

Making Connections Between Families and School

by

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FOR most of the 18 years I have taught at my Philadelphia elementary school, the same sign has been fastened to an easel just inside the school's entrance: PARENTS — REPORT TO THE OFFICE FIRST — IT'S THE LAW. Each morning I have walked heedlessly by this sign. But on one particular morning the sign spoke to me in a new way. On that morning the sign was to become a symbol of the mixed messages schools send to parents about their roles in their children's education. I started to think about how that sign, present in most schools throughout the city, represented all the work that was needed in order to improve the relationship between families and schools.

I do not believe I would have come to see the sign in this way if I had not become involved with the Urban Sites Network of the National Writing Project. As a participant in the Network, I began to look for ways to build connections between my classroom, my students and their families. In the process, I paid attention to what I was doing: I kept a journal, collected student work, logged conversations with parents, and conducted end-of-the-year surveys of students and their families.

Also during this time, the third grade team of teachers at my school began implementing a literature-based language arts program. This study details how my thinking about connections with families and with literature became integrated as I pursued my teacher inquiry project on relationships between families and schools.

I began my inquiry project in a school with a population of one thousand kindergarten to fourth grade students. The student population was 98 percent African American; the teaching staff was 60 percent African American and 40 percent European American. Mostly working families lived in the neighborhood surrounding the school, many of whom had been hit hard by the loss of industrial jobs in Philadelphia. The school building was 75 years old and, as is the case with such aging buildings, we sometimes taught while asbestos was being removed and contained, when we were without heat or had too much heat, and when there were no working water fountains.

Conversations with Parents: Talking Together about Learning

During the school day there is little time for teachers to connect with the families of their students, unless an emergency occurs. Early on in my teaching career, I began calling parents on a monthly basis at home in the evenings because I

was having a hard time bringing out the best in the children in my classroom. I thought that the very act of calling homes would motivate students to do better. In fact, it did have a very positive effect in the classroom. So I continued making these supportive though minimal contacts with families during all of my years of teaching.

When I participated in the Philadelphia Writing Project's Summer Institute several years ago, I had time to reflect on my work and think about the importance of building connections to families. I once again considered the phone calls I had been making to parents. I began seeing them not only as a way to give information to parents, but also as a way to receive a more complete picture of each child. The conversations became a way to forge a relationship with the parents of my students as I shared stories about my own family and children, and they shared stories and information about theirs.

Most of these shared telephone stories had to do with everyday issues we'd faced as parents and workers. Some of them revealed a similar way of looking at things. For example, Barry's mother and I spent much time talking about how to set limits for our children and how hard that can be. Other conversations reminded me of the possibility of making different meaning out of the same situation. One example I documented involved a phone conversation I had with Andrew's mother in October 1991. I worried about Andrew's seriousness which I just assumed was based on something going on at home, school or both. He never smiled or seemed to be enjoying himself. I was concerned that he didn't seem to appreciate the class. A phone conversation with his mother reminded me of the dangers of making such assumptions. She related to me that she tells Andrew every day to take school seriously. She wants no playing around. She values his education and wants him to value it as well. I learned

something about Andrew's family and their values and priorities. I saw Andrew's seriousness in a new way.

I noted the content of these phone calls in my journal which I kept throughout the two years of my inquiry project. At the beginning of my journal are references to a series of phone calls I shared with Donald's aunt, Mrs. Johnson. Donald was still a beginning reader in the third grade, and our calls in October were about his reading. Mrs. Johnson planned to go to the library and take out books we had read in class like *Abiyoyo* and *Bringing the Rain to Kapiti Plain*. We talked about how Donald dictated stories to her at home and how we could then practice reading them. She told me about his strengths, particularly in math, and the need for me to foster these skills to help build his confidence and self-esteem which had been badly shaken.

Later, when the class wrote family stories, Donald's aunt helped him write a powerful story about his grandmother and grandfather:

Donald's Family Story

Once upon a time there was a large family. Their name was Richardson. The mother was called Momma Richardson and the father was called Daddy Richardson. No one could remember their first names because there were so many of them. One day they had to move out of the house where they lived because the rent was too high. So they moved to a new house on 29th Street. Next door lived a lady named Miss Janey. She was very mean. She thought there were too many children and she didn't think Momma Richardson would keep a clean house with so many children. She wouldn't speak to Momma Richardson. She wouldn't let them sit on her steps. She was just plain old mean. She told others about the family. But one day Miss Janey lost her

keys to her house and couldn't get in her front door. So guess who she had to get? One of the Richardson kids climbed in a second floor window from their roof to let her in her house. Ever since, she treated all the children nice, even Momma. She also found out Momma Richardson was a very good housekeeper. She said one day when they were all sitting outside on the steps "If there is not enough room you can sit over here on my steps." And from that day on everybody Miss Janey talked to she always said good things about Momma Richardson. She says my neighbor had fourteen children and you should see how clean and pretty her house is.

Momma Richardson and Daddy Richardson are my grandmom and grandpop and the thirteen children were my aunts and uncles. One of the children was my mom, Barbara Ann Richardson.

Written by Donald Richardson and told to him by his aunt.

She used this story to help Donald read and write and — most importantly — to feel proud of who he was. In February, Donald wrote a biography about his brother. The story tells as much about Donald's growing confidence as it does about his brother:

My brother is eleven years old. He likes to play a game called Game Boy. He likes to play football and baseball. I like to write my own story. I like to read my own story. I like to read about myself.

by Donald

Another parent and I had an extended series of conversations about reading. In the following journal entry I describe these exchanges:

After several conversations spread out over the first semester of school, I spoke with Lauren's mom, Mrs. Barnes, again. All three of us, Mrs. Barnes, Lauren and I know that she is a beginning reader. Phonetic instruction has not been helpful to her. We're all worried about her reading. Her mom says that hearing and reading the same story works best at home. She also loves to read to her younger nephew. I commented that I have been noticing that many readings of a story help Lauren.

We decided to take certain steps to help Lauren with her reading. I said I'd put stories from the classroom on tape for Lauren to use at school and home. Mrs. Barnes said she'd follow this up at home. She would also occasionally help Lauren choose books from home she's familiar with to bring to school for self-reflected reading. In class, I asked Lauren to choose a partner to echo read with her; read a line and have Lauren repeat it. Lauren seems to love to do this. I recently asked students how they think they learned to read or become better readers. Lauren said that echo reading and reading the same story have helped her most. I've noticed that in just a week's time Lauren has begun to volunteer to read aloud and complains when not given a chance to read.

Lauren began the year having difficulty reading simple books with two or three sentences on the page. By the end of the year, she could comfortably read short stories and was motivated to read longer "chapter books."

In June I asked students and parents to complete a survey on our reading program so it could be improved for the following year. In response to the questions, "What did you notice about your child's attitude and ability toward reading? Did anything

change from the beginning of the year to the end of the year? If so, what?" Mrs. Barnes wrote: "Lauren started loving to read. She loves finding what is going to happen next."

Lauren wrote in a response to a similar question:

I did not know how to read some books that I thought were going to be hard. I learned to read more. Now sometimes I think I'll be able to read a book.

I would like to think that the information Mrs. Barnes and I shared played a part in Lauren's new outlook towards reading and her reading development.

One thing that stood out for me about many of my phone conversations with parents was how often books and stories became the topic of our discussions. Our conversations began to have an influence on the classroom curriculum and my individual plans and goals for children.

One of the purposes for my initial school year phone call, in fact, was to find out about the interests of my students and how they could be honored in the classroom. It was these phone calls that informed me about Andrew's love of science, Jonathan's interest in computers, Lynda's use of journal writing to help control her temper, and Shonda's desire to read chapter books. While I unfortunately didn't act on all of this information, I was able, over time, to use it to enhance children's learning. Andrew became an avid observer of our monarch caterpillars, chrysalis, and finally butterflies. Shonda was encouraged at school now as well as home to read and talk about chapter books. And on numerous occasions, Lynda was encouraged to use her journal to help express angry feelings and hurtful experiences.

Parents as Resources: Bringing the Culture of the Community into the Classroom

In the Philadelphia Writing Project Summer Institute, I began reading, thinking, and having conversations about the relationship between school and culture. I started to think about how “culture” at my school seemed, for many members of the staff, to be defined as something outside of the students and their families. Culture was the study of *famous* African Americans. Students learned about their heritage through beautiful and richly informative hallway displays on Africa and historic African American figures. They learned by being encouraged to participate in writing and oratorical contests and through literature and other curriculum areas. All of these were seen as important and positive by our staff.

Yet we seemed to ignore the wealth of culture present in our own school community. We did not look to parents as a resource. There had not been an evening meeting for parents in at least twelve years. I was painfully aware that at a meeting held for parents of third grade students during the day, only two of eight staff members who were supposed to attend were actually able to do so because of difficulties presented by the school schedule. I wondered and worried about what messages these and other similar occurrences presented to parents. It occurred to me that even those of us working in schools with the best of intentions may bring with us our own assumptions about families, race, and class which may also help to create the barriers between schools and families. Particularly, as a white teacher, I wondered what I could do to include the culture of families in the classroom, as well as the culture of the world, and how to make connections between the two.

With this concern in mind, I began the school year with very definite assignments for family projects. In fact, I had a folder

of these assignments ready for each child. The following is an example of an assignment from the folder:

Many times there are stories that have been told in families throughout the years. Maybe your great-grandmother told your grandmother a story she told your mother and your mom told it to you.

See if there is a story like that in your family by asking your parents and grandparents, or another relative. Listen to the story again and write it here. Your due date is:

At our first Urban Sites Network meeting in Philadelphia, I shared my thoughts and ideas for my teacher inquiry project. My colleagues helped me to see that this folder could not be used as I originally intended. It did not take into account who my students would be, what their interests were, and what else we would be doing in the classroom. This realization had a significant effect on my work.

Here is the revised letter which actually was sent home to parents as a result of the discussion in the Urban Sites group:

Dear Parents,

*The students from room 217 have been listening to stories from *The People Could Fly*, American Black Folktales told by Virginia Hamilton. We're talking about storytelling and how cultures tell stories. We've discussed how stories are passed from parent to child and how these are often family stories. These stories might be made-up or true accounts about the family — funny or serious.*

I'm hoping that you'll help your child write one of your family stories to share with the class. Like our interview

book, I'd like to make a book of Family Stories, written and illustrated by the families of 217.

Thanks, Marci Resnick

The first letter suggests that the idea of writing family stories is an isolated one. In fact, when I wrote that letter in the summer, I wasn't thinking about the other events in the classroom that would establish the context for these stories. As the literature program in the classroom began to flourish, I immediately began to see ways to make Family Stories more than an exercise or assignment. They became a way to use home literacy to deepen and enrich our learning at school. The second letter made the connection between what we were doing at school and Family Stories, establishing a context for both. The letter also refers to the past classroom practice of publishing children's work.

So I began to see that it was the books we were reading that gave projects like writing family stories, creating family trees, and writing family recipes and family biographies their meaning.

The chart on pages 126 & 127, covering one month, illustrates how I worked on the connection between classroom reading and writing and families. The first column includes the literacy events occurring in the classroom; the next column records connections I tried to make with families. In the third column I write about the responses of families, and in last column I reflect on the process.

In selecting literature for our reading program, the third grade teachers chose children's books which represented a variety of cultures, genres, and time periods. We shared ideas for making each book a rich experience for our students. The books we read also began to help me find other ways to invite families

into the classroom. For example, in the beginning of the school year we read many different fairy tales and folk tales. Parents were invited to come to school to share their favorite fairy tale with the class. Katrina's mom, Mrs. Williams, did so and continued to come to school to share books and stories with us throughout the year.

This journal entry was written after Mrs. Williams's second visit to the classroom in October:

Katrina's mom, Mrs. Williams, came today with a book called Africa Adorned. It's a beautiful book. She had chosen a few pictures to show the class and began a discussion about different African tribes. It was really fascinating. The children were particularly interested at first in the lack of clothes in some of the pictures. But they got over the giggles and compared the dress to that of the Vietnamese children in the book Angel Child, Dragon Child which we recently read. Mrs. Williams promised to come back with the same book. The students will write questions they have in their response logs and will share the job finding the answers with Mrs. Williams.

I was excited that the students compared the illustrations of clothing in Angel Child, Dragon Child with the photographs in Africa Adorned. I saw the students making connections between the classroom literature program and books shared outside of the classroom. This visit also led me to a better understanding of how my teacher inquiry project was helping to deepen my thinking about new ways for parents to be involved in the classroom.

In reflecting more about Mrs. Williams' visit in my journal, I wrote:

SEPTEMBER, 1991

our focus in reading was fairy tales and folk tales. As a whole class we read: Stories From Many Lands, Abiyoyo, Lon Po Po, Mufaro's Beautiful Daughters, Ming Lo Moves Mountains, Smaller groups read Tikki Tikki Tembo, Bringing the Rain to Kapiti Plain. Individuals read many other traditional fairy tales.

All students were assigned to write one fairy tale, although much of their writing in their writing folders (self selected topics) reflected many elements of a fairy tale or a folk tale. This was seen in October newsletter, and notes on sharing time. (see attached observation for example)

Students wrote at least 3 times a week for an extended period on our topics.

Sharing time everyday (about 6 children). On his/her day to share child gets a chance to share (tell about) just about anything; toys, dreams, jokes, weekend events, etc.

In Science we did a butterfly project and students jotted observations daily.

For Soc. St., students chose folk tale we read and found out some interesting facts about country it came from. Parents were asked to help.

13 Boys

12 Girls + 1 (new admit)

① I initiated phone calls with 15 families. The purposes were to introduce myself, open lines of communication, share information about child

I was able to reach 18 families by phone and spoke with 18 at school; (private appointments and back to school night.)

(all homes were called but I was unsuccessful in reaching 10)

② We made a bulletin board for pictures of family and friends.

Encouraged family connections at Sharing Time.

③ I invited parents to come to the classroom and read or tell their favorite fairy tale or folk tale. (see attached note)

④ There was a back to school night where 8 parents came. I extended invitation to parents to read to class here, also.

⑤ I sent an introductory note home to parents. (see attached)

⑥ Began to identify children who talked about feeling upset with some aspect of what was going on at home. (See journal 9/13-9/1)

Classroom Description

Connections With Family

Two parents came to read to the class; William's and Tiana's mother.

William appeared to be uncomfortable with his mother's visit.

(see journal 9-26) This led me to have some conversations with students which I taped on how they'd like to see their parents and other family members involved in their school. (It struck me how it never occurred to me to do this earlier.)

Tiana's mom brought a book about farm animals but mostly talked with the class about growing up on a farm (see journal 10-11). She came a few days later with a book called Africa Adorned. (see journal 10-21)

My journal entry on 10-28 talks about some reflections on these visits and how I need to think about my reactions in relationship to my own assumptions and biases.

Kashima's mom came to see me to let me know she didn't feel comfortable reading to the class but would like to volunteer 1 day a week in the classroom.

After initial phone call with Carlos' mom, she came to see me next day to talk about some anticipated family problems and their effects on Carlos

I received critical information about most students on first phone calls, i.e. Dorell hadn't spent full year in school yet.

What seems most important to change here, is instead of giving parents only one way in to classroom (invitation to read), I need to give many different ways for parents to become involved. Kashima's mom felt able to state her discomfort with invitation. I wonder if others felt the same way. (Eri volunteer 1 AM or PM 2 week or month; Generate things adults might want to teach class; ask parents to come once a month for specific task like help in publishing)

I also need to do much better follow up with parents reading when applicable. For example, Tiana's mom began excellent lessons on farms and different cultures in Africa. I lost teachable moments by not pursuing. This year I not only should price but let parent know how it was pursued.

These are genuine ways of looking at fact that parents want to be involved and how to build upon that involvement.

Send ^{trip} student invitations for back to school tonight saying what I'll be talking about.

Spoke to Latasha's mom and Brandon's grandmother about home situations.

Responses

Implications /
Changes

I'm critical of myself for trying to take over Mrs. Williams' lesson at one point. When the children started to ask her questions about the book she brought, I found myself wanting to jump in and help answer them although Mrs. Williams didn't need any help at all.

This entry raised some issues for me about being a teacher. One had to do with power and giving that up as I opened the classroom not just to parents, but to students as well. Also, working so closely with parents in my classroom was new for me. I was still learning when to offer help and when to move aside. I am continuing to think about how to help parents feel comfortable in my classroom and how I will know when they are comfortable.

Perhaps it is the following reflection that best describes how books provided a natural invitation for families to participate in the classroom. Students, working in groups of about seven, chose a play to produce. After many days of rehearsing, making costumes, props and sets, we wrote letters inviting families to come and watch the performances. I wrote in my journal:

*On Wednesday afternoon the children performed their plays. We had a very good turnout of family members. In between each play, students and parents wrote about what stood out for them about the plays and performances. As I watched the children and parents writing, I began thinking about how teaching language arts in a different way this year has made it possible to invite families into the classroom in meaningful ways. The basal wouldn't have been able to provide these same opportunities. Beginning the year with a wealth of fairy tales and folk tales from many cultures provided a great opportunity for inviting parents to read or tell their favorite tale to the class. It was really natural how reading the tales spun in the book *The**

People Could Fly led to families sharing and writing family stories and the class publishing a newsletter about them.

Now the class is writing I-search reports on famous African Americans. Jonathan has talked to me about exploring the life of a great-grandparent — someone he came to know through doing his family tree and story.

I eventually published Jonathan's paper — along with other writing about families — in the class newsletter:

This is a story about how my great-great-grandmother got from Africa to America. She was put on a ship. Her foot was tied to a ball and chain. She got off the ship and ran away. Before she died she was in Jacksonfiled.

Written by Jonathan Crawford and told to him by his Grandmother.

For our newsletter, Warren told the story of his mother:

My mother's name is Denise La Ruth Brown. She was born in 1958. She is now thirty-four years old. As a child my mother played rope, hopscotch, and played with doll babies. She was born in University of Penn. My mother's mother's name is Arlene Brown. She is fifty-nine years old. My mother's best food is chicken, oodles and noodles, and tea. Her favorite music is oldies music. My mother goes to church every Sunday. She sings in the youth ambassador choir. She is very strict sometimes and I do get upset with her but I know she's only doing it because she loves me. That's why I picked her to do my biography on!

by Warren

And Barry shared some interesting information about his grandmother:

Why My Grandmother Has Red Hair

One day she went to the hairdresser and the lady commented you have a lot of gray in your hair. But you don't look old. She told the lady, "I don't feel old either," so they agreed let's do something about it. That is when she decided to dye her hair and chose the color red.

Written by Barry

Future Directions for Inquiry

I spent two years looking closely and documenting events in my classroom connected to families and schools.

There were differences between the two years. In the first year, the Family Projects seemed to be central to making connections. During the second year, it was the phone conversations that were crucial to building and maintaining these relationships.

In trying to understand this difference, I returned to my journal and found the following entry from October 16, 1992:

It's been much more comfortable for me working with parents this year. In some ways, last year was most difficult because I was so self-conscious about what I said to parents and how I said it. Unlike in past years when phoning parents was just something I did, this year it was my work that both colleagues and I would be looking at closely. This year I have more confidence in my instincts and have more knowledge gained from last year's looking. I feel more sure of what I'm trying to build between families and schools.

While there may be many more reasons for the differences, it's significant to me that looking over time at my practice with a community of colleagues can have such a positive effect on my practice and, ultimately, the children.

Throughout both years, the books we read in the classroom played a key role in the connections that were made between home and school. These connections required a great deal of time, something which is in short supply for teachers and parents. Mrs. Williams wrote that the only problem in doing the Family Projects "was making time necessary to make the project to be its best because of my working hours." Similarly, another parent wrote, "My days are tied up with school. I can meet with you during evening meetings." However, even with these time constraints, many parents spoke favorably about the projects they did with their children. In many cases these projects grew out of conversations I held with these parents. I see these conversations as critical and necessary for developing the best educational program for their children.

Normally there had been two brief report card conferences scheduled for parents each year; the time was barely enough to give a cursory summary of a student's work. As a result, I often felt someone or something was being shortchanged.

My conversations with parents have allowed me to go beyond these superficial encounters and have affected my attitude toward my job. At the end of the second year of my inquiry project, I entered these thoughts in one of my final journal entries:

Now I have begun to think of many more ways to make connections between the classroom and the family. Actually, it's not really a matter of just thinking of individual activities but a matter of how I perceive teaching. Since I

believe that children learn from reading real books, all of my reading reflects that belief. If I approach children believing that a curriculum of connections between school and families makes sense, the units, lessons, and assignments are developed to encompass that belief, not just a writing assignment or a phone call home. What has been so exciting is how both of these beliefs, that of teaching through literature and making connections between families and school, support each other so beautifully.