means the conversation must go both ways, allowing parents to voice their concerns, and allowing teachers to learn about family literacy practices. Parents want to be included in supporting their children's growth as readers; their views of literacy at home need to be valued. Rather than teaching *to* our parents, teachers need to find ways to empower our parents and to build upon their strengths in home literacy. We are proposing a gradual release model in which: 1) we develop opportunities to model the suggested literacy practices based on families' expressed needs, 2) we allow parents time to practice and receive feedback, and 3) support parents in being able to confidently implement additional literacy practices at home. Teachers can facilitate home literacy by scaffolding parents' understanding and use of literacy practices that add to, not replace, home literacy practices..

We, the authors, observed a family literacy night at University Preparatory Academy- Mark Murray Campus in Detroit and saw how the gradual release model was used to support parents (as well as grandparents and other caregivers) in learning how to support literacy practices at home in ways that would be impactful to their children's school-based literacy success. Teachers planned multiple workshop sessions (practicing sight words, decoding strategies, comprehension strategies, fluency practice, etc.). Parents chose topics of their interest and went to classrooms where teachers worked in pairs to model literacy activities that could be used at home to support children's school-based literacy. One teacher acted as the adult at home, the other as the child who was reading. The teachers named

what they were doing as they modeled the strategy/skill that adults can use to support readers at home. Parents were given time to practice these activities with each other, talk about them as a group, and receive feedback from the teacher. In addition to parents' questions and concerns being addressed in the workshops, parents were also encouraged to share the ways they were engaging in home literacy and provided suggestions to other parents. We were struck by how engaged parents were in these workshops, and the school received highly positive feedback from the families that attended.

The family literacy night we attended was aligned with what research suggests may be effective ways to support home literacy. Combining research from Compton-Lilly, 2009; Cook-Cottone, 2004; Elish-Piper, 1997; Jay & Rohl, 2005; Klassen-Endrizzi, 2000; Longwell-Grice & McIntyre, 2006; and our professional experience, we developed some ideas that we educators can incorporate into our practice in order to bridge home-school literacy practices.

- *Create partnerships and build relationships with parents through constant communication* (e.g., surveys, questionnaires, conferences, informal meetings, workshops, phone calls, dialogue, frequent classroom newsletters). This will allow us to build upon the literacy events that occur in their homes. Through this communication we are able to gain information about families' interests, practices and needs regarding literacy. If we are going to obtain genuine feedback from parents, questions should not be interrogative but instead open-ended so that parents might feel safer to provide feedback. For example, "What does reading time look like at home?" is open-ended rather than "How often do you read?" or "Do you read at home?" which can give the feeling of one being judged.

- *Collaboration with other families:* Opportunities for students' families to meet, dialogue, and collaborate on literacy activities with other families should be created. Teachers, administrators, and support staff should also be included in the network. This will provide parents the sense that they are not alone in their quest to support their children. For instance, parents

could be invited to read aloud in classrooms to demonstrate for other parents, who could observe, the strategies they have learned through the school's support.

- *Construct purposeful literacy workshops with parents to address the needs of parents/students:* Teachers can lead flexible workshops created with parent input. Formatting workshops with school agendas set only by teachers should be avoided in order to prevent alienating parents. School goals and parent needs must be balanced when planning purposeful workshops.

When it comes to children's literacy achievement, a partnership must evolve between teachers and parents if we want children to achieve the best literacy outcomes. Instead of resorting to negative assumptions about our students' family literacy practices, we need to rethink our assumptions and support our families by giving them specific strategies to build upon the literacy that already occurs at home (Compton-Lilly, 2009 & Cook-Cottone, 2004). Giving families tools to further scaffold their children's literacy growth and creating contexts for quality collaboration between home and classroom can be an important step in supporting children's literacy achievement.

References

Au, K.H. (1998). Social constructivism and the school literacy learning of students of diverse backgrounds. *Journal of Literacy Research, 30,2,* 297-319.

Au, K.H., & Raphael, T.E. (2000). Equity and literacy in the next millennium. *Reading Research Quarterly, 35*(1), 170-188.

Compton-Lilly, C. (2009). Listening to families over time: Seven lessons learned about literacy in families. *Language Arts,* 86 (6), 449-457.

Cook-Cottone, C. (2004). Constructivism in family literacy practices: Parents as mentors. *Reading Improvement,* 41 (4), 208-216

Delpit. L., & Dowdy, J.K. (Eds.) (2002). *The skin that we speak: Thoughts on language and culture in the classroom.* New York: The New Press.

Elish-Piper, L. (1997). Literacy and their lives: Four low-income families in a summer family literacy program. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy,* 40 (4), 256-268.

González, N., Moll, L.C., & Amanti, C. (2005). *Funds of knowledge: Theorizing practices in households, communities, and classrooms.* Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Hart, B. & Risley, T.R. (1995). *Meaningful differences in the everyday experience of young American children.* Baltimore: Paul H. Publishing Co., Inc.

Heath, S.B. (1983). *Ways with words: Language, life, and work in communities and classrooms.* New York: Cambridge University Press.

Jay, J. & Rohl, M. (2005). Constructing a family literacy program: Challenges and successes. *International Journal of Early Childhood*, 37(1), 57-78.

Klassen-Endrizzi, C. (2000). Exploring our literacy beliefs with families. *Language Arts*, 78(1), 62-70.

Longwell-Grice, H., & McIntyre, E.. (2006). Addressing goals of school and community: Lessons from a family literacy program. *School Community Journal*, 16(2), 115-132.

Neuman, S.B. (1999). Books make a difference: A study of access to literacy. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 34(3), 286–311.

Neuman, S.B. (2001). Early language and literacy skills in low-income African American and Hispanic children. In S.B. Neuman & D.K. Dickinson (Eds.). *Handbook of early literacy research*, pp. 192-210. New York: The Guilford Press.

Neuman, S.B., & Celano, D. (2001). Access to print in low-income and middle-income communities: An ecological study of four neighborhoods. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 36(1), 8-26.

Neuman, S.B., Greco, A.N., & Celano, D.C. (2001). *Access for all: Closing the book gap in early education.* Newark, DE: International Reading Association.

Teale, W.H., & Sulzby, E. (1986). *Emergent literacy: Writing and reading.* Westport, CT: Greenwood Publishing.