

Assessing Our Work with Parents  
On Behalf of Children's Literacy

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*To the living memory of Paulo Freire:  
your love and wisdom continue  
to transform the world*

Introduction

In the course of our work with parents, we have had the opportunity to listen to the many of the difficulties faced by parents of language-minority children. The following anecdotes highlight some of the issues that we will be addressing in this chapter.

After listening to a presentation where parents have been encouraged to communicate with their children, tell stories, and share life experiences as a way to support their children's learning, a mother approaches the presenter. The mother's concern is greater than her obvious shyness. "I have a problem," she says. "How can I follow your recommendations, if I don't speak English? Everyone says that if I speak Spanish to my child, he'll never learn English. Isn't it better for me to just let him watch TV in English, instead of speaking to him in Spanish?"

After another presentation, a parent approaches, pleading for help. "My son is failing high school," she confides. "They want to send him to an alternative school, but he just wants to drop out. I want to help him, to talk with him, encourage him... but he doesn't understand me. He doesn't understand my language when I speak to him... I

don't know when he forgot his Spanish. When his older sister lived at home, she always spoke to him in English. Now I realize that she was translating everything I said to him. But now she has moved away. She did well in school, she is doing fine with her life. But I am losing my son... he is my son, and I can't even talk with him!"

As educators, we need to ask ourselves some difficult questions. What is our responsibility here? In what ways have we been contributing to this problem? And, what can we do to make a positive difference for language-minority parents and their children?

### Assessing Our Work With Parents

When it comes to assessment, our culture's predominant tendency is to focus on assessing others, instead of assessing our own work. Of course, assessing a child's learning can help us learn more about the effectiveness of our own practice, when conducted with that clear intention in mind. Yet too often, the question of "How effective are my teaching practices, and how might I improve them?" gets lost in our focus on assigning grades to students.

When examining our collaboration with parents, it is equally important that we keep the focus on assessing and improving our own efforts. After all, any limiting beliefs or negative judgments we might hold about the parents of our students are likely to lead to reduced communication and cooperation. On the other hand, a sincere and in-depth examination of our own efforts and approaches can allow us to make needed changes in the area over which we have the most control.

One of the main points of this chapter is that, in addition to assessing our work in the areas of parent education and parent engagement, we also need to assess our everyday classroom curriculum with regards to the inclusion of parents, family, and community. If we are not making an effort to include parents' knowledge, wisdom, and history in our curriculum, we are missing powerful opportunities for motivating and supporting

students' literacy development. And we are also contributing, by default, to a painful gap between the worlds of home and school.

Too often, language-minority children end up alienated, feeling that they do not belong at school. Alternatively, they may come to feel that their home is deficient, and that the price of success is to distance themselves from their own roots. Parents, in turn, often believe they have little to offer their children's formal learning, since they do not speak English or have lacked opportunities for formal education.

As educators, we can consciously choose to send a different message to students and their families. By thoughtfully assessing and modifying our curriculum, we can take significant steps towards helping children integrate the worlds of home and school. As we help parents build on their strengths by encouraging them to use their home language, their life experiences, and their human wisdom to engage with their children in beneficial ways, this can also help create more powerful learning environments for children in the classroom.

### Brief Background on Research

Erroneous beliefs about minority parents are unfortunately still prevalent among educators. Minority parents are often regarded as not caring or not being willing to be involved in their children's education. As stated by Kerbow and Bernhart, many policy initiatives designed to increase minority parental engagement operate on the false assumption that "levels of parental involvement for these parents are inadequate or at least below expected levels" (1993, p.115).

Research, however, does not support these beliefs, confirming instead that minority parents have high educational expectations for their children and are willing to invest whatever economic resources are at their disposal on their children's education (Muller and Kerbow, 1993). Research also confirms that minority parents are highly interested in collaborating with schools in order to help their children succeed

academically (Moles, 1993). Looking at the available evidence, Kerbow and Bernhart conclude: "To claim that these parents are inadequate in their attention to their children's education is straightforwardly mistaken" (1993, p.134).

While language-minority parents may care deeply about their children's education, and hold high hopes for their children, they may not communicate their hopes in similar ways to mainstream parents (see, for example, Delgado-Gaitan, 1990). In addition to cultural differences, parents may have accepted prevailing beliefs that those with scant formal education have little to contribute to their children's educational development. Often, they may feel that sending their children to school is the best they can offer--only to have their behavior interpreted as "not caring about their children's education." Of course, language barriers, work schedules, and lack of adequate child care can all limit the ways in which parents are able to express their concerns.

Searching for workable alternatives, progressive educators have called for other approaches to working with minority parents. These educators have argued that traditional ways of understanding parent involvement, such as attendance at PTA meetings, overlook the many ways in which minority parents can be powerful supports at home for their children's academic success (Nieto, 1992; Simich-Dudgeon, 1993). Research has confirmed the significance of alternative forms of parent involvement. For example, one of the most important correlates of student achievement is parent-student discussions about school activities and programs (Muller, 1993). Encouraging parents to engage in dialogue with their children results in positive effects on students' academic achievement, even when parents themselves have very little formal education and low levels of literacy (Hewison & Tizard, 1980; Simich-Dudgeon, 1986). These findings have lent support to "home learning activities" as a promising avenue for helping parents increase student achievement (Rich, 1987 & 1993; Ramirez & Douglas, 1989; Simich-Dudgeon, 1993).

Despite the promise of "home learning activities", too little is said about the language in which these activities might be most effective. Indeed, with few exceptions (Auerbach, 1989; Simich-Dudgeon, 1993) the issue of home language use is rarely mentioned in the literature on parent involvement. Yet research worldwide shows repeatedly that strong home language use in the home correlates with higher student achievement in the language of the school (Cummins, 1981; Dolson 1985.) Regardless of our position on bilingual education, abundant evidence points to the academic value of promoting home language use at home. Additionally, a shared home language facilitates greater communication between parents and children, allowing parents to offer continued support and guidance to their children.

The above considerations lead us to pose three initial questions. First, to what extent do we regard all parents as concerned about and having high hopes for their children's education, even if they may not be expressing their concerns and hopes in a way that we can understand? Secondly, to what degree do we promote communication at home in the home language, so that parents are able to contribute their strengths towards their children's academic success? Thirdly, to what extent does our curriculum include the use of home learning activities that promote communication between parents and children?

This third question can lead us to consider what other kinds of modifications to our curriculum we might make in order to encourage greater communication at home between parents and children. When discussing the finding that minority parents appear to have a lower incidence of communication about school-related activities with their children, Muller and Kerbow present the following hypothesis:

"discussion of current aspects of the educational experience may be more likely to come about in families in which parents are able to in some sense 'put themselves in the context of the school', figuratively speaking, so that the student and parent have enough

commonalty of understanding to be able to talk about what happens to the student" (1993, p. 18).

In other words, one of the likely effects of the disparity between the respective cultures of school and home is reduced communication between parents and children about school matters. This reduced communication, in turn, can affect children's academic achievement.

Yet there is no reason to take the "context of the school" as a given. In our experience, teacher practice can significantly influence the degree to which the classroom culture reflects children's families and communities. Ada (1993), Huerta-Macías and Quintero (1993), and McCaleb (1994) all explore what teachers can do in the classroom in order to promote parent-child conversations that build on parents' life experiences, family histories, and cultural knowledge. By accessing and incorporating parents' "funds of knowledge" into classroom curriculum and practice, the "context of the school" becomes more reflective of children's families and communities (Moll, 1990). This, in turn, promotes further parent-child communication. Our fourth question, then, becomes: "To what extent does our classroom curriculum and practice, by being culturally relevant and family-friendly, promote parent-child communication?"

By including and honoring parents, families, and community in the curriculum, we increase possibilities for communication between parents and children about school-related activities, which in turn correlates with higher academic achievement. Yet there are many school factors that also correlate with achievement, and which influence the acquisition of literacy at least as significantly as home factors (Chall & Snow, 1982; Urzua, 1986). Including family and community in the curriculum also influences school factors that affect literacy by creating a stimulating and engaging classroom environment.

The benefits of closer home-school collaboration are not only academic: encouraging children to feel proud of their families and communities helps foster strong

family ties. Conversely, when the school's curriculum and practices do not respect children's families, home languages, and communities, the school is contributing to the breakdown of community and family ties, regardless of its good intentions. Using the terminology introduced James Coleman (1991), we can say that schools either *strengthen* or *undermine* the social capital of the families and communities they are supposed to serve.

Children are sensitive to the "hidden curriculum" of the school. The image they hold of their parents --already threatened in a culture whose primary value is economic success-- suffers further whenever schools maintain a silent disregard. As children encounter greater and greater difficulty in sustaining their original respect for their parents, they are more likely to look for alternative role models and alternative sources of pride and self-respect. While a few might choose to assimilate and identify with the majority culture, for too many the solution lies in the direction of gang membership. And, when children lose the ability to speak their home language, *the language their parents speak best*, it becomes vastly more difficult for parents to guide and support their children as they enter adolescence and face major choices, challenges, and risks.

The difficulties created for children when the schools do not include parents has been stated eloquently by James Comer (1988, p.219): "When we ask low-income, minority-group children to achieve well in school -- an instrument of mainstream society -- we are often asking them to be different than their parents. With parents involved there is no conflict." By encouraging communication between parents and children, by including parents' knowledge, experience, and wisdom in the curriculum, and by honoring the languages that parents speak, we further reduce children's sense of conflict.

The following table summarizes the four principal questions for self-assessment we have considered in our discussion of the research:

## **Building Collaborative Relationships with Parents**

1. To what extent do we regard all parents as having high hopes for their children's education, even when they may not express their concerns and hopes in a way we understand?
2. To what extent are we promoting home language use at home as a way for parents to support children's learning and development?
3. To what extent does our curriculum include home learning activities as a way to promote conversations in the home language?
4. To what extent are we creating a culturally relevant, family-friendly curriculum that promotes greater parent-child communication?

### Implications for practice

The above discussion points to the need to re-examine and expand previous typologies of parent engagement efforts. Typologies can serve to help sort and organize the various kinds of efforts included in the field of "parent involvement". Yet they also need to be revised and expanded as our knowledge base expands. Epstein's categories of "parental involvement" (1986) include the following areas:

- 1) Parent education and family support services
- 2) Increased communication between home and school
- 3) Parent/family participation at school in school activities and programs
- 4) Parent/family participation in advocacy and decision-making
- 5) Parent/family participation in home learning activities initiated by the school

It is obvious from our previous discussion on "the context of the school" that we need to add a sixth category, namely

- 6) The inclusion of parents, family, and community in classroom curriculum and practice.

As mentioned earlier, the result of including and honoring children's parents, families, communities, and home languages within the school and classroom community affects both home *and* school factors that influence student achievement. It makes communication between parents and children about school-related activities more likely, helps create a supportive school environment, and strengthens relationships between parents and children.

In addition to including this crucial sixth category, we also need a way to assess the quality of our work in each of these six areas. To do so, we need a clear sense of "best practice". In turn, our definition of "best practice" is informed by our fundamental philosophy about human beings and how we learn.

In working with children, we are aware of the distinction between a facilitative, constructivist approach that honors children's intelligence and builds upon their prior knowledge, as contrasted to a "blank slate" approach that assumes children are empty vessels waiting to be filled (Cummins, 1989). Likewise, it is important to be cognizant of the underlying assumptions and philosophical beliefs that inform our work with parents (Freire, 1984; Auerbach, 1989; Montecel, María Robledo et al., 1993).

Within each of the above six categories of parent engagement, we can position our work at some point along the continuum between a "deficit" or "empty vessel", perspective, which focuses primarily on what parents lack, and an "additive" or "building on strengths" approach. By doing so, we add a qualitative dimension to each category, turning the typology into a matrix . In this way, we can examine how our beliefs and attitudes shape the work that we do within each of these different areas, limiting or enhancing our effectiveness.

Before proceeding further, it is important to acknowledge that we all carry within us the seeds of the "deficit" perspective. As members of this society, we have all been conditioned to compete with one another, to evaluate and rank each other in hierarchical systems based on any number of factors, from the amount of money we make to the number of degrees we hold. Even when regarding others from this limited perspective, we often act out of helpful intentions. For example, we may sincerely attempt to help others "climb the economic ladder" by obtaining more educational opportunities. Yet our ability to truly help someone will be limited by the degree to which our focus on their "deficits" causes us to overlook their "strengths".

Conversely, the power of a "strengths-based" approach is due to the simple fact that the greatest help we can give another person is the full dignity and respect that is due them as a human being. When we do so, we find that growth and learning occurs quite naturally, often by leaps and bounds. Even if we look at the situation strictly from the perspective of effectiveness, we can see the difference that our own approach can make.

Now we will examine each of the six categories of collaboration with parents, exploring what the continuum between a "deficit" and a "strengths" perspective might look like within each. While some of these categories are more directly connected with children's literacy acquisition than others, we will look at all six.

1) Family support services and parent education. Obviously, a principal need faced by language-minority parents is English-language instruction. Yet too often, the quality of this instruction is unexamined. ESL classes can embody *either* a "deficit" *or* a "strengths" approach, depending on their design. As expertly demonstrated by Auerbach and her colleagues (1990), the ESL classroom can be designed to build upon parents' prior knowledge and experience, validate parents' home language, and honor parents' abilities to think, create, and problem-solve.

While learning English is essential, it is important that the need for ESL classes not blind us to the value of parents' home language for contributing to their children's cognitive, emotional, and ethical development. Likewise, it is crucial that we not mistake the lack of literacy skills as equivalent to a reduced ability to reason. Parents' problem-solving abilities and the wisdom they have gained from overcoming difficult life experiences often become invisible to us if we focus solely on their lack of English and literacy skills. Instead, a "strengths" approach seeks to bring together parents with limited formal education and their literate-bound children in a way "...that the parents will not lose face, and the children will respect and be proud of their language and cultural backgrounds" (Simich-Dudgeon, 1993, p.199). A detailed example of a family literacy program based on a strengths approach is included in a later section on Practical Applications.

2) Increased communication between home and school. Much emphasis has been placed on making the one-way communication from the school to the home more accessible to minority parents, for example by translating materials to be sent home. While this is a laudable goal, greater awareness is needed about the importance of two-way communication. It is true that minority parents can feel diffident and shy about speaking out, as a result of the power imbalances prevalent in school-community relations. Yet tremendous energy can be generated when conditions are created for parents to truly voice their hopes, fears, questions, and concerns (Rodriguez, Rothstein, & Santana, 1994; Shirley, 1997). These examples will be discussed further in the fifth category, advocacy and decision-making.

Communication overlaps several other categories as well. Eliciting parents' voices is also an integral element of including parents in school curriculum and practice, our sixth category. In a later section on practical applications, we explore how teachers can invite parent voices into the classroom through interactive home learning activities. This

form of two-way communication helps create classroom environments conducive to learning, where the richness of students' prior knowledge and experience is recognized and built upon (Developmental Studies Center, 1995).

Inviting dialogue and listening to parents is also an essential aspect of the "strengths-based" parent education programs explored in the first category. Two-way communication allows community concerns and cultural traditions to inform the content and design of ESL classes and family literacy programs (Auerbach, 1989).

3) Parent or family participation in school-site activities and programs. While language-minority parents often have heavy work schedules that make it difficult to volunteer or to attend school functions, the quality of programs also makes a significant difference in parent attendance. When parents are invited to events where they have no voice or where they are lectured, the results are understandably low. Parents respond much more positively to events that celebrate their own cultural heritage, or where they are invited to see their children perform.

Parents also respond quite positively to opportunities for face-to-face conversations with each other about significant issues. Whenever time is created for such small-group discussions as part of an evening event, parents express deep appreciation for the opportunity to meet (Forest, 1994). This is especially significant since parent friendship networks have been shown to correlate positively to student's academic achievement, and some existing research has shown these networks to be less strong among minority parents (Muller and Kerbow, 1993).

4) Parent or family participation in advocacy and decision-making. Schools often do not experience much success in recruiting minority parents for their school-site councils. However, groups such as the Right Question Project (Rodriguez, Rothstein, and Santana, 1994) have shown that when parents are invited to work together in collaborative groups

to brainstorm lists of their own questions regarding their children's education, a tremendous amount of interest and commitment can be generated. Similarly, Shirley (1997) describes the success of the Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF) in Texas, which built community support for school reform by holding meetings in parents' homes to identify their issues and concerns. .

The examples mentioned above point to a larger vision of collaboration between schools and families; one that includes not only the goal of improving student outcomes, but also the goals of social integration of diverse populations, strengthening democratic participation among the public at large, and ultimately, creating increased public support for education (Safran, 1996). Yet in order to reach these goals, schools need to learn to truly share power with parents. Sarason (1995) offers a brilliant analysis of the challenges involved in doing so.

5) Parent or family participation in home learning activities initiated by the school. The addition of the phrase "initiated by the school" is intentional, as it signals a recognition that parents are already involved in a wide variety of learning activities with their children at home, although these activities may look very different from the kinds of learning we associate with schools. Indeed, some educators have offered a cautionary note regarding the danger of home learning activities when they are approached from a deficit perspective, as the result can be a one-way transmission of school practices and culture to the home (Auerbach, 1989).

Yet home learning activities initiated by the school can take various forms, corresponding to different places along the deficit-strengths continuum. From a "strengths" perspective, the most powerful home learning activities are interactive ones, based on parents' own life experiences and stories, and which encourage parents and children to communicate in the home language (Rich, 1987).

In addition, when home learning activities are designed to be followed up back at school, they can serve as powerful tools for including parent voices in the curriculum -- our next and final category. An example of this kind of interactive home learning activity with a strong classroom component is the Homeside Activities/Actividades Familiares (Developmental Studies Center, 1995).

6) Inclusion of parents, family, and community in classroom curriculum and practice.

While a unit on the ancient history of Mexico may be a step in the right direction when we are wanting to include Mexican-American children's experience in the curriculum, it is also important to bring our honor and respect to bear upon children's own families and present communities, not just upon the historical past.

As mentioned earlier, interactive home learning activities that include classroom follow-up can be a simple way to start the process of validating children's families and communities at the school site. In the Spanish-language parent video for the Homeside Activities program, we see examples of teachers using home activities for this purpose (Developmental Studies Center, 1997). Other approaches along the same lines were cited previously (Ada, 1992; Huerta-Macías and Quintero, 1992; McCaleb, 1994). A more detailed description of such a program follows in the next section.

In the chart below, we summarize this discussion. In addition, we include the kinds of questions we might ask ourselves to assess our efforts in each category.

Categories of School-Home Collaboration	From a "Deficit" or "Empty Vessel" Perspective:	Towards a "Building on Strengths" Approach:
Family Support Services and Parent Education	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•ESL classes taught from an "empty vessel" approach</li> <li>•Family literacy programs focused on English use at home</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•ESL classes using a "participatory curriculum" model (Auerbach, 1990)</li> <li>•Family literacy models focused on parents as authors (Ada, 1988 )</li> </ul>
Questions for Self-Assessment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•To what extent is our curriculum for parents built around parents' own ideas and experiences?</li> <li>•To what extent are parents treated as active and creative learners, with significant contributions and real choices to make?</li> <li>•To what extent do we help parents recognize home language skills as an asset to support their children's cognitive and emotional development?</li> </ul>	
Increased Communication	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Focus on one-way communication from school to home on topics determined by the school</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Creating conditions where parents' real concerns can be heard : (Rodriguez et al., 1994; Shirley, 1997)</li> <li>•Inviting parent voices into the classroom through interactive home learning activities (Ada, 1993; Developmental Studies Center, 1995)</li> <li>•Dialoguing with parents to co-create content of parent education offerings (Auerbach, 1989, 1990)</li> </ul>
Questions for Self-Assessment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•To what extent are we ourselves as educators listening to parents' stories, in order to gain a deeper appreciation of their lives, their strengths, and their hard work?</li> </ul>	
School-Site Activities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Activities planned with scant parent input; more reflective of school culture than community culture</li> <li>•Parents seen as passive audience; few opportunities for active participation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•School-site activities are culturally relevant</li> <li>•Opportunities for parents to connect with each other (Forest, 1994)</li> <li>•Activities are based on an inclusive, participatory model (DSC, 1996)</li> </ul>
Questions for Self-Assessment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•To what extent are our school-site activities inclusive, participatory, and non-competitive?</li> <li>•To what extent are they reflective of the culture and traditions of the community?</li> <li>•To what extent do we provide opportunities, such as small-group activities, for parents to get to know each other?</li> </ul>	

Advocacy and Decision-Making	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Efforts to educate parents re: rights/responsibilities limited to one-way transmission models</li> <li>•Parents greatly outnumbered on committees; structural pressure to assimilate to prevailing school culture; token participation</li> <li>•Appearance of "site-based management" &amp; "partnering with parents" incongruent w/real power dynamics</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Parents work in collaborative groups to uncover concerns, learn to act effectively (Rodriguez et al., 1994)</li> <li>•Parents, organized as a community, collaborate with the school (Shirley, 1997)</li> <li>•Schools look deeply at challenges of sharing power, both within the school and with parents (Sarason, 1995)</li> </ul>
Questions for Self-Assessment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•To what extent do we provide hands-on, collaborative opportunities for parents to learn participation skills?</li> <li>•To what extent do we work with community organizations on educational issues?</li> <li>•To what extent do we honestly address issues of power, both within the school and with parents?</li> </ul>	
Home Learning Activities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Focused on getting parents to carry out school-like activities with children</li> <li>•Few opportunities for parents to contribute own knowledge, experiences</li> <li>•Not designed for two-way flow back into classroom of parent voices, stories</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Designed to elicit parents' views, life experiences, stories; promote home communication in home language (Rich, 1993); also to enrich classroom life by including parent voices (Developmental Studies Center, 1997)</li> </ul>
Questions for Self-Assessment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•To what extent does the "homework" we assign promote communication and provide opportunities for parents to share their perspectives and experiences?</li> <li>•To what extent do we integrate the learnings from home activities back into the life of the classroom?</li> </ul>	
Inclusive Curriculum	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Information re: children's communities and cultural backgrounds presented without real respect or in stereotyped ways</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Children's families and communities included as valuable resources for classroom learning (Ada, 1993; Huerta-Macías &amp; Quintero, 1993; McCaleb, 1994 )</li> </ul>
Questions for Self-Assessment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•In what ways do we invite parents to share their stories and life experiences in order to enrich children's classroom experience?</li> <li>•In what ways do we use the printed word and other technologies as a means of validating and celebrating children's families and communities?</li> </ul>	

### Practical School and Classroom Applications

In this last section, we describe two examples of work with parents. The first is a family literacy program entitled "Parents and Children as Authors". The second is a classroom-based approach where teachers write a simple book of their own as a way to introduce home learning activities and to create an inclusive curriculum.

Transformative Family Literacy: Parents and Children as Authors. In 1986, the bilingual program of the Pájaro School District in Northern California agreed to participate in an innovative project, titled *Proyecto de Literatura Infantil* (Children's Literature Project) . The original project (Ada, 1988; see also Brown, 1993) led to a series of replications based on a similar model and following the same set of principles:

1. Parents are the first and most constant educators of their children. Regardless of their level of formal education, all parents have a wealth of personal experience and family stories to share with their children.

2. Parents' home language is a valuable resource for children's oral language and cognitive development. Children's home language is also connected to their sense of identity and community.

3. Parents are valuable allies for children's emotional and social growth and development. Strong ties between parents and children, based on sharing a common language, help parents guide and support their children as they grow into adolescence.

4. Parents are more inclined to share books with children if they themselves have been able to experience the pleasure and relevance of the reading act. Giving parents the opportunity to listen to a story and discuss its relevance to their own lives, helps them to share that experience with their own children.

5. Picture books are an accessible medium for parents. Even if parents are pre-literate, they can re-tell the story to their children at home, using the illustrations as a support.

6. As parents and children are helped and encouraged to share their own thinking, their own writing, and their own stories, their self-confidence grows in tangible and often surprising ways.

The format of the program consists of a series of monthly evening sessions, during which parents meet in small groups to listen to and discuss selected children's

books. Parents are then given the books to take home and share with their children. At the sessions, parents are also assisted in writing their own collective books, as well as given blank books to take home for their own and their families' use. Each of these key elements is described more fully below.

The picture books shared with parents are carefully chosen both for their literary and artistic merit as well as for their potential to initiate rich, thought-provoking discussions. Examples of books that have yielded excellent discussions include: *Frederick* and *Swimmy* by Leo Lionni, *La conejita Marcela* by Ester Tusquets, *Arturo y Clementina* and *Rosa Caramelo* by Adela Turin and *The Gold Coin* by Alma Flor Ada.

The dialogue following the reading is guided by the Creative Dialogue Process (Ada, 1991). This methodology is inspired by the work of Paulo Freire. Its basic premise is that reading, in its fullest expression, is a dialogic experience with the text for the sake of human growth and development (Freire, 1984; Ada & Campoy, 1997).

The form of the dialogue consists of four phases, which in actual practice are often interwoven. During the *Descriptive Phase*, the actual content of the book is analyzed. The theme, conflicts, and development of the story are discussed, along with characters' motives and the consequences of the choices they made. In the *Personal Interpretative Phase*, parents are invited to relate the story to their own life experiences, exploring how significant issues in their own lives may parallel or differ from those in the book. Next, the discussion is taken to a level of critical reflection in the *Critical/Multicultural Phase*, as the participants are invited to offer their own perspectives, discuss what aspects of the book may or may not apply to their own culture, and examine other possible alternatives. The dialogue returns to parent's own lives again during the final *Creative Transformation Phase*, where parents are invited to reflect on their own present circumstances and discuss areas of potential growth in their lives.

Following the discussion, parents are helped to create their own collective books. The facilitators pose a generative, open-ended question to the group and record parents' contributions. Entries are read aloud for possible corrections or additions. Afterwards, the book is typed and bound, and copies are made to distribute to participants at the next meeting.

The collective books written by parents cover a wide range of topics. Sample titles include *From Yesterday to Tomorrow*, a collection of traditional sayings and proverbs and *Adivina, adivinador*, a collection of riddles. Other titles include *Celebrations of My Childhood*, *Our Grandparents*, *Our Dreams for Our Children and How We Can Help Them Come True*, *The Best Advice We Can Offer*, and *Things We Can Give Our Children That Can't Be Bought*. Facilitators have also offered simple sentence starters: books written in this manner include *Peace Is...*, *Friendship Is...*, *Family Is...*, and *Work Is...*

At each session, parents are given blank books to take home. The number of parents with little previous schooling who have chosen to create books by themselves or as family projects, counts among the significant results of this simple yet profound process. Often, the blank books are used by the children to write their own stories. As parents bring these books back to the meetings, both parents and children are invited to share their books in front of the large group, and the family is celebrated as a family of authors. Later, the children's books are also typed, duplicated and distributed to each family, to add to their growing home library.

Listed below are some of the most salient results observed and documented in program sites (Anaya, 1995; Balderas, 1993; Gómez-Valdez, 1993; McCaleb, 1992; Murillo, 1987; Patrón, 1986; Reichmuth, 1981; Watts, 1988).

Parents who initially felt uncertain about their role in relationship to the school, were able to establish a human, social relationship with teachers and administrators and experience first-hand their children's life at school. Once the gap they felt between home

and school was bridged, parents were able to familiarize themselves with the content of their children's education, regain trust in their own abilities and create an active role for themselves in their children's and their family's literacy process. The group discussions helped parents develop or expand their contacts in their community. Over and over, parents expressed their appreciation for having had the opportunity at the meetings to form closer ties with other parents.

Teachers participating in the program reported a greater understanding of the children in their classroom, as well as of the challenges faced by those children on a daily basis. Teachers felt better equipped to serve the needs of each child. Teachers also reported that children who had the opportunity to see their parents recognized as authors by the school gained a greater sense of self-esteem and a new-found appreciation for the wisdom of their parents' words and their parents' life experiences.

Parents reported a greater interest in books and reading. Even more importantly, they reported that in the course of sharing their thoughts with each other, they had come to realize that their own personal stories are at least as important as those found in books. Parents also commented on the usefulness of books for inviting reflection and for promoting greater understanding of ourselves and of the world.

In addition to ethnographic research, other ways to assess the effects of a program of this kind include keeping records of the number of books written by the parents, the diversity of the subjects addressed in these books, and parents' willingness to read each other's books as evidenced by the books' circulation patterns. If the discussion sessions are videotaped, as was done in Pajaro Valley and other sites, the videos can be used to assess growth and development by observing parents' willingness to participate, their sense of ease in addressing the group, as well as the depth of their reflections.

In addition to summative evaluations, it is critical for program planners to be involved in a continuous process of formative evaluation, utilizing parents' direct and indirect feedback to create a climate of trust and respect. In previous implementations,

the following have been identified as important contributors to program success: 1) offering an enjoyable program for children while parents are meeting; 2) presenting the family literacy program as an enriching cultural event, instead of as a remedial program; 3) offering quality books to parents, with high aesthetic appeal and content that encourages reflection; 4) providing respectful and skilled facilitation for the small groups; and 5) including preparation time for facilitators to read the books and create discussion questions beforehand.

As mentioned earlier, the interest generated by the experience at Pajaro Valley led to the replication of the project in many other sites and under various names, including *Literatura Infantil* (Children's Literature), *Padres, Niños y Libros* (Parents, Children and Books), *Padres y Niños Autores* (Parents and Children as Authors). Some of the schools in California where the project thrived for several consecutive years are Glassbrook School in Hayward, under the enthusiastic direction of Marcos Guerrero; Marshall School in San Francisco; and Project Even Start, at Windsor Elementary, under the efficient guidance of Jennifer Reynolds. The original Pajaro Valley program continues as *Literatura Infantil y Familiar*, under the auspices of the Migrant Education Office and the vision of its director, Dr. Paul Nava. In 1995, prompted by nation-wide requests for information, the Migrant Office of Pajaro Valley sponsored the creation of a manual (Zubizarreta, 1996) that can be of assistance to those wishing to replicate the program.

Interactive learning at home and in the classroom: Parents, Teachers, and Children as Authors. At various presentations on *Parents and Children as Authors*, teachers repeatedly brought up the question of what to do about children whose parents, for one reason or another, did not or could not attend the evening programs. Searching for an answer to this question brought us back to the following conclusion: by definition, authentically child-centered education needs to make children's home, family and community a central part of the classroom curriculum.

While we advocate that parents and family members be included in the educational process on a daily basis, this does not necessarily require their physical presence at school. Of course, their presence is welcome whenever possible. Yet the presence of their thoughts, experiences, history, and words does not depend upon parents being physically on-site.

In the model offered by *Parents, Teachers, and Children as Authors* , a book is authored by the teacher to serve as a catalyst for interactive, dialog-based home learning activities. The activities are designed to invite parents to share their life experiences, family stories, and words of wisdom. Parents' contributions are then woven into the classroom curriculum, as a way to honor and celebrate family and community (Ada, 1992).

Teachers wishing to follow this model do not need special training or materials. They do need to rethink their priorities to include 1) restoring parents' dignity as educators; 2) encouraging meaningful interaction between children and parents at home; 3) validating the home culture in the classroom; and 4) promoting the preservation of the heritage language. When we began working with teachers toward these goals, we invited them to send home, on a daily or weekly basis, oral or written questions and dialogue prompts. These dialogue prompts were created by the teachers themselves to elicit parents' thoughts, stories, and traditional knowledge.

As teachers explored how to make this kind of interaction between home and school a frequent practice, they discovered that authoring a personal book to share with families served as an excellent way to initiate teacher-family dialogue. By modeling the process of sharing their own life stories, teachers made it easier for parents to contribute their experiences. As we shared these earlier books written by teachers with others in subsequent workshops, we saw teachers become very inspired by the work of their own colleagues.

We found that books based on the teacher's own life or family are a good starting-point. When teachers share their stories, they begin to bridge the formidable barriers of social class and educational status that may exist between them and the parents of their students. For example, a teacher who wrote a book about her mother and sent it to all the mothers of her students was able to convey a very strong message of equality and respect, and elicited a strong positive response from the parents.

Many teachers have enjoyed writing a book about the story of their name. By sharing how their name was chosen, who else in their family carries that name, and what their name means to them, these teachers have sent the message home that there is a story in every one's name, and have modeled for their students the process of creating one's own personal book. Other books written by teachers include *I Was Not Always A Teacher* and *My Bed Is Not at School*. (Both of these books proved very popular with students, who are sometimes surprised to discover that teachers have a life outside of school!) For the most part, teachers have chosen to write books about their own parents and grandparents, children, spouses or siblings, in order to share these cherished stories with parents.

Once trust has been established, the process continues with questions and dialogue prompts that invite students to discuss with parents, in their own home language, any of the topics covered in school that day. Teachers show interest in parents' wisdom and experiences by recording the stories brought back by the students, by inviting students to create class books with the stories they have collected, or simply by providing students with the time and space to share their stories with classmates.

Students can also be encouraged to ask parents for memories of common human experiences: Who were their parents' friends when they were young? Did they ever have differences of opinion with a friend? How did they resolve the conflict? What do parents seek in a friend today? What would they be willing to do for a friend?

Or, parents can be invited to share their thoughts about universal values: What would they like to do to create a more just society? What would they like to change? What would they preserve? The teacher's role is to honor a diversity of opinions and model an attitude of respect. A variety of perspectives can be discussed, while maintaining the right of everyone to his or her own position.

Teachers who have asked students to collect their parents' thoughts are often happily surprised by the wisdom and insights they receive. When a group of parents in Windsor, California, was asked for their best advice to their children, Mr. Roberto Vargas responded by writing: "We are here to create a better world". Teachers decided to make a project based on this parent's words. They began by making a banner of the quote, properly credited, to display in every classroom. Next, each child was asked to create a page for a classroom book on how we can all make a better world. Needless to say, the response from the community was overwhelming. By treating parents as constructors of meaning, with valuable contributions to offer, we are indeed working together to create a better world for all.

### Final Thoughts

By assessing what attitudes and beliefs about parents are embodied in our parent education programs, our parent outreach programs, and our classroom curriculum, we can take the necessary steps to create more supportive conditions for children's literacy development. As we create parent education offerings that build on parent strengths, and as we create classrooms where children can feel proud of their families and communities, we create greater opportunities for families to share the joy of learning.

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