

# Becoming Teammates

*Teachers and  
Families as  
Literacy Partners*



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# 1 Transforming Our Orientation toward Families

*Adult collaboration in any form is relatively rare in schools. . . . The traditional approach . . . emphasizes hierarchy, individualism, and technology, rather than dialogue, relationship, and reciprocity. (Swap, 1993, p. 17)*

Public education today is in the midst of a struggle over who is going to have a say about what counts as learning in classrooms. On one side, there are legislators who aggressively work to control and dictate curriculum, specifically literacy learning. From an opposite perspective, teachers, who choose to listen and respond to students' interests and needs, are growing increasingly alarmed at the takeover of their classrooms by those who neither know their students nor understand literacy learning. Lost in this struggle are the voices of family members, who also know a lot about their children but are forgotten bystanders, often misguided by representatives of the media who report legislative sound bites with little understanding of the teaching and learning process.

With each new legislative action by those outside education, those who work to understand children and respond by offering appropriate and effective support (teachers and families) become greater adversaries. In the midst of a tidal wave of change within education, I am advocating a different sort of change, a change enabling teachers and families to become teammates. I use the label *teammates* very specifically, because I have developed a deeper appreciation for this concept by listening to parents and preservice teachers. I invited Dee, a mother from Karen's second-grade classroom at Mohawk Elementary, to talk with my preservice teachers at Westminster College after our yearlong inquiry together. She summed up her discoveries about family-teacher partnerships by saying, "We are a team. You know my child as a student. I see my child as a person." She concluded by emphasizing how communication between these teammates must be a priority throughout the year. Two years later, John, a Westminster College student teacher, focused my thoughts again on the label *teammates*. At the close of a teacher study

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group session, I asked John, along with the other Petersville teachers, to write about insights gained after listening and learning with parents. He explained:

I am not as apprehensive now. I realize that parents are concerned, which is a good thing. They want what's best for their child. . . . I feel more relaxed and confident around the parents now that I have been through Family literacy nights, Open House, and conferences. Parents are our teammates, not our opponents!

From the perspective of a parent and a student teacher, Dee's and John's words present a radical departure from the way I thought about parents when I entered this profession. The label *teammates* suggests an atmosphere of trust and mutual respect between families and teachers, in which each member of the team offers a vital, unique perspective. Initially, I never considered myself a collaborator alongside each student's primary learning partners—their families and community members. Instead, I saw myself as a force that could potentially transform each student I met, a single change agent responsible for improving my students' potential to participate fully as knowledgeable, thoughtful citizens in the world they entered after graduation. For too long, this singular, isolated view of teaching kept me apart from my students' dominant reality—their lives beyond my classroom, with their families, friends, and communities. John's vision of teammates offers a new perspective on how teachers need to approach their students' families and communities.

Rightly so, many teachers, feeling overwhelmed by mandates from those outside education, might see as ludicrous my appeal to include the voices of families in our teaching and learning lives. But I must stop to consider how long it has taken me to understand my need to learn alongside students' first learning partners. Coming to a new perspective on the intense need for family-school partnerships has been a slow journey, over many years. During my first ten years of teaching, I tried to figure out a literacy curriculum while also listening closely to my fourth- through sixth-grade students and their ways of thinking and knowing. When I began teaching undergraduate and graduate students, fourteen years ago, I initiated a research study examining the usefulness of building partnerships between teachers and families, and I slowly realized the power of parents as vital informants. My perspective shifted as I saw how children, together with their family members, used literacy for their own purposes in their lives outside of school. Yet in the midst of my third research inquiry, I was not prepared for what happened on May 4, 2001, when my son Bryce came home. As a new

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mother, this young life jolted me into realizing how much more I needed to learn about literacy beyond my classroom door. Becoming a parent transformed my previous beliefs about literacy learning. Each day with Bryce enables me to think differently and to understand more clearly the real work of families as lifelong learning partners. Remembering the awe I felt at the onset of motherhood helps me realize how overwhelmed teachers might feel as they listen to me advocate for the development of learning partnerships with our students' families.

As I contemplate my twenty-eight years in teaching, I see three distinct orientations toward family-school partnerships emerge. At various stages of my career, I enacted each view in my own classroom or in my work alongside preservice teachers, classroom teachers, and families, depending on my current understanding of literacy learning, children, and their family's cultural background. These three orientations—avoidance, dependency, and mutualism—embody the struggles and possibilities of teachers and families who choose to ignore, accept, or embrace each other. Using these distinct orientations as landmarks in my teaching career, I show how my vision of working with parents changed dramatically over many years. I also explore how families' perspectives on working with teachers have been altered as I enlarged my vision of family-school partnerships.

## **Avoidance**

### **Teacher Perspective: No Parent Allowed**

Pablo, a new migrant student, arrived in our fifth-grade classroom during the middle of my second year of teaching. Quickly discovering that he spoke little English, I wondered how I would teach someone who did not speak my language. I was relieved to discover that Pablo knew enough about school to understand his role—to try to complete assignments as best he could with a little support from the teacher and several bilingual classmates. I never realized that I needed to ask one of our school's bilingual aides to help me initiate a discussion with Pablo and his parents, whom I had never met. I assumed that his family's livelihood, like that of many other migrant families in our district, depended on the availability of thousands of farm labor jobs in California's Central Valley. I could have learned so much from Pablo's parents by initiating a conversation, yet I chose not to access his family's wealth of knowledge that was based on their bicultural life in Mexico and in the western United States. I did not see Pablo's first language and cultural experiences, so different from mine, as powerful, rich resources (Cummins,

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1989; Freeman & Freeman, 1992). In the two months that Pablo attended our school, I learned little about him, his prior experiences, or his aspirations. In hindsight, I wonder why my own parents' bilingualism did not encourage me to value Pablo's bicultural experiences. Only in later years of working with immigrant and refugee families did I begin to understand these bilingual parents' hopes and dreams for their children and the richness in their lives.

Avoidance is a label that aptly described my view of family-school partnerships during this second year of teaching. After several difficult encounters with frustrated parents, I grew reluctant to initiate interactions with family members; in reality, I saw parents as adversaries not to be trusted. At the age of twenty-three, I felt uncertain of my curriculum, and so I readily accepted a culture of teaching that did not see the need for family-school partnerships. I simply hoped parents would leave me alone; I longed for brief parent-teacher conferences. I avoided family members whenever possible. My unspoken wish was the invisible sign hanging over my classroom door, declaring "No Parent Allowed" (see Table 2).

**Table 2.** Three Paradigms of Family-School Partnerships

Orientation	Avoidance	Dependency	Mutualism
<b>Teacher Perspective</b>			
Unspoken signage	No parent allowed	Parents: Let me help you	Come in: Let's learn together
Label	No involvement	Parent involvement	Family-school partnerships
Perception of families	Avoidable adversary	Useful helper	Trusted ally
Perception of home culture	Not understood, stereotypes of culture abound	Stereotypes remain	Valued, works to understand own culture as well as differences and similarities between cultures
Characterized as	A separation between home and school	A program supporting teacher	A partnership built on mutual respect
Professional development on family-school partnerships	Not considered in preservice training	Few inservices on ways to involve parents	Inservices and study groups on family-school partnerships

*(continued on next page)*

Orientation	Avoidance	Dependency	Mutualism
Role of teacher	Disseminates information, interacts only when required	Solicits support from parents	Invites families into classroom to create a partnership
View of learning at school	Curriculum as fact	Curriculum as activity	Curriculum as inquiry
Issues of control	Not talking to parents	Talking at parents	Talking, listening, and learning with families
Forms of talk	Authoritative	Presentational	Exploratory: conversation, story, and dialogue
Resources available	School knowledge	School knowledge	Funds of knowledge from home, school, and community
View of learning at home	Not important	Parent imitates teacher's practices	Values family's investment
Ownership and responsibility for learning	School responsible for educating child	Teacher responsible with some parental support	Families, teacher, and student share responsibility
Resistance to the development of partnerships	None	Limited	Families who never felt valued by school in past, colleagues in school with divergent beliefs
<b>Family Perspective</b>			
Unspoken signage	Blame the teacher	Fix my child	Reaffirm my role as vital learning partner
Family member's role	Caregiver and nurturer	Caregiver, nurturer, and supporter of school practices	Caregiver, nurturer, and knowledgeable co-learner with teacher and child, assumes responsibility and sets learning goals
Teacher's role	All-knowing	All-knowing but willing to share	Co-learner with families and child, a trusted partner who responds to questions
Perception of school	Does not value me	Values my efforts to support them	Discovers teachers who value me and my cultural background
Factors influencing beliefs	NCLB Act, <i>Put Reading First</i> booklet, national and local media, traditional classroom literacy practices	NCLB Act, <i>Put Reading First</i> booklet, national and local media, traditional classroom literacy practices, requests from school to join as helpers	NCLB Act, <i>Put Reading First</i> booklet, national and local media, constructivist classroom literacy practices, invitations to become active learning partner, conversations and dialogue with teachers

This first orientation toward family-school partnerships is characterized as a separation between school and home. My classroom embodied societal myths perpetuating distinct roles for teachers and parents. Compounding these myths and working to separate students like Pablo, his parents, and myself were the myths that I brought with me as a teacher. Missing from my preservice or inservice training was a focus on families as learning partners. I do not recall engaging in discussions during my undergraduate work about the value of families or the need to initiate a conversation with them. And this focus is still missing from most preservice teacher programs (Shartrand, Weiss, Kreider, & Lopez, 1997). In my second year of teaching, when I arrived at Palm Elementary to teach fifth graders, half of whom were native Spanish speakers, I met many students like Pablo. I recall few if any inservice sessions in which we, as a faculty, discussed the need for finding ways to invite English-speaking and Spanish-speaking families directly into our classrooms.

Learning in my classroom exemplified teaching as a transmission process. Knowledge was broken down into small, manageable bits and pieces for me to transmit to students (Barnes, 1992; Smith, 1986; Weaver, 1994). Coverage was key because I felt duty bound to complete textbooks and meet standards created by outsiders who knew little about my students or their ways of knowing. Curriculum was seen as facts to be consumed and relayed on request (Dewey, 1916; Short & Burke, 1994).

I viewed the act of teaching as a solitary endeavor, epitomized by my quiet, closed classroom. As a young teacher, I rarely collaborated with colleagues because I felt easily threatened by others who might judge my work with students. The responsibility for learning lay clearly on my shoulders alone. My students' parents—who likely had known twelve years of similar learning experiences in which one teacher worked single-handed with twenty-five or more children in a closed classroom—supported this view, holding teachers accountable for growth. Deficiencies that I perceived in my students' home lives, resulting from a lack of the essential learning experiences that only schools could provide, polarized both the parents and me (Heath, 1983; Taylor & Dorsey-Gaines, 1988). I believed learning that took place at home was of minimal use. As I examine much of the current research on Family Literacy, all too frequently I see researchers and teachers entering into interactions with families with this same mind-set, focused on tackling and overcoming family deficiencies. In reality, this deficit model of family-school partnerships does little to invite parents into a partnership with teachers.

Current discussions that I initiate with my graduate and undergraduate students concerning this deficit model evoke many horror

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stories of classroom teachers who are struggling to avoid growing numbers of “helicopter parents,” who are hovering too close by, complaining and pointing out any injustice that could impede their child’s growth. The avoidance pendulum has swung in the opposite direction, still out of alignment, with parents involved in every minute aspect of their child’s education, resulting in teachers trying to sidestep interaction or at best, interact minimally with families. As a college teacher, I infrequently interact with the parents of my preservice teachers, who are concerned about their child’s grade-point average, ignoring the need to help their son or daughter acquire independence and assume responsibility for his or her efforts. I struggle to balance listening to a parent’s concerns against the academic responsibilities and professional growth of their adult son or daughter.

Freire’s “banking model” of education (1989), an apt description of my curriculum, provides further insight into this first view of family-school partnerships. I saw my role as one of depositing information that was saved for retrieval at another time. As passive receivers of disseminated facts, families chose either to comply with or dismiss the plethora of information sent home. District handbooks, school or classroom notices, and calendars of events might be used or ignored. Just as I felt controlled by others (e.g., federal mandates, school board members, legislators, textbook publishers, administrators, state departments of education), I in turn worked to control families and students.

I did not perceive a chasm between home and school because I remained unaware of the need to even initiate a conversation with families. I thought my goal of not talking with parents or avoiding them whenever possible made life in my classroom simpler. On the rare occasions when school policy dictated some form of discussion (e.g., Back to School Night, Open House, parent conferences), I enacted an authoritative attitude by quickly relaying minimal information.

As I reflect on my first years of teaching, during which I worked to avoid parental interaction, I admit to replicating my instructional history in school. My own parents accepted the few invitations that they received to attend my elementary, junior high, or high school performances and talked with my teachers only at annual parent conferences. I recall how my two sisters and I dreaded the return of my parents after they had conferenced with our junior high school German teacher, Herr Petrosian. As native German speakers, they enjoyed this chance to converse in their first language with someone other than family members. My sisters and I could not fathom how they seemingly enjoyed this rare occasion to chat with a teacher whom we merely tolerated. Based on

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these once-a-year encounters between my parents and teachers, I understood and accepted the separation of school and home learning experiences. Years later, as a new elementary teacher, I disliked but completed every parent conference and Back to School Night that my administrators required. My students' families kept their distance and did not interfere with my work as their child's teacher. We upheld an unspoken agreement, meaning that I assumed and accepted the responsibility for educating their child. It never occurred to me that I should explore my students' ways of learning at home and build connections to unite these two vital learning communities.

As a European American female teacher of Dutch descent, I represented 85 percent of the teaching workforce, who met cultural differences head-on in our classrooms, with 35 percent of the student population coming from diverse cultural backgrounds (Howard, 2004). I was not prepared, nor did I take much initiative, to learn alongside Pablo and his family. I offer no excuses, yet I felt overwhelmed as a new teacher, trying to make sense of endless textbooks, schedules, and district requirements. I found no time to contemplate family-school partnerships.

### **Family Perspective: The Blame Game**

Robin, a young mother of a second grader, called me several years ago, asking for tutorial help in reading for her child. Through a mutual friend, Robin heard that I worked with young readers and sought help for her seven-year-old daughter. She explained how her second grader dreaded school and complained many mornings of stomachaches, partly, Robin believed, because of her struggles with reading. Until this new year in second grade, her daughter had loved the teachers and enjoyed school. This shift in her daughter's attitude worried Robin. I proceeded to ask Robin what she had already tried in order to help her daughter with these current reading struggles. She seemed surprised, almost offended, by my question. As our discussion continued, I realized that Robin believed school would teach her child everything she needed to know. Her parental role encompassed caretaking and nurturing.

Through subsequent conversations, I discovered how Robin carefully avoided interactions at home that might be deemed as schoolwork (i.e., reading or writing with her child) because she thought that school would teach her child the necessary skills when her daughter was ready. Both Robin, a stay-at-home mom, and her husband, a truck driver, clearly separated schoolwork from their home life. In a ten-year study, Heath (1983) uncovered similar beliefs amongst working-class families in North Carolina. Parents did not want to overstep their bounds and encroach on

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school territory. Their cultural backgrounds had separated school from home, a practice that they readily replicated in their own homes.

Society as a whole perpetuates the notion that schools own the learning process. In fact, during the mid-1900s, teachers contributed to this myth by urging families to leave the teaching to those most qualified—certainly not parents (Wasik & Herrmann, 2004). Based on twelve years of their own school experiences with teachers as all-knowing and all-powerful, many parents do not question this notion and accept the role of caretaker and nurturer until “formal learning” begins in school. Many teachers, like me in my early years, relay a similar vision of schools as owning the learning process, and they convey this view through schoolwork and homework assignments. As family members recall their own years in school, they readily remember and comply with the rules governing the parent-teacher game: keep interactions with school personnel to a minimum. Compounding the natural societal tendency to separate school life from home life are various cultural groups who respect a teacher’s domain by removing themselves from life at school. Believing that the teacher has the knowledge base to support children’s learning, Latino parents, for example, focus on respecting educators and would likely not challenge a teacher’s authority (Hammer & Miccio, 2004). In similar ways, when I began teaching Southeast Asian refugee children in 1986, I found that the families were equally removed from the school—first, because they did not speak English and second, because teachers were highly regarded elders in their community.

When children struggle with learning, like Robin’s daughter in second grade, a natural response is to blame someone. In fact, our government exemplifies this response through the NCLB Act. By placing responsibility for learning on teachers’ shoulders and holding them accountable through frequent, standardized high-stakes tests, legislators sanction the blaming of teachers for learning “failures.” Caught up in this blame game, families naturally follow suit. Parents like Robin easily begin to blame teachers for not teaching their child adequately. Lana, a parent of a second grader at Petersville Elementary, shared with me her efforts to overcome this tendency to find fault with someone else: “Parents are at fault too. We have not opened ourselves to helping teachers teach our children; we are too busy blaming teachers for the education of our children rather than taking responsibility.”

Another factor contributing to the blame game grows out of family members who realize that their contributions are not welcome. Lack of interest is a natural response when parents do not feel valued. Additionally, if parents struggled in school themselves and did not

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feel valued, they assume that their child's teacher represents this same dreaded system. The blame game becomes a dreadful cycle of families and teachers not trusting or valuing each other. This cycle perpetuates generations of families who do not feel appreciated by school and therefore do not trust or interact with teachers.

## Dependency

### Teacher Perspective: Let Me Help You

During my sixth year of teaching, I took a risk at Back to School Night by inviting parents to experience reading as an interactive process. I recall wanting to help parents understand all that I was learning about reading through my graduate studies. As I redefined the act of reading, for myself and for readers of all ages, I wanted to create opportunities for my fifth graders to interact with texts and come to their own understandings based on their prior experiences. Excited and nervous, I began the evening by welcoming parents to our new year together. On the overhead projector, I placed a short passage written for an adult audience and asked the parents to read it and then discuss it with a neighbor. I went on to pose some meaningless comprehension questions which we answered together, such as "What color is the red car?" (Harste, 1985). I compared and contrasted the act of reading silently and talking about key ideas with a neighbor to the act of reading and answering factual comprehension questions. As we engaged in what I hoped would be a moment of enlightenment, I discovered some resistant parents who preferred reading and answering straightforward, factual questions. What they knew from their own schooling experiences, in turn, framed their expectations for me as their child's teacher.

In spite of some unexpected responses from family members to my different vision of literacy learning, I spent the year sharing Literature Studies with my fifth graders, inviting them to read, write, and talk about historical, science fiction, and biographical texts in small groups or as a whole class. Gone were many of the endless worksheets that I had faithfully distributed in past years. Instead, my fifth graders selected texts of their choice and completed response projects. I cautiously shared these studies with parents and invited them to join in our learning as we demonstrated new understandings through events such as our *Colonial America Plays*—reader's theater scripts written by students performing in costumes—or our *Fresno's Centennial Celebration*—an historical tribute to our city's hundredth birthday, centered around interviews, puppet shows, and monologues. Although other parts of my curriculum were

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still textbook-bound, I experienced newfound energy as my students began taking ownership of our literacy curriculum.

By my sixth year of teaching intermediate grades, I had grown more comfortable interacting with parents and, in fact, began inviting them to help out in our classroom. Family members came to school for various reasons (e.g., chaperoning class field trips, being the audience for class productions, typing and publishing students' stories as we celebrated their authorship). I maintained my role as the key decision maker, but family support augmented our learning experiences.

The invisible sign hanging over my door that year declared: "Parents: Let Me Help You" (see Table 2). Instead of respecting what parents knew and valuing their knowledge base, I naturally fell into the mode of "let me help you understand what you need to know about learning." My presumptuous attitude was fueled in part by a common mind-set that plagues new graduate students: wanting to help everyone understand new, personal discoveries.

I enacted a different orientation toward family-school partnerships at this point in my teaching career, a view characterized as a program focused on sustaining the teacher's perspective of learning (Shockley, Michalove, & Allen, 1995; Swap, 1993). Recognizing the available workforce in my students' families, I viewed them as useful helpers and began by slowly inviting them into our classroom. I assigned them specific jobs, such as listening to children read one-on-one, typing student-authored books for publication, photocopying worksheets, or filling out book orders. Parental visibility in the school increased the school's rapport within the community as family members took on minor responsibilities. I valued this support as family members shared the workload; parents felt valued as they invested in their child's learning at school. Feelings of good will evolved from the participatory atmosphere created when families were not excluded from school. However, I remained firmly in charge as the decision maker.

I found the courage to invite strangers into my classroom because I had witnessed other teachers having success with their parent helpers. Although it took extra time to organize projects for the parents to complete, I had witnessed colleagues using them to run learning centers, help struggling learners one-on-one, read aloud to the class, and organize art projects in productive ways. Like many schools, my district did not offer inservices on ways to build family-school partnerships; we were heavily invested in curricular explorations.

My orientation toward family-school partnerships paralleled my changing views of the learning process. Transmitting knowledge

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to students and families was one primary goal; however, I also invited learners to transact with new ideas (Weaver, 1994). I required students to accumulate skills, but I also attempted to share the ownership of learning with students by allowing them to explore their own questions at times (Strickland & Strickland, 1993). Struggling to balance these two views of learning, I espoused no clear theoretical base for my curricular decisions. This juggling act translated into a curriculum filled with activities to be completed (Short & Burke, 1994; Short, Schroeder, Laird, Kauffman, Ferguson, & Crawford, 1996).

This curriculum as activity orientation defined my reading curriculum as well as the experiences that I asked family members to complete at home with their children. I thought that teacher-directed events at home could reinforce concepts that I introduced at school. Therefore, I regularly assigned minor tasks, such as math worksheets or reading aloud a portion of a self-selected book, to a family member. These minimal shifts to involve families in superficial events reflected my belief that I was comfortably in charge of learning at home and at school. I did not consider each family's ways of knowing and unique cultural capital as funds of knowledge (Moll et al., 1992) that could enhance or direct curricular experiences with students at school. I simply wanted families to practice and imitate the work that I had begun at school during the students' off-hours at home.

Moving my goal beyond avoiding parents meant that, instead, I talked *at* parents. As I set out to present ideas for family members to consume, I created a hierarchical relationship that empowered me but continued to disempower parents. Parent voices were heard only in relation to the topics that I chose to present. Barnes's notion of presentational talk (1992) uncovers dilemmas within this conventional relationship. Presentational talk, centered on transmitting knowledge for someone else to acquire, epitomizes interactions between many family members and teachers. Deeming myself the more knowledgeable person, my goal was to impart information to passive listeners. The imbalance and lack of trust within this relationship fostered simple replication of events, not discovery or new insights. I also failed to ask parents to share how they already used literacy events for their own purposes in their homes and communities. Knowledge evolving from reading and writing experiences at home, influenced by their unique cultural backgrounds, was not valued (Gadsden, 2004). Transmitting knowledge to family members was my goal, not valuing or building on current family literacy practices. Many current programs in family literacy today promote this same notion of transmitting information to families, who are deemed deficient in some way.

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Well-intentioned teachers like me feel uncertain about sharing control of the learning process with each child's first learning partners. I never considered the usefulness of learning from families. When I first contemplated the need to start talking with parents, I naturally assumed ownership and carefully created events that I controlled and managed. When I became the director of Westminster College's Summer Reading Program in 1994, I enacted this model of dependency. As the Reading Specialist graduate students worked with struggling readers for four weeks each summer, I developed literacy workshops for family members—leading mothers, fathers, grandparents, babysitters, and step-parents through a series of literacy experiences designed to help them understand the reading process more fully. Family members met with me one morning per week for two hours while the graduate students worked with their children. Some of the experiences that I and the family members collectively explored included watching a miscue videotape and reflecting on the reading process (Perkins, 1994); examining how proficient readers used all cueing systems, not just phonetic cues (Dahl & Freppon, 1995; Goodman, 1973; Mills, O'Keefe, & Stephens, 1992); and studying spelling growth over time (Wilde, 1992). Parents began to value their child's efforts to engage with print and started listening more and interrupting less, as they reexamined their own reading experiences in school. They began to consider how useful it was to encourage the use of multiple strategies when their child tackled challenging texts (Klassen-Endrizzi, 2000).

However, I got stuck in the rut of talking *at* parents, not fully realizing the need to explore ways in which families wanted to deal with the anomalies that they uncovered about their child as a reader. I did not consider or value the family members' knowledge base or cultural background as a starting point for our learning process. I failed to see the need for a more equitable means of communication—a give-and-take or an exchange of ideas (Spaggiari, 1998) as a more productive way of learning with parents. I spent two years leading family literacy workshops before I began questioning our outcomes and wondering why we did not have a greater impact on reticent readers and their families.

The question of ownership helps uncover inherent pedagogical dilemmas with this orientation toward family-school partnerships. As I remained in charge of creating learning activities for parents and children to consume, I unfortunately conveyed a subtle message of a deficient home environment, one lacking the necessary elements for literacy success. I failed to ask parents to share their literacy questions and goals that had evolved from interactions with their children. In addition, I failed to inquire about the cultural backgrounds that had resulted in

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unique literacy events in their home and community life (Gadsden, 2004). My intent when sharing these parent-child activities was to transmit my literacy knowledge. I did not realize how consumption of activities created by a teacher failed to invite ownership or the generation of new literacy insights by family members.

### **Family Perspective: Fix My Child**

At the close of our fourth Summer Reading Program in 1998, mothers, fathers, grandparents, and I took time to think ahead to the upcoming school year and the work facing us all as the children returned to their own neighborhood schools. One father of a fourth grader interjected: "We came to this program seeking help for our child. We wanted you to fix him. . . . But now we understand that we need to become more involved."

Asking someone to fix your child implies a need, sometimes even a sense of desperation. Families arrived at our college summer program after their child experienced reading difficulties at their own home school. The range of emotions evoked—after a teacher or reading specialist had told parents that their child struggled with reading—ranged from frustration to helplessness or anger. Colleen, the mother of a second grader in our summer program, made this plea in her first parent-teacher journal entry:

One of my biggest questions would have to be: What do I do when [my daughter] shuts down? She never did this in kindergarten or first grade. This past year by October she was shutting down on everyone. She would wait for the next person to tell her she was wrong. . . . All I want from my daughter is for her to feel good. . . . Very rarely does she smile anymore. She has had very, very little success. . . . How do you help her have success?

Cries for help on behalf of a child urged me and the graduate students to listen and respond. Yet family members already knew what they wanted us to do for their child, based on their own years of learning to read. They wanted more instruction in reading as word recognition (Goodman, 1998), because that is what they knew about learning to read, a belief that had been perpetuated throughout their lives. Hearing television or radio ads for *Hooked on Phonics* or receiving fliers from tutoring agencies, such as the *Sylvan Learning Centers*, sustained the promise of a quick fix, offered by a program or by someone with reading expertise. In our current era of NCLB, families hear a steady stream of promises, offering an easy phonics solution to fix their child's reading problems.

If teachers fall into the trap of assuming the role of all-knowing educator, family members readily abdicate their responsibility and

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remain relegated to the roles of caregiver and nurturer. If teachers somehow fail to fulfill their promise of a quick fix, parents turn elsewhere, hunting for that magic cure. Families remain focused on a single, limited view of reading—as rapid, accurate word recognition.

Placing the responsibility on someone else's shoulders seems easier. Parents naturally feel comfortable in their role as caregivers, providing minimal academic support because they become acculturated into this negligible role. On a five-hour flight last Christmas, I witnessed a mother taking ten minutes with her elementary school-age daughter to review basic multiplication facts using flashcards. This mother obviously understood the school's view of learning and offered support even while on Christmas vacation. I surmised that this child's teacher often enlisted the help of parents in providing a little extra practice time beyond the regular school hours, just as I had enlisted the help of my students' families years ago. The end result was that ownership of the learning process had remained elsewhere, outside the home.

Families do not consider the question of who owns the learning process and who participates as critical learning partners within this orientation of family-school partnerships. Parents continue to assume that the school carries the burden for learning. Designed for a parent audience, booklets such as *Put Reading First* (Armbruster, Lehr, & Osborn, 2001) outline the National Reading Panel's overview of a comprehensive reading program. Devoid of family participation, the five central elements of a primary reading program focus intently on drilling word recognition skills, with a minor focus on obtaining meaning from texts. Parents quickly resonate with this view of literacy learning, based on their own school experiences of reading as word recognition. Responsibility for teaching reading through word recognition skills remains firmly in the hands of teachers. Funds of knowledge from home literacy events that provide a wealth of experiences prior to any decoding lessons at school are not considered to be a part of the process of learning to read or of reading to learn. Family members are lulled into a dishonest comfort zone but are never invited to assume their rightful place as essential literacy teammates.

## **Mutualism**

### **Teacher Perspective: Come In; Let's Learn Together**

Diana, a second-grade teacher at Petersville Elementary, began her twenty-ninth year of teaching by inviting her students' families to a Parent-Teacher Conversation, an evening designed to allow her to get

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to know her second-grade students' mothers, fathers, and stepparents. Studying family-school partnerships as a current graduate student at Westminster College while also conducting Family Literacy Gatherings with other teachers in our Petersville program, Diana wanted to extend her understanding of partnerships to include her own classroom. Sixty-three percent of her students' families attended the first parent-teacher gathering in the fall. Diana chose to reflect on the value of this initial family-school conversation through her biweekly newsletter and penned these thoughts to her students' families the following week.

This [evening] was an opportunity for the parents and I to get to know each other. Children spend 6 and one-half hours at school every day with people their parents have never really met. The faith that parents must have [in teachers] is pretty amazing. . . . It seems a priority that I need to meet the very important people in my students' lives. It is also important that parents have an opportunity to understand what views I have about educating their child. . . . We need time to have conversations about our children. I value this talk because it gives me a better understanding of the children I want to teach. Parents know so much more about them than I do.

This excerpt provided evidence of Diana's work on building connections with families (see Appendix, Chapter 1: *Room 4 Times*, for complete newsletter). As a mother of two college students, her words revealed an ability to take on a parent perspective. In reflecting on the faith and trust that she felt toward her daughters' teachers in past years, she openly marveled at the faith that her own students' families expressed in her. In their book *Whole Language for Second Language Learners* (1992), Freeman and Freeman explore how critical it is for teachers to have faith in their students as learners, regardless of their current ability to speak a new language (English). Likewise, it is critical for teachers to have faith in family members as their child's foremost learning partners and to discuss openly the value of this first partnership, initiate conversations with parents, and actively build connections between home and school learning experiences. Seeing families as trusted allies, teachers like Diana realize how vital it is to establish regular communication patterns between home and school from the onset of the school year. Getting to know parents through informal and formal (Parent-Teacher Conversations) events became a priority for her. Although I never actually saw a sign hanging over Diana's door, she worked to embody a unique vision for interacting with families that school year that is captured in this phrase: *Come in: Let's learn together* (see Table 2).

Many well-intentioned teachers feel uncertain about sharing control and ownership of the learning process with each child's first

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learning partners. Like me in my first ten years of teaching, many educators never consider the power of a family-school learning partnership. If they experience parental criticism or simply feel uncomfortable teaching with someone else watching them, as I did, they do not consider inviting families into their private teaching space. The impetus for my change began when I became director of Westminster College's Summer Reading Program. Discussions with a literacy colleague, Mary Hill, helped me begin to think about starting a conversation with each child's first learning partner. Instead of watching parents mill around campus, killing time during the sixteen two-hour sessions that their children spent with a graduate student, Mary urged me to seize this opportunity to engage in vital conversations with families about reading. Although my first two years of weekly Family Literacy Workshops embodied two hours of talking *at* parents, I gradually began to examine the brief learning time that classroom teachers actually had with children in a given year. Seven-hour days at school for 180 days constitute only 1,260 hours in school each year, with the remaining 3,850 hours spent at home with friends and family, playing video games, watching or participating in sports events, and so on (see Appendix, Chapter 1: Students' Time In and Out of School). Because only 24 percent of a child's time in one year is allotted to a teacher during the thirty-six weeks of school, I became more focused on thinking—with families and educators—about ways to transcend the traditional home-school borders.

Once I realized the need to begin talking and learning with family members, I focused my work over the past ten years on inviting classroom teachers like Diana, graduate students, and preservice teachers to explore avenues for interacting with parents. Collaboratively, we uncovered the value of multiple contexts for learning together, including Family Literacy Gatherings, home surveys, parent-teacher journals, home-school literacy backpacks, and curricular newsletters.

At Petersville Elementary, when four classroom teachers, along with Diana and me, obtained a state literacy grant, we found that we needed a teacher study group to provide bimonthly meeting times for talking about family-school partnerships. Critical to our growth was this support network during our first uncertain efforts to explore new terrain. I recall the uncertainty that Diana and the other teachers felt when we initiated Family Literacy Gatherings seven years ago. Several months after our first family-teacher evening, a kindergarten teacher, Sherry, revealed just how much apprehension she felt that first night. Through a written reflection, she revealed her initial concerns, wondering how we could possibly create a true partnership when all she knew was years

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of parents in subservient roles (see Chapter 6 for further discussion). Essential to our growth as learning partners with families was collective time to reflect on what worked, examine struggles, and plan subsequent family-teacher gatherings. As Diana gained experience developing family gatherings through our literacy evenings for twenty primary parents, she went on to initiate biannual family evenings in her own second-grade classroom (Parent-Teacher Conversations). We came to see these family-school relationships built on mutual respect as a partnership between trusted allies (Shockley, Michalove, & Allen, 1995; Swap, 1993).

When family-school partnerships are perceived as opportunities for families and teachers to learn together deliberately, they transform parent-teacher interactions. Each September, as teachers like Diana and Sherry recognize the need to respect a child's years of learning beyond their classroom, they intentionally set out to build bridges and work to unite community, home, and school learning experiences. Family members are respected as each student's first and primary learning partners, and teachers reach out to parents, explaining their desire to join the established partnership for nine months (Hill, 1989). Teachers value the funds of knowledge that each child brings from family, peer, and community life, and they use these resources in the learning process (Freeman & Freeman, 1992; Moll et al., 1992). Teachers realize that, just as children are natural learning machines (Smith, 1986), parents naturally learn with their child. Recognizing that some parents bring a mindset of abdicating their role as learning partners when formal schooling begins, teachers intentionally initiate discussions focused on connecting growth across a child's life experiences. Posing questions to families through events such as home surveys in September and January (Calkins, 1991) helps teachers uncover and consider parents' concerns and learning goals for their child (see Chapter 2 for further explanation). The onus for creating a partnership lies with the teacher, who must consciously set out to extend frequent invitations in order to build a productive relationship.

This third orientation toward family-school partnerships translates into curriculum as inquiry: both teachers and students work collaboratively to create, critique, and transcend their current understandings (Harste, 1992; Short & Burke, 1994). Viable topics for inquiry evolve from student, family, or teacher interests; required curriculum; or a combination.

Life and learning need to become inextricably intertwined at school, at home, and in the community. Dewey (1897) envisioned school in such a way when he wrote the following: "I believe that school

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[curriculum] must represent life—life as real and vital to the child as that which he [she] carries on in the home, in the neighborhood, and or on the playground.”

Karen, a second-grade teacher at Mohawk Elementary, used information that one parent had shared in a September home survey to create a three-week study of the *Titanic* in her classroom. In this initial correspondence, Daniel’s mother focused on her son’s passion for the *Titanic*. Her response to the question “Please tell me about your child” evoked a lengthy answer about baseball and his sisters, but it also emphasized his passion for this newly released movie. She explained, “My gosh, *Titanic*. Don’t dare leave that out. Everything is ‘*Titanic* this and *Titanic* that.’” Throughout the fall, as Karen realized how many other second graders loved this movie as well, she decided to create a three-week Reading Workshop centered on three *Titanic* trade books (see Chapter 6: Curricular Conversations for further discussion). Although these available children’s books appeared to present a significant challenge for her students, the considerable knowledge that the students brought to the study from their personal lives sustained these second-grade readers through the transactions with these complex information books (Klassen-Endrizzi, 2005). Karen’s second-grade learning community focused on inquiring about the *Titanic*, valuing and using the understandings that each learner brought throughout the three-week collaborative exploration. She realized how learning developed in contexts outside of school and used the students’ community and home life to inform her curriculum (Harste, Woodward, & Burke, 1984). Regular communication with students and families provided vital information for curriculum development.

Spending the year in Karen’s classroom and working with her to build vital connections between home and school, I began thinking a lot about talk as an essential but overlooked aspect of learning (Barnes, 1992; Pierce & Gilles, 1993; Short & Pierce, 1990; Watson, 1993). Years of conducting literature circles—with elementary students in Fresno (Klassen, 1993b), with preservice teachers in my dissertation study (Klassen, 1993a), and with families for several years at Westminster’s Summer Reading Program—helped me think intently about the central role of talk in the learning process. Unlike the presentational method I used to talk *at* parents when I first began holding Parent Workshops in 1994, exploratory talk (Barnes, 1992) within a supportive setting enabled members to share and reconsider their current understanding of the world. Fostering an atmosphere in which people worked to accept ideas, clarify concepts, expand on another’s thoughts, question arguments, and reflect

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on current understandings (Pierce & Gilles, 1993) became one of my primary goals as Karen and I initiated family-teacher gatherings.

In the summer of 1999, Karen and I invited one mother from her classroom, Loraine, and her school's vice principal, Debbie Farelli, to analyze data with us from our yearlong inquiry in order to present the results at a national literacy conference that fall. While reading a year's worth of observational notes, I became aware of three types of exploratory talk: conversation, story, and dialogue. Each form of talk, with a separate and distinct purpose, invited community members to learn to trust each other, become connected, and explore new ideas (Henson, 1993). I noted how different forms of exploratory talk enabled parents and teachers to share past experiences while deepening our understanding of each unique second-grade learner. Open-ended conversations, stories about learning at home, and focused dialogue about uncertainties offered unique avenues for building a partnership that encompassed home and school learning communities (Klassen-Endrizzi, 2004). Each form of exploratory talk enabled Karen and me to value the immense investment in the learning process occurring far beyond school in her students' families. We came to realize the power within students' home learning environment by entering into conversations, listening to stories, and engaging in dialogue with families.

Realizing the need for joint ownership, thereby sharing the responsibility for literacy learning, was an odd shift in thinking for teachers like Karen, Diana, and Sherry, for family members, and for me. We discovered resistance from some parents, who, for many reasons, did not trust the school system. As we became aware of struggles that certain family members had faced in school long ago, we found them avoiding interactions with us. Yet it was natural for them to avoid systems where they did not find success. Also, if their children had experienced learning struggles in previous years, some family members grew wary of entering into a partnership with teachers. Our response to this resistance was to acknowledge it, while continuing to extend invitations to all families, regardless of their willingness to become active co-learners. Surprisingly, we also experienced resistance from teachers at both schools, who openly wondered why teachers, already overburdened with bureaucratic demands from the district and state, would agree to initiate various interactions with families beyond their regular contractual commitments.

### **Family Perspective: Reaffirm My Role as a Vital Learning Partner**

Families do not expect teachers to invite them into a learning partnership. As their children continue in school each year beyond kindergarten,

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the parents' experience often is that teachers are less interested in their contributions. Family members know the banking model of education (Freire, 1989) and the limits on parent involvement from their own instructional histories in school. It takes committed teachers a good deal of time to help families understand how much we value their role as essential co-learners. By the end of the year, many family members in Karen's classroom embraced their central role as co-learners. During her parent interview, Dee, the mother of four preschool through third-grade children, talked about how her literacy interactions with all of her children grew through our yearlong inquiry together:

You know reading is important but you're just so busy. . . . It's so much easier to put on "Rugrats" after dinner. I can clean up. . . . This [family literacy evenings at school] has been reaffirming to me. . . . This has been a recommitment. Ever since "Turn Off the TV Week" we have been reading every night. We are on to "Caddie Woodlawn" and "The Chocolate Touch." . . . We have been cranking through the chapter books. They [my children] love it.

Dee came to see herself in a new light. Even while juggling basic family tasks, such as cleaning up the dishes after dinner, she recognized her role as co-learner. Although in previous years she had already logged many hours reading with her children, she reaffirmed her vital input and grew more committed to focus on learning events away from distractions like television.

Other family members in Karen's classroom surprised us with their depth of knowledge about their children as readers. During an interview with Jane, this mother of two boys talked extensively about the differences between her children as literacy learners and the efforts she made to encourage each child as a unique reader.

Kenny reads the sports page in the newspaper. Barry [her second grader] loves the *Guinness Book of World Records*. He is always asking questions like "Did you know the longest fingernail is ????" His current favorite is "Captain Underpants and the Revenge of the Talking Toilet." He loves them. [The author] is almost up there with Robert Munsch. Recently I thought maybe he'd love Shel Silverstein. I have read "Goosebumps" with them (maybe you think that's terrible). He doesn't like "Boxcar Children." We got "Sports Illustrated for Kids" for a while. We tried "Nickelodeon" magazine for a while too.

Her knowledge of authors and of current children's literature for boys amazed me. She assumed responsibility as a reading partner by working to build a love of reading with both of her sons, based on their unique interests as individual learners. Taking ownership meant setting

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goals as well, which Jane revealed clearly. "Barry is a couch potato, a TV freak. . . . I want to equal out reading and TV time."

Setting goals is an important part of being a learning partner for teachers and family members. Jane recognized her son's love of television yet also laid out an agenda for where she wanted Barry to head next. As parents like Janet enter into a partnership with teachers, they hear an educator, perhaps for the first time, value the power in their essential learning partnership beyond the learning occurring at school. With this recognition comes a renewed sense of responsibility. My interview with Jane moved beyond reading, as she explored other subjects she wanted to focus on next with Barry.

We expect a lot from kids. . . . They catch on at different times. Kenny, my older son, catches things quickly; he breezes along. There is a difference between my two kids. . . . Kenny, in math, he just does it. Barry's having trouble with math. We weren't working with him.

Not getting caught in a "blame the teacher" mode, Jane accepted responsibility for focusing on math at home in the future. This surprised me because I often almost expected parents to blame teachers for struggles that their child faced, especially in light of the current NCLB legislation and the focus on school as the sole entity responsible for ensuring growth. Most families enter our classrooms today with few expectations that teachers will ask for their input when working with their children. I heard family members at Petersville Elementary expressing surprise over teachers who asked them to become active participants. One mother of a second grader explained: "I was surprised to find we could help teachers." Another mother, Dale, recognized this shift in the teachers' attitudes at her son's school by sharing this thought: "They [the teachers] are interested in what you think." In past years, Dale had not experienced teachers wanting to create a partnership with her, and so she felt surprised at the teachers' interest.

Family members with an awareness of their responsibility for learning alongside their child became conscious of the changing role that teachers had assumed as well. Several mothers at Petersville talked openly during family interviews about how they saw teachers in a new light.

*Roni:* Teachers changed as they got to know parents.

*Patty:* Teachers have a lot more patience and are trying to figure out what is going on with the kids. . . . They have much more understanding.

*Terry:* They [the teachers] now have a different perspective on teaching.

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As families considered this new role for teachers, they found comfort in this joint enterprise. Allen's mother explained: "We were in it together. No teacher said, 'This is what you're doing wrong.' Allen and I weren't alone in our reading quest." Parents like this mother saw teachers seeking interdependence with them. Collaborative efforts and sharing the responsibility lightened the load, while also energizing each learner partner. Problem solving the struggles that young readers faced appeared to be more manageable to this mother when she did not feel alone. Allen's mother taught me the value of problem-posing education (Freire, 1989), in which teachers and family members tackle issues collaboratively.

Family members who chose to enter into a partnership with their child's teachers naturally posed questions as they encountered differences between the way they were taught reading and how their child experienced reading instruction today. Conversations with parents, centered on our broader understanding of how readers managed text and gained personal meaning, became a critical component of our partnership. Naturally, teachers, who themselves were still learning about the reading process alongside their students each year, felt reluctant when entering into literacy discussions with families who perceived teachers as all-knowing. It took so much courage for teachers like Karen, Diana, and Sherry to take a leap of faith and begin these complex conversations, while openly admitting to family members that they viewed themselves as learners as well.

Considering the daily headlines grabbing parents' attention in the midst of NCLB mandates, resulting in lots of negative press about literacy learning, it is essential for teachers to counter these images of schools as failing with examples of productive reading experiences from their own classrooms. Families are left wondering, and they need to hear teachers share their views on reading beyond just a decoding event. As Karen and I talked with the families of her second-grade students about her classroom reading program, they raised many questions and concerns based on their own reading experiences in school that had influenced how they believed their son or daughter would learn to read. One mother, Jeanne, shared with me her ongoing concerns about her own reading experiences twenty years ago versus how her daughter experienced reading in school during her interview.

When [my daughter] went to first grade, Mrs. Mason taught that whole language and I couldn't figure out how in the world anyone could learn to read by learning sight words. . . . When I learned way back when, we learned word for word for word

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and [my daughter was] learning these [sight] words and putting the stories together. But she is a wonderful reader. . . . My son learned to read like that too from Mrs. Mason. . . . But for me when I learned how to read, you had to sound everything out. You learned your basic syllables and basic sounds.

Jeanne did not pretend to understand how her daughter and son learned to read, yet she considered another paradigm beyond her own personal experience. I entered graduate studies twenty-five years ago and today I still find myself working to understand every reader whom I encounter in classrooms, together with my undergraduate and graduate students. Reading is such a complex endeavor, difficult even for those of us in the reading world to understand fully how a three-, four-, or five-year-old mind begins to connect symbols with specific sounds and letters in order to make sense of print. Family members deserve a chance to grapple for themselves with our evolving views of reading as they work to create a support system that encourages their child as a reader and learner.

Along with other family members in Karen's classroom, Jeanne did not arrive at definitive answers for her reading questions, yet our collaborative consideration of former beliefs led us all to new responses when reading with children. Within this school district, family members witnessed classroom teachers considering various avenues for teaching reading. Parents needed a place to grapple with these various perspectives, and our family evenings offered an opportunity to pose questions and concerns for collective consideration. Karen and I began to realize the validity of family members' questions and the need to take time to examine these questions openly through our partnership (Klassen-Endrizzi, 2005).

Instead of pushing parents outside our learning circle, teachers like Karen, Diana, and Sherry realized that family members deserved occasions to talk about reading and literacy learning in relation to their own child. Entering into a partnership with each child's first learning partners meant hearing diverse voices. Questions about classroom, district, and national literacy practices became an important part of our family-school partnerships. Just as we teachers bring many concerns about literacy education to current discussions, families brought their own set of concerns. I admire the courage these teachers displayed in holding these complicated but essential conversations with families.

Even more courageous were the family members like Jeanne, Dee, Jane, Roni, Dale, Patty, and Terry, who enabled us to gain a much more realistic glimpse of their child as a reader by opening up their home lives

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and revealing triumphs and struggles at home and school. Across the nation, as teachers grapple with the government's push toward "one size fits all" reading programs (Allington, 2002), having honest literacy conversations with families gets even more complicated. Yet, if we hope to gain the support of our strongest potential advocates for literacy learning that is focused on gaining personal meaning from text, we must find the courage to enter into these discussions. Mutualism means finding time to make teaching even more complicated than it already is by inviting families into our literacy conversations.

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# Becoming Teammates

## *Teachers and Families as Literacy Partners*



**Becoming Teammates: Teachers and Families as Literacy Partners** offers a bold new look at how teachers and families can work together to build family-school relationships that value and respect each other's perspectives on literacy.

Featuring the voices of parents, teachers, graduate students, and preservice teachers, this book explores how families and educators can combine their resources to become essential teammates and partners in children's literacy development.

**Charlene Klassen Endrizzi** recognizes that family-school partnerships are a complex undertaking and offers suggestions for three phases of implementation.

- In Phase 1, teachers begin by extending to family members a variety of invitations to communicate—via surveys, ceremonies, and celebrations—thus building an awareness and understanding of the literacy learning that occurs both in school and at home.
- Phase 2 explores how teachers can initiate a two-way literacy conversation with families through dialogue journals, curricular newsletters, and literacy backpacks.
- The final stage has teachers forging partnerships with parents at Family Literacy Gatherings, during which they explain and demonstrate literacy beliefs and practices, discover and appreciate the families' funds of knowledge, and acknowledge and nurture the emerging parent advocates.

Endrizzi challenges teachers to take an active role in developing partnerships by considering a myriad of ways to build bridges of understanding with their students' first learning partners.

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