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Relationships in Personalized Learning: Teacher, Student, and Family
Patricia A. Edwards

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Teacher, Student, and Family

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Rich, personalized relationships thrived among the teacher, student, and family in the segregated South, and several researchers have provided in-depth and insightful accounts into this historical phenomenon (Edwards, 1993a; Irvine & Irvine, 1983; Lightfoot, 1978; Siddle-Walker, 1996). By documenting African American teachers' voices at the Caswell County Training School, Siddle-Walker (1996) paints a vivid picture of traits, policies, and support that allowed the personal, intellectual, and social development of students. For example, teachers were active community members as well as powerful and positive role models. Teachers taught, but this activity involved much more than instructing students in a given subject. Faculty members served as advisers to extracurricular clubs, spent funds for transporting students to after-school competitions, and opened their homes to students. Teachers also transcended the boundaries of their profession by visiting their pupils' homes and churches, and many taught Sunday school at churches where their students attended. These visits blurred the lines of authority between teacher, parent, and preacher and functioned as a community-sanctioned safety net. Billingsley (1968) and Belt-Beyan (2004) reiterated this point. According to Billingsley (1968), before desegregation, the African American community was an institution to which parents and children specifically looked for strength, hope, and security:

> In every aspect of the child's life a trusted elder, neighbor, Sunday school teacher, school teacher, or other community member might instruct, discipline, assist, or otherwise guide the young of a given family. Second, as role models, community members show an example to and interest in the young people. Third, as advocates, they actively intercede with major segments of society (a responsibility assumed by professional educators) to help young members of particular families find opportunities that might otherwise be closed to them. Fourth, as supportive figures, they simply inquire about the progress of the young, take special interest in them. Fifth, in the formal roles of teacher, leader, elder, they serve youth generally as part of the general role or occupation. (p. 99).

Through these varied roles, community members set the stage for personalized learning. Belt-Beyan (2004) revealed that, through local organizations such as the church and the school, the African American community represented, enacted, and inscribed uniquely stylized characteristics and values. The core values of intellectualism, freedom, collective success, and hard work were essential to the African American community. Belt-Beyan also noted that "children, as well as adults [in the African American community] were expected to be resourceful and ever watchful for opportunities to meet any of their life's goals" (Belt-Beyan, 2004, p. 162).

The rallying call in segregated communities was that education would do much to uplift the race and help establish a necessary and viable separate social and cultural existence. For example, Belt-Beyan (2004) revealed that "many [African American] parents expressed the beliefs that even if they did not learn to read and write themselves, they would have considered themselves successful if their children did" (p. 163). Gadsden (1993) noted: "Literacy and education are valued and valuable possessions that African American families have respected, revered, and sought as a means to personal freedom and communal hope, from enslavement to the present" (p. 352). Literacy, as Harris (1990) found, has been attached historically to the uplifting of Black people—uplifting steeped in understanding the traditions and beliefs of literacy and education as communal knowledge and hence group strength.

Through the years, these community-oriented values, beliefs, and dispositions have been encoded in long-standing cultural sayings such as "each one, teach one" and "we lift as we climb." Moreover, the standards of community success were transmitted through the African American literacy traditions, which were built on narratives by slaves or former slaves such as Phyllis Wheatley and Frederick Douglas (Belt-Beyan, 2004). Some of today's researchers draw on three frameworks to describe the personalized relationships that existed among teachers, students, and families in the segregated South: (a) community of possibility (Belt-Beyan, 2004; Billingsley, 1968), community of cultural wealth (Oliver & Shapiro, 1995; Yosso, 2005), and funds of knowledge (Gonzales, Moll, & Amanti, 2005; Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzales, 1992).[1]

I was born and raised in a midsized southwestern Georgia community. I entered school a few years after the 1954 U.S. Supreme Court landmark decision *Brown v. Topeka Board of Education*, which declared segregation in education unconstitutional. I grew up in a stable, close-knit neighborhood where I knew many eyes watched me and that neighbors would tell my mama when I misbehaved. My elementary school principal and most of

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[1] **Community of possibility** can be characterized as a place where everyone feels at home, where people care about community life and want to contribute, where people in the community serve as role models and encourage their youth that they can become what they want to become and that the sky is the limit.

Yosso's six-part **cultural wealth model** includes six types of capital that educational leaders may use to frame their interactions with students. The six forms of cultural capital are aspirational, linguistic, familial, social, navigational, and resistance. Yosso argues that all forms of capital can be used to empower individuals. Yosso designed this model to capture the talents, strengths, and experiences that students of color bring with them to their college environment.

Funds of knowledge is defined by researchers Moll, Amanti, Neff, and Gonzalez (2001) "to refer to the historically accumulated and culturally developed bodies of knowledge and skills essential for household or individual functioning and well-being" (p. 133).

my teachers lived in my neighborhood. Consequently, there were many opportunities outside of school for my principal and teachers to talk with my parents about my progress and behavior in school. My principal, teachers, and neighbors, as well as my parents, all shared and reinforced similar school and family values.

Before school desegregation, African American parents had a place in the school. They felt comfortable coming and going to the school at their leisure. The faces of teachers and administrators were familiar to them because, in many instances, the teachers and administrators were their friends, neighbors, and fellow church members. Parents could voice their concerns, opinions, and fears about their children's educational achievement, and teachers and administrators listened and responded.

For many African American parents whose children attended segregated schools, parent involvement connoted active participation, collaboration, and co-generative discussions with teachers and administrators. It meant African American parents had some control of the school and school systems that helped shape the character and minds of their children. For example, teaching personnel were accountable to the community and therefore had to teach effectively if they wanted to retain their jobs. School

> "distribution of power among schools, families, and communities is a crucial piece of the complex puzzle leading toward educational success for all children" (Lightfoot, 1980).

performance was relevant to the life experiences and needs of African American children and provided motivation to learn. African American children developed self-worth and dignity through knowledge of their history and culture and through the images provided by community leaders and teachers. African American parents had control through coalition. The schools maintained continuous communication with African American parents and developed with these parents a structure that included them in the governing of the schools. African American parents could exert influence to protect their most precious resources, their children. This involvement assisted schools in providing a more relevant education for students.

In a 1993 article published in *Educational Policy* titled "Before and After School Desegregation: African-American Parents' Involvement in Schools" (see Edwards, 1993a), I had the opportunity to interview three people: my mother, a first-grade teacher, and an elementary school principal, Mr. Eramus Dent. My mother was president of the parent–teacher association (PTA) throughout my entire six years of elementary school. When my mother was asked by Mr. Dent, the teachers, and the parents to run for PTA president, she was honored to do so. My mother knew my elementary school principal—Mr. Dent—before I entered school, and she knew what was expected of me at each grade level.

The interviews with my mother, first-grade teacher, and elementary school principal provided an insightful look into the personal relationships that existed among parents, teachers, and the principal in this segregated Southern community. These interviews also demonstrated that the close relationships in my elementary school community allowed for power and responsibility to be shared among home, school, and community. As Lightfoot (1980) revealed, the "distribution of power among schools, families, and communities is a crucial piece of the complex puzzle leading toward educational success for all children" (p. 17). In segregated settings, there was the recognition that most parents were eager for their children to learn, grow, succeed, and feel accepted in school. Also, there was

consensus that schools, parents, and the community should work together to promote the health, well-being, and learning of all students. When schools actively involve parents and engage community resources, they are able to respond more effectively to the needs of children and families (for further information, see Edwards, 1993a).

Pleas for Home–School Collaboration

After school desegregation, researchers began to plead for educators to develop a closer working relationship with the home. Fletcher (1966) was quick to build the case that "Education is simply not something which is provided either by teachers in schools or by parents and family members in the home. It must be a continuing cultivation of the child's experiences in which both schools and families jointly take part" (p. 66). Potter (1989) continued this line of thought by candidly stating, "Teachers have the important responsibility of working with and relating to families, not just children" (p. 21). See-ley (1989) argues that "the crucial issue in successful learning is not home or school—teacher or student—but the relationship between them. Learning takes place where there is a productive learning relationship" (p. 11). In Gordon's (1979) plea to educators to develop a closer working relationship with the families, he stated:

> Parent involvement holds the greatest promise for meeting the needs of the child—it can be a reality rather than a professional dream. Of course, the bottom line is not only that involving parents holds the most realistic hope for individual children but also it serves as a hope for renewing the public's faith in education. This faith is needed if public schools are to continue as a strong institution in our democratic form of govern-ment, which, ironically, can only survive with a strong educational program. (pp. 2–3)

"Teachers have the important responsibility of working with and relating to families, not just children" (Potter, 1989).

Berger (1991) made a very realistic and logical appeal to educators regarding the need to make a commitment to "parent education" or "parent involvement." She stated: "Schools have more contact with families than any other public agency [and the] school and home...have a natural opportunity to work together" (p. 118). I believe that learning about students' home literacy environments and learning how to interact with diverse families are the lifelines for creating better family–school partnerships. These lifelines will improve the academic achievement of all children regardless of race or economic status. Furthermore, today's teachers must make a concerted effort to reach out to diverse family groups even if they do not share the same heritage (Edwards, 2004). However, it should be noted that collaboration may not seem very natural to teachers today, who are more likely than ever in our nation's history to live in communities different and distant from where they work, speak a different language, represent different cultural backgrounds from their students, and may not have many natural, everyday encounters with parents.

Recognizing Parent Differences

In thinking about parent involvement and developing family–school partnerships, edu-cators must understand that parents are not all the same. Parents bring their own strengths and weaknesses, complexities, problems, and questions; because of this, teachers must work with them and see them as more than "just parents." In my work with parents, I coined two terms, *differentiated parenting* and *parentally appropriate*, to help teachers

find new ways to think about parents (Edwards, 2004, 2009). I proposed the concept of *differentiated parenting* "as a way to urge schools not to place all parents into one basket" (Edwards, 2011, p. 113).

Although parents might have the same goals for their children (i.e., to read, write, and spell well), they might have different ideas about how they can help their children accomplish these goals (Edwards, 2004, 2009). *Parentally appropriate* means that, because parents are different, tasks and activities must be compatible with their capabilities. For example, parents who do not read well might be very intimidated and frustrated by teachers who expect them to read to their children every night, and teachers might need to select other activities parents can do to support their children in developing reading fluency (Edwards, 2004, 2009). Parents who work multiple jobs or who are raising their children by themselves might not be able to attend parent conferences after school or in the early evenings, and teachers might need to make other arrangements to accommodate them. When teachers plan activities and tasks designed to engage parents in collaboration and support of their child's learning, most parents will want to successfully accomplish them. Teachers might work to provide as much support as possible to assist parents in completing these activities and tasks.

Creating a Personalized Learning Environment in a Professional Development School

In the fall of 1989, I joined the Michigan State University faculty, where I continued to expand my research agenda on creating a structure for families to be involved in the literacy development of their children. This agenda includes as well the pursuit of a professional mission involving locating and testing ways to communicate with urban families. At Morton Professional Development School (PDS)[2] (a pseudonym) located in Lansing, Michigan, I conceptualized and served as principal investigator of the Home Literacy Project from 1990 until its conclusion in 1993. Many of the concepts implemented then are still integral to the school. The goals of the project were to (a) respect the multiple literacy environments the families represented; (b) become knowledgeable of the family's capability, responsibility, and willingness to be involved in the school; (c) help educators recognize that not all families are the same; (d) help schools reach out to diverse families in new and different ways; (e) help educators create a personalized learning environment among the teacher, student, and families that many expressed they had witnessed in years past; and (f) develop a scope and sequence of family involvement activities coordinated around the grade level literacy curriculum. As part of that project, I created what I called a *scope and sequence of family involvement*. At each grade level, I developed family involvement activities coordinated around the grade level literacy curriculum. Family participation in these literacy activities was critical to their child's success. I learned that families were composed of busy people and that I needed to consider their work schedules and other personal and professional commitments in order to develop approaches to and expectations for parent involvement.

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[2]Professional development schools (PDSs) are formed through partnerships between professional education programs and P–12 schools. PDS partnerships have a four-fold mission: the preparation of new teachers, faculty development, inquiry directed at the improvement of practice, and enhanced student achievement. PDSs are often compared to teaching hospitals.

Before the Home Literacy Project began, the existing parent involvement activities at Morton PDS varied in substance and duration, much like the conventional activities described in the literature (Delgado-Gaitan, 1991; Epstein, 1987; Hess & Shipman, 1965; Lareau, 1989, 2000). At Morton PDS, when teachers solicited parent participation in classrooms, they often wanted parents to perform mechanical tasks, such as typing, editing, or binding children's stories. Such tasks offered little opportunity for significant involvement in the curriculum, required the availability of parents during working hours, and involved no opportunity or expectation for reciprocity (i.e., seeking information or feedback from parents as "experts" on their children). Annual open houses and semiannual parent–teacher conferences provided time for parents to see their child's classroom and get a brief overview of subject matter covered in a specific grade level. Teachers and administrators had set up PTA or parent–teacher organization meetings, held parent–teacher conferences, made home visits, and encouraged parents to attend field trips and student performances. Although these events brought families and teachers together, they did not necessarily bring them together around specific literacy events or involve families in ways that would enable them to support children's literacy learning (Edwards, 1991).

New Parent Involvement Structures Emerge

Much has been written about the benefits of involving families in their children's literacy development (Edwards, 1991, 2004, 2009; Epstein, 2001; France & Hager, 1993; Handel, 1992). A major focus of this work has centered around the question of how educators and families can better understand, cooperate, and communicate with each other in order to more effectively work together to support children's acquisition of literacy. One of the most important themes that has surfaced in the literature is the need for improving current structures for family involvement in schools (Edwards, 1996; Fear & Edwards, 1995). A second important theme is that families need to be heard; they need to be given time as well as opportunities to share their ideas, questions, and insights with teachers and administrators (Lynch, 1992). Simply put, teachers, administrators, and parents should become communicating allies in the education of all children.

At Morton PDS, the home literacy project can be defined as a curriculum-centered parent involvement project. Pizzo (1990) reports that parents should sustain strong attachments to their young children and advocate for them in the face of exceptionally adverse circumstances. Supporting families provides a boost to the overall development of children. It seems reasonable to conclude then that parents should be involved in their children's school curriculum. Thirty years ago, Seefeldt (1985) stated that schools should communicate with parents through the curriculum. She noted that educators should do the following:

> Capitalize on the curriculum as a means of communicating with parents. It is an ongoing way to keep parents totally informed of their child's day, the school's goals and objectives, and the meaning of early childhood education. It's one way to begin to establish close, meaningful communication with busy parents...remember—informed, involved parents, those who are aware of what their children do in an early childhood program, are also supportive parents. (p. 25)

Researchers such as Keenan, Willett, and Solsken (1993) also believe that schools should communicate through the curriculum. The aims of their curriculum project were

to strengthen the children's academic learning, foster school–home collaboration, and construct a multicultural community strong enough to nurture the diverse children of the urban elementary classrooms where they worked. Keenan and colleagues (1993) believed that the project's focus on communication and meaning in the language arts provided a rich context for children's learning, but they also saw opportunities for further enriching their learning through new forms of parent participation in the curriculum.

Cummins (1986) argues that efforts to improve the education of children from dominated societal groups have been largely unsuccessful because the relationship between teachers and students and between schools and communities have remained unchanged. In his view, "The required changes involve personal redefinitions of the way classroom teachers interact with the children and communities they serve" (Cummins, 1986, p. 18). He posits that school programs will be more successful at empowering minority children if (a) students' language and culture are incorporated into the school program, (b) community participation is encouraged as an integral component of children's education, (c) the pedagogy promotes intrinsic motivation on the part of students to use language actively to generate their own knowledge, and (d) professionals involved in assessment become advocates for students

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rather than legitimizing the location of the "problem" in the students. Although, like Cummins, I am particularly concerned with the success of children from dominated societal groups, I believe that his work speaks to school–home collaboration more generally and provides directions for raising all children in our increasingly diverse and complex villages. Unlike other approaches that focus on changes that families must make to support schools, I begin with ways that schools must change to support families.

Teachers and the whole school "family" have the responsibility for encouraging and facilitating parents' exposure to and integration into their children's classroom curriculum (Beane, 1990, p. 362). According to Knapp, Turnbull, and Shields (1990), all students must learn the culture of the school while they are attempting to master academic tasks. This is especially so for disadvantaged learners. Lyn Corno (1989) summarizes well why the home and school should communicate around curricular issues, noting:

> With some shared understanding of their commonalities and differences, schools and homes should be able to work together to support each other in the development of a literate populace. There is, indeed, evidence that this is already occurring in certain enlightened contemporary homes and classrooms. It seems that the polarization of these subcultures may be transformed in important ways, and that families and classrooms wishing to move in this direction can benefit by a better understanding of the other's special traditions. Becoming literate about classrooms, then, is also in part becoming literate about the home; for this view suggests that effective classrooms are a blend of classroom and home—of family and knowledge workplace. (p. 41)

At Morton PDS, in our move toward a personalized learning environment, I assisted the teachers with developing a scope and sequence of parent involvement activities grade by grade around curriculum issues. I shared with the teachers that, even though school begins in August, very few schools provided a detailed schedule of literacy activities for parents throughout the school year in August (see Edwards, 2004). As a result,

parent involvement did not become for families a set of structured activities that they could expect to participate in throughout the year (see Edwards, 2004). Advice to teachers included "to note that when children enter school not only are they affected by the new school environment, but their parents are as well" (Edwards, 1993b, p. 1). Also, I reminded them of a statement by Fletcher (1966), which I referenced earlier in this chapter: "Education is simply not something which is provided either by teachers in schools or by parents and family members in the home. It must be a *continuing* cultivation of the child's experiences in which *both* schools and families jointly take part" (p. 189).

I informed teachers that I believe that a good relationship between parents, child, and teacher should be a priority. Potter (1989) echoed my position by arguing that "the teacher should strive to develop an environment where there is a *participatory role* for the family, which facilitates the parent–teacher–child relationship and so enables the teaching and evaluation of the child to be appropriate and just" (p. 21).

Based on our initial conversations about parents' struggles to support their children's learning, I helped the teachers organize grade-level parent informant literacy group meetings, in which teachers and parents collaborated on a grade-level literacy project. The purpose of the face-to-face monthly group grade-level meetings was to provide an opportunity for teachers, parents, and me to participate in conversations that would facilitate parent understanding of how their children were developing as readers and writers. The parent informant meetings established a predictable structure for parents to communicate information about how their children responded to instruction in school. Parents not only became more knowledgeable about the school curriculum, but they also contributed information about their children's struggles, concerns, and progress. They began to inform other parents and teachers about their children's desires, and they made sense of the topics, audiences, and kernel issues in children's lives. Many parents gave each other ideas about how they wrote with their children and what ideas had stirred their children's curiosity. Parents became more than recipients and overseers of assignments. Their creative responses also changed the dynamics of the informant group. There was a mutual sense of pride and enjoyment shared by parents and professional educators alike. It should be noted that, in addition to meeting with the grade-level groups monthly, we communicated with specific parents within the grade-level group individually by email, telephone, or other means. This was another way we tried to develop a personalized learning relationship with parents centered on their children's literacy development.

In addition, I encouraged the teachers to collect parent stories so they could get an in-depth understanding of how parents constructed literacy learning for their children at home.[3] From the information the teachers and I accrued from the grade-level parent informant literacy group meetings and from the collection of parent stories, we then organized a scope and sequence of parent involvement built around the school's curriculum (see Table 1).[4] To begin the discussion on a scope and sequence of curriculum-based parent involvement with an emphasis on personalized learning, I asked the teachers a series of questions: (a) What does an elementary teacher need to know at each grade level (K–5)

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[3]**Parent stories**—Narratives gained from open-ended interviews. In these interviews, parents respond to questions designed to provide information about traditional and nontraditional early literacy activities and experiences that have happened in the home.

[4]**Scope and sequence**—Grade-level family involvement activities that are developmentally based on shared decision making and built around the elementary literacy curriculum.

about how to involve parents in the literacy support of their children? (b) What should be the "scope and sequence of parent involvement" around literacy from kindergarten to fifth grade? and (c) What specific literacy activities should teachers ask parents to participate in at home or school with their children? In the next section, I provide a more detailed account of what occurred in three of these grade-level parent informant meetings (i.e., kindergarten, first, and second grade).

Table 1. Scope and Sequence of Curriculum-Based Parent Involvement at Morton Professional Development School

Grade	Parent Involvement Activity
Kindergarten	Sharing time
First	Emergent literacy
Second	Reading and writing connections
Third	Writing process
Fourth	Content area reading
Fifth	Content area reading

Kindergarten Project

I asked the two kindergarten teachers, Mrs. Bowker and Mrs. Dozier (pseudonyms), where they found dissatisfaction with their programs. Both immediately said they were dissatisfied with sharing time. After thinking about the teachers' comments, I recommended we work together on involving parents in helping their children construct sharing time conversations. They agreed.

The teachers wanted the children to stay on the topic so they could follow what the children were saying and so that they could ask the children questions. These kindergarten teachers highlighted an issue that Michaels (1981, 1986) raised in her research. She reported that when the children's discourse style matched the teacher's own literate style and expectations, collaboration was rhythmically synchronized and allowed for informal practice and instruction in the development of a literate discourse style. For these children, sharing time could be seen as a kind of oral preparation for literacy. In contrast, she noted that when the child's narrative style was in variance with the teacher's expectations, collaboration was often unsuccessful. Michaels (1981) also observed:

The discourse of the white children tended to be tightly organized, centering on a single, clearly identifiable topic, a discourse style..."topic-centered." This style closely matched the teacher's own discourse style as well as her notions about what constituted good sharing....In contrast to a topic-centered style, the black children and particularly the black girls, were far more likely to use a "topic-associating" style, that is, discourse consisting of a series of implicitly associated personal anecdotes. (pp. 428–429)

In their experiences, Mrs. Bowker and Mrs. Dozier observed that White children as well as Black children failed to use a topic-centered style during sharing time. Based on this observation, Mrs. Bowker and Mrs. Dozier recognized the need to make changes in their sharing time program. The teachers organized the sharing time topics within units in the following categories: Self-Awareness (This Is Me, My Neighborhood, My Favorite Color, All About Me, and My Year), Books and Writing (My Favorite Book, A Story by Me, The Public Library, Finger Puppets, and Making a List), Holidays (My Favorite

Thanksgiving, My Favorite Holiday Season, Art Project, and A Valentine for Someone), Measuring (World's Greatest Cook), Senses (Mystery Tastes, Mystery Smells, Things to Feel and Guess, and What Is It?), Environment (Nature Hunt, The Weather, Plants, and I Found a Leaf), Families (This Is My Family and All About My Family), and Animals (Bears, Dogs, Cats, Snakes, and so on). To monitor parent–child sharing time conversations, I recommended that the teachers send a tape recorder home and to record the children's sharing time presentations at school. This information allowed teachers to assist both children and parents with oral language development.

With my assistance, Mrs. Bowker and Mrs. Dozier organized parent forums to explain their ideas about sharing time and address the differences between sharing time and homework. These forums became a place for informal conversation and the exchange of ideas. The teachers asked several parents to talk about how they made time each week for sharing time preparation. The conversation proved helpful for parents. Many commented that they learned strategies for assisting their young children with sharing time.

In the past, Mrs. Bowker and Mrs. Dozier assumed that low-income parents did not take the time to prepare their children for sharing time. They further noted:

> The sharing time topics that we included in our new approach are topics that middle-class parents normally talk to children about. And these conversations help them to grow into good readers and good writers because they have this kind of information. We have many young and teenage parents that didn't have examples of good parenting, so we've tried to create a structure that makes conversation in the home a natural part of what we do. (Edwards, 1996, p. 348)

What Mrs. Bowker and Mrs. Dozier did by creating a structure for sharing time is supported by Epstein (1988) in her warning that "unless we examine both family and school structures and practices, we will continue to receive contradictory and often false messages about the capabilities of unconventional, minority, and hard to reach families" (p. 58). In the beginning, the teachers made assumptions about low-income parents but did not create a structure that would help these parents understand the school structures and practices (for further information on the sharing time project, see Edwards, 1996).

First-Grade Project

I asked first-grade teachers at Morton PDS to describe their perceptions of parent involvement. The teachers responded by voicing frustration because they said that parents lacked respect for their children's gradual movement toward becoming readers and writers. After several discussions with the three first-grade teachers, I was able to help them understand the importance of closely examining their conversations with parents about reading and writing. I was also able to help teachers see that they needed to develop specific ways to help parents understand what was happening in first grade. I reminded the teachers that the children were trying to construct an understanding of reading and writing, but that it was important to help their parents construct an understanding of how their children were developing as readers and writers (for more information, see Edwards, Fear, & Harris, 1994).

The purpose of the first-grade parent informant literacy group was to provide an opportunity for teachers, parents, and me to participate in conversations that would facilitate parents' understanding of how their children were developing as readers and writers. We used Marie M. Clay's books, *What Did I Write? Beginning Writing Behaviour* (1975)

and *Reading: The Patterning of Complex Behaviour* (1979) as guides for helping parents understand how their children were developing as readers and writers.

Second-Grade Project

Similar to the first-grade teachers, second-grade teachers at Morton PDS were unsure of how they wanted to involve parents in the literacy support of their children. Teachers struggled to find ways to connect parent involvement activities to the curricula in their classrooms. After multiple discussions with the second-grade group, we decided to help parents understand the connections between reading and writing curriculum. The parents and teachers discussed children's interests, successes, struggles, and uses of writing at school. Some parents joined in to affirm their children's growth and to describe their children's writing initiatives at home; others raised concerns about their children's reticence and lack of initiative. Teachers shared their work, plans, questions, and uncertainties about differences in students' development as writers.

Parents were truly involved in the group and the group process. The curriculum was not simply handed out, and parents were not just told about how their children were learning reading, writing, English grammar, and spelling. Instead, the informant meetings—in conjunction with the audiotapes, videotapes, invitations to the classroom, and journals— created an organizational structure for parent interpretation and expression. Parents could listen in on how their child's interests and problems were addressed during in-school writing conferences. More important, the videotaped instruction help parents visualize and consequently discuss the community of readers and writers that teachers were attempting to build within the classroom. By changing the organizational structure of parent meetings and allocating resources to help parents gain access to information about the school, parents participated in more meaningful ways. They contributed and developed an interpretation of their children's reactions to school assignments, classmates, and their teacher as they developed strong parent–teacher and parent–parent relationships.

Parents began to raise questions about how they might respond to their children's writing, topic selections, and mechanical errors. These questions added a new level of complexity in the writing instruction taking place in the classroom. These children in the second-grade classroom had developed as very different writers and gained expertise in several different writing genres. For example, one student wrote a fantasy story that included a dialogue between a fork and a spoon, another student wrote about his goals as a Cub Scout, and another wrote about how he cared for his "pet slug." In response to parents' questions, the team designed a method to show parents how teachers responded in school to children, depending on the child's development and writing purposes.

The teachers began to audiotape conferences with individual students during their regular classroom writing conferences. These tapes were sent home in the "traveler's briefcase" with a brief message to the parent at the end of the tape. Each child took a tape recorder and tape home for three days on a rotating basis. Parents could hear examples of how teachers were responding to their children, as well as the contents and mechanics in their children's writing. A parent journal was also sent home with the tape, and parents were encouraged to respond to the child's writing and also to the teacher's conference either orally or in writing or both, depending on their preferences.

The impact of these changes reached the parent community and the teachers and had an effect on the entire Morton PDS staff. In response to the information and questions shared

in the informant journals and meetings, additional times were scheduled, attendance increased, and parents began to ask more questions. Parents asked the team to continue the project with their children during the next year in third grade.

Concluding Comments

The personalized relationships that existed among the teacher, student, and family in the segregated South described at the beginning of this chapter highlighted the crucial roles that teachers, community members, and parents played in children's learning. In these communities, teachers taught students, but their teaching and interactions did not stop at the classroom door. Teachers' involvement in the local community and close relationships with parents helped children to grow as students and as individuals.

During the Home Literacy Project at Morton PDS described in the middle of this chapter, teachers worked to build closer relationships with the families of the children in the classrooms. They put structures into place that encouraged parents, caregivers, and community members to become communicating allies in the education of all children. The personalized relationships that emerged in many of the teachers' classrooms supported students' academic success. Just as in the segregated South, teachers' relationships with families and communities led to personalized learning environments that extended beyond the walls of the school and fostered students' personal and academic development.

Action Principles for States, Districts, and Schools

Action Principles for States

  a. Require teacher preparation programs to have pre- and in-service teachers participate in cross-cultural conversations and interactions.
  b. Require teacher preparation programs to provide training for pre- and in-service teachers to effectively work with parents.
  c. Develop guidelines for helping schools to create family-friendly schools.
  d. Require teacher preparation programs to integrate community action projects in their educational programs in order to connect with and support community agencies (i.e., service-learning opportunities).
  e. Develop guidelines for prioritizing issues of equity, diversity, and language differences in funding opportunities.

Action Principles for Districts

  a. Encourage parents and students to create a vision statement with schools about family involvement.
  b. Support and use parent focus groups to make important decisions at the schools.
  c. Encourage family events and invite parent stories.
  d. Determine parent capabilities, interests, willingness, and responsibility in order to make home-to-school connections.
  e. Conduct a school climate assessment survey to understand family perceptions and open dialogue about family involvement.

Action Principles for Schools

   Although state and local education agencies have an important role to play in supporting parent involvement, it is ultimately the schools that provide the front line contact with parents. The following action principles will help schools to proactively engage families in their children's education:

   a. Define parent involvement so that everyone understands what it means in your school. For instance, you need to ensure that the teachers' and school's definition of family involvement do not conflict. In a broad sense, parent involvement includes home-based activities that relate to children's education in school. It can also include school-based activities in which the parents actively participate, either during the school day or in the evening.

   b. Assess parent involvement climate. Many of the parents at your school may not become involved if they do not feel that the school climate—the social and educational atmosphere of the school—is one that makes them feel welcomed, respected, trusted, heard, and needed.

   c. Consider the needs of parents. Before launching any program, first consult with a group of parents to identify the needs of the children and their families. Remember that all programs your school offers to benefit adult family members also will have positive effects on the children in the school. When the parents or guardians receive support, they become empowered and develop self-esteem. This affects the way they interact with their children.

   d. Ask questions. As J. L. Epstein (1988) noted in *Education Horizons*, "Schools of the same type serve different histories of involving parents and have teachers and administrators with different philosophies" (p. 59). Epstein's observations should encourage teachers and schools to consider several questions:

   • What is our school's history of involving parents and families?

   • What is our school's philosophy regarding parents' involvement in school activities?

   • What training and skills do we need for involving parents in school affairs?

   e. Create a demographic profile. This is a short questionnaire that compiles information about the school's families. There are two different types of demographic profiles—one is conducted at the school level and the other at the classroom level (Edwards, 2009). Gathering this information has several benefits. It allows you to:

   • **Set your scope and sequence**. It is vital to help teachers and parents "get on the same page" by organizing and coordinating parent informant literacy groups, which will make school-based literacy practices and skills more accessible to parents. In essence, the goal is to make the school's "culture of power" (Delpit, 1995) explicit to parents so that they can familiarize themselves with school-based literacy knowledge (McGill-Franzen & Allington, 1991). You need to have a clear plan and a set of goals that you would like to achieve at each grade level and decide how parents can assist.

   • **Raise awareness**. After you have identified the needs of your school's families, make community members aware that they can help. Make announcements on local radio stations and cable TV channels. Have ads printed in local

newspapers. Meet with the "movers and shakers" of the community—political leaders, religious leaders, business owners, or influential parents.

 f. Create a learning management system (LMS) that manages and documents the learning process while permitting access to rich resources of information. LMSs house all of the curricular learning modules in one centralized location that can easily be differentiated for personalized learning. By empowering students to participate in the design of their learning experiences, learning suddenly becomes more meaningful to them. Parents can also monitor their students' academic growth and maintain consistent communication with their children's educators by way of the LMS. LMSs allow for:

- continuous, meaningful feedback;
- real-time decisions based on student assessment data;
- a personalized dashboard for the students, parents, and teachers;
- development of student personalized learning goals; and
- student voice and choice.

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