

PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT: WRITING INSTRUCTION'S MISSING DIMENSION

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Writing instruction practices in the past few decades have undergone a radical transformation, but most elementary school teachers still fail to involve the persons with the most potential to impact positively the writing development of their students—namely, parents. It is not enough for teachers to acknowledge the need for parental involvement. Rather, it is time that they aggressively seek it and, when it appears to be impossible to obtain, that they create the ways to make it possible.

Literacy emerges gradually. To become proficient at writing, an extremely complex, sociopsycholinguistic activity, takes many years and extensive practice. Teachers at every grade level know that the time students spend in the classroom learning to write is often not enough to get the job done well. They need all the additional help they can get.

The need to improve writing instruction is critical. One out of four students has serious writing difficulties. Many students say they like writing less and less as they go through school (OERI 2). Students must, however, be prepared to compete in a world where approximately 90% of all occupations require some reading and writing skills (Dudley-Marling 16) and where

socioeconomic mobility and quality of life are undeniably affected by level of literacy. Unfortunately, teachers will never be able to impact their students' writing performance to the degree they wish, to the degree the public seems to demand, or to the degree the students deserve unless the effort becomes a collaborative one between teachers and parents.

Parental Involvement: A Missing Dimension

For students to achieve their maximum potential as writers, writing instruction must include parental involvement, a heretofore neglected, if not missing, dimension. Educators should do everything in their power to develop, encourage, facilitate, monitor, and continuously reinforce the home/school alliance. Rather than simply accept the typical absence of parental involvement in writing development, teachers should actively solicit participation from parents who may be reluctant to get involved, and, at the same time, demonstrate sensitivity toward the possible factors behind this reluctance, e.g. the possible uncomfortable self-consciousness such parents may have concerning their own weaknesses as writers or memories of their own lack of academic success. Whatever degree of involvement parents see as currently possible for them must be nurtured. Parents can be helped to realize that they do not have to spend huge amounts of time or money, nor do they have to be English teachers, accomplished authors, college graduates, or even confident writers themselves in order to help their children become better writers.

Fears of inappropriate, damaging parental involvement must be set aside, for, after all, who better than teachers to educate parents to ensure positive involvement? Parental help when properly given does not interfere with a child's development of responsibility, independence, and perseverance. It does not involve telling the child what to write or how to write, nor does it involve a parent doing the writing for the child or becoming the writing's coauthor.

Importance of the Parent Role

Many parents erroneously believe that writing instruction does not begin until their children enter school. Teachers must make them aware of just how important their role is, proud of what they may have already contributed, and cognizant of what

they have the potential to contribute to their children's writing progress. Former President Bush, Former Secretary of Education Lamar Alexander, and the nation's governors underscored in their well-publicized plans for educational change by the year 2000 the role parents increasingly need to play as coeducators. Former Secretary of Education William Bennett challenged parents when he stated, "The message I want most to share with the American public is this—you can make a difference. You can make a difference in the education and future of your children" (Crook Foreward). His successor, Lauro Cavasos, further contended, "The single most important predictor of a child's educational achievement is parental involvement" (OERI 7). What parents do to help their children learn may actually be a more important factor in academic success than even the socioeconomic level of the family (Crook 1).

Parents are, after all, their children's first and most influential teachers. They often inspire, support, and reinforce children's early oral language experimentations and approximations. Teachers can help parents realize how important it is that they play a similar role in their children's development of the skills needed for written expression. Children's innate desire and propensity for expression and communication, and the home environment in which they find themselves with its variety of familial interactions, verbal and otherwise, all contribute to a formidable learning climate—a climate which can be enriched even further by parent-teacher collaboration.

Of course, if parents truly are to serve as coeducators and collaborators with teachers, they must be kept informed about their children's reading and writing curriculum. Research indicates that school-based instructional programs are significantly more effective when parents participate (Brice 71; Reutzell and Fawson 222). If collaboration is to be genuine, parental involvement should be integral to the development, implementation, and evaluation phases of all writing programs.

What Parents Can Do to Foster Writing Development

Based on what we currently know about the role parents can play in their children's writing development, it is possible to assemble a list of recommendations, suggestions, and admonitions for effective parent involvement. It is important, however,

to remember that there is often a wide gap between what "ideal" parents can do to impact their children's written expression and what "real-life" parents are willing or able to do. Nevertheless, and without regard to whether the advice will be heeded, here is a list of what parents can do if they wish to play an active role in their children's development as writers:

1. Read to and/or with your children everyday. This is important, not only for the sake of their development as readers, but also for its impact on their growth as writers. Reading and being read to enhance children's respect for the written word, comprehension of communicative intent, vocabulary growth, awareness of language patterns and writing conventions, and appreciation for language rhythms and word play. Through reading, they are exposed to various genres and styles of writing. Fill your home with as many different types of purchased or borrowed written materials (newspapers, catalogues, magazines, directions, library books, recipes) as possible. Use every occasion possible to read with your children and discuss what you have read.
2. Encourage your children to draw and scribble "stories" at an early age. Children often begin writing before they begin reading (Robinson and Hulett 7). With parental encouragement of early approximations of writing, they will later learn to compose more easily, effectively, and with greater confidence than children who have not been provided such encouragement (Crook 5). Praise and display your children's early writings with their unorthodox spellings and forms, as well as their later, more sophisticated writings, and do so with as much enthusiasm as you show for their achievements in sports and other areas.
3. Provide opportunities for your children to write. Parents can answer the often-asked question "When will my child write?" with another question: "What early opportunities has your child had to develop as a writer?" (Tway 335). Try talking and writing with your children about things you do together. Taking into account what you have time for, can afford, and would enjoy yourself, you may wish to share some

of the following experiences with your children using them as catalysts for talking, examining environmental print, and writing:

- trips to the grocery store, mall, post office, firehouse, community college, bakery, factory, or carwash
 - visits to zoos, farms, parks, pet shops, art museums, beaches, neighbors' homes, or friends in hospitals or nursing homes
 - appointments with the dentist, optometrist, pediatrician, beautician, or barber
 - attendance at garage sales, block parties, concerts, ballets, or movies
4. Write with your children frequently. Remember that "children who have had frequent opportunities to write and read emergently at home are more likely to enter conventional literacy as confident, risk-taking readers and writers" (Sulzby, Teale, and Kamberelis 76-77). Let your children see you writing often; children are more likely to write often themselves if they often see their parents writing (Dudley-Marling 18). Encourage your children to write, even if they're so young that their writing consists of dictating to you, or drawing and scribbling without conventional orthography. Given that so many elementary teachers are female, boys and girls need to see the significant males in their lives (fathers, brothers, uncles, grandfathers, etc.) writing if they are to acquire positive and non-sex-typed attitudes toward writing. Ideally, whether at school or at home, children should write everyday, just as they should read or be read to everyday.
5. Provide or create a place to write. If possible, have a desk or some type of writing surface for your child, or schedule a time when the kitchen table is reserved solely for his or her writing use. Provide as many different materials with which to write as you can:
- pens, pencils, crayons, chalks, pastels, markers, watercolors, paints, brushes
 - a variety of lined and unlined, plain, or colored papers; posterboards; endrolls of newsprint; blank books
 - felt/magnetic boards and felt/metal letters; chalkboards

- a typewriter, tape recorder, and computer with word-processing/desktop publishing software;
 - reference books (dictionary, thesaurus, encyclopedia, grammar book, etc.)
 - for making books at home: discontinued wallpaper sample books, contact paper keyrings, hole punches and reinforcers, ribbons and yarn, and staplers.
 - You may also wish to make a portable writing center that can be contained in a sack or box small enough to be taken on family trips, daily errands, visits to friends, etc.
6. Provide a place for everyone to display and share their writing. Have your family exchange written communications regularly through a family message center. Message centers can be: simple, magnetic paper pads on a refrigerator door; chalkboards; commercially-made products; or family projects made inexpensively from closet door shoeholders, or from small plastic beach buckets, shoe boxes, or baskets placed on a shelf or a bureau. Display with pride and permission any writing (both “works in progress” and final products) done at home, work, or school by family members. Written works can be taped to refrigerator doors, posted on centrally located bulletin boards, perched atop easels, or hung on the wall using inexpensive, acrylic poster frames (the contents of which can be easily changed on a weekly basis).
 7. Provide your child access to microcomputer-based writing environments. Most writing that takes place in the real world takes place in computer-mediated environments. Skill in using a computer keyboard has become as important a basic skill as good handwriting. Facility with wordprocessing and desktop publishing software is a requisite skill for many jobs and college success. Parents who make microcomputers available for writing will notice that their children write more, enjoy it more, engage in more revision and editing, and develop a greater sense of pride about their finished work.
 8. Be supportive of developmentally appropriate writing instruction. Avoid pressuring teachers to rely upon

dittoed “skill/drill” worksheets in place of more meaningful writing instruction. Parents who provide language-rich home environments ultimately become dissatisfied with traditional, skill-based, handwriting/writing instruction programs because they don’t take advantage of, and may squelch, the motivation and creativity displayed in writing at home” (Cathcart 18). To be meaningful, writing at school or at home should emphasize communication with varied audiences, purposes, and modes of discourse. Express your concern regarding instructional practices which do not seem to be helping your child and ask for something that will.

9. Respond to what your child writes, not merely how he or she writes it. Most parents “do not become involved spontaneously in helping their children develop as authors beyond criticizing letter formation and word spellings”(Reutzel and Fawson 223). Listen to your children read their writing to you, ask questions for clarification, react to their ideas, make suggestions for their consideration, and praise their efforts. Remember that

Standard spellings, usage, and punctuation are important only insofar as they help children fulfill their communicative intentions. Meaning is and must be the predominant consideration in writing development. Otherwise, . . . [you] may inadvertently teach. . . [your] children that good writing is merely a matter of form. (Dudley-Marling 18)

10. Accept teachers’ invitations for you to participate in your child’s writing development. Whatever initial degree of participation you feel comfortable with will be welcome. Gradually you will build confidence and develop the effectiveness of what you can do. Ask the teacher to support your efforts by providing simple, short activity suggestions and related information about the writing process and about what is going on in school, feedback on your child’s progress, and answers to questions which may occur to you as you participate.
11. Ask teachers to help you become a partner in your child’s writing development. If teachers do not contact you about your child’s writing as is too often the case,

contact them yourself and indicate your desire to help. Most teachers will be delighted at your concern about your child's writing development, pleased to receive your support and assistance, and willing to give you whatever suggestions or information you may need. You are not alone if you want to know more about aspects of today's writing instruction which seem at odds with approaches that were used when you were in school. Writing instruction trends and theories which parents often wish to know more about if explained in layperson's terms include:

- The whole language movement in language arts and the resultant emphasis on real communication experiences, curricular interconnectedness, cooperative learning, flexible grouping, individualization, integration of the language arts, and the use of thematic units of study rather than isolated skill /drills and reliance on basal readers.
 - The language experience approach in reading instruction and how it may impact writing instruction.
 - The emphasis on writing as process rather than product (including concepts such as prewriting, drafting, revising, copyediting, publishing, writing workshops, conferencing, peer-editing, etc.)
 - The developmental nature of written language acquisition including an understanding of: (a) how the concept of emergent literacy has displaced the notions of reading and writing readiness; (b) the importance of scribbling, drawing, nonphonetic letter strings, and invented spelling to the development of conventional writing; and (c) the characteristics of children's writing at various ages and grade levels.
 - New approaches to writing evaluation (including holistic and analytic evaluation, portfolio assessment, evaluation without grading, treatment of errors as developmentally appropriate opportunities for learning, the stressing of ideas and content over mechanical correctness, etc.)
12. Engage your child in family-based writing experiences. Children benefit from the opportunity to experience writing as more than a school-based activity

done for a grade or to satisfy course requirements. Writing should be an integral part of the fabric of family life. Writing should be done in the context of home and family, both in answer to “real world” needs as well as to provide family recreation and pleasure. Appropriate types of family-based writing experiences include the following:

- Letters/postcards/notes
- Home-made invitations
- Lists, inventories, and charts
- Messages
- Diaries and journals
- Rules (devised by the whole family)
- Instructions
- Gifts and artwork
- Family calendar/schedule
- Logs and records
- Family and individual memories;
- Notes of congratulations/appreciation
- Labels
- Directions
- Recipes and menus
- Word banks

If securing parental involvement in children’s writing instruction were simple, then the above list could be mailed by teachers to all the parents of children in their classes and the job would be done. In actuality, the list is more useful as a tool to help teachers conceptualize a standard of parental involvement to work towards than as a common set of expectations for all parents. Often the real problem that teachers face is not a lack of knowledge of what parents can do to become meaningfully involved; rather it is the problem of soliciting and maintaining any degree of parental involvement at all.

Soliciting and Maintaining Parental Involvement

With sensitivity to the socioeconomic milieu in which they teach, teachers should provide parents various options for becoming involved with their children’s development of written expression. Parents may choose to participate in different ways and at different levels:

- as participants in writing workshops with their children
- as volunteers who work with children in the classroom
- as coeducators who work exclusively with their own children in their own home

- as layreaders who assist the classroom teacher by serving as an additional audience/source of feedback for student writing
- as guests who act as supportive audiences for oral reading by students of their written work at school or who simply observe children and teacher engaged in a writing workshop atmosphere
- as publishers of student writing who help in the duplication and distribution of student writing, etc.

Teachers must reach out to parents using different communication approaches until they are successful in securing their interest and involvement. "Not all parents will be reached using the same form of communication," cautions Brice. "Variety is the key" (72). Communication about student writing and writing instruction should ultimately become productively "two-way." To this end, regardless which approach is used, it is essential that the teacher communicate genuine concern about the children's level of literacy and genuine respect for what parents have already contributed to their children's language learning and writing development. Additionally, if parental involvement is to be sustained, the teacher must evidence confidence about the parents' ultimate contribution to their children's education and an openness to parental concerns, questions, and suggestions. Parent-teacher communication strategies which have been used successfully in the past include:

1. Newsletters/home letters. This teacher-written (sometimes with student contributions) means of communication should aim to ease parental reluctance to become involved because of a real or perceived lack of knowledge about writing instruction. Newsletters/home letters may contain student writing samples, excerpts from writing books or journals, and/or strategy descriptions by teachers and parents involved in an exemplary writing program. They often contain detailed descriptions of "easy-to-do-at-home" writing activities which parents can do with their children. Anne Bingham suggests writing a series of newsletters for parents in which each issue focuses on a particular stage of the writing process with activities appropriate to that stage to be done cooperatively by parents and children (445-450).

2. Bulletin Boards. Conventional bulletin boards in community or parent centers and, when possible, electronic bulletin boards enable teachers to disseminate information to parents

about the writing program and upcoming events and to suggest related parent-child activities. Parents may also use these to communicate with the teacher or with one another.

3. Reports, Writing Progress Forms, and Informal Notes. A regular flow of these communiques regarding the child's writing development from the teacher to the parents, and from the parents to the teacher, should be kept going throughout the year. Many can be shared with the child, and can include his/her own comments.

4. Parent-Teacher Conferences. During conference periods, over lunch, after school, in the classroom, the school library, lounge area, or cafeteria, writing conferences may be held at parent or teacher instigation; some may be conducted without, and some with, the student. On occasion, conferences with a small group of parents who have similar concerns and questions may be beneficial.

5. Home Visits. Teacher visits to individual student homes, regularly scheduled throughout the year, may be viable in some situations.

6. Calendars and Schedules. These should detail class activities and experiences, highlighting student writing assignments and home activities, and be sent well in advance to permit maximum parent participation.

7. Writing Hot-Lines. Parents may call a special local number to receive an answering machine message recorded earlier by the teacher about that night's writing assignment with suggestions for appropriate parental involvement.

8. Writing Folders or Writing Portfolios. Kept in the classroom for instructional purposes, these, or student/teacher-selected items from them, may be shared at conferences among the student, the parents, and the writing teacher, and selected items may also be signed out overnight by the student for family members to read and respond to if they wish.

9. Videotapes. Class writing activity videorecordings can be shown and discussed during conferences, workshops, P.T.O./P.T.A. programs, or on "Parents' Night." Some may be signed out for one or two evenings with accompanying explanatory reading material and optional parent feedback forms.

10. Workshops. Teacher/parent or teacher/parent/child workshops can be designed to do all or some of the following: (a) to allow the teacher to share how the writing process is

being taught in his/her classroom; (b) to suggest specific strategies parents might use to help their children with writing; (c) to provide opportunities for parents to write with their children and to talk about both the product and the experience of writing it together; (d) to give parents a forum in which to discuss or ask questions about writing instruction; and, (e) to have parents and students "make-and-take" materials to support writing at home.

Informing parents well in advance, setting a variety of times, dates, and locations, and involving parents in the workshop planning itself help to ensure maximum participation. Workshops can be held in school cafeterias, in private dining rooms of modestly priced, centrally located restaurants, in public library or civic meeting rooms, or on a rotating basis among private homes, and after-school, evening, and Saturday morning writing sessions may be scheduled. A noninhibiting work atmosphere must be created, with flexible seating arrangements conducive to individual participants or family groups comfortably writing and talking, not just to the teacher or workshop director, but among themselves as well.

Patrice Goldys' "The Write Stuff Workshop" for K-5 student writers and their families is an excellent prototype. Party-like decor, writing games, and enjoyable parent/family-student writing activities were used. Family teams created take-home writing centers from materials and directions provided; each child was sent home with a "Writer's Starter Kit," and each parent received brief informative guidesheets (58-61).

Patricia Davis describes an exemplary workshop concept for parents and older students. Parents and children wrote about "My First Childhood Memory" in the first session. Members from the same family read what they'd written, one after another, and chatted about what they had in common. Meeting one night each week for four weeks with about twenty people in attendance at each session, families wrote and talked about their writing, ultimately gaining valuable insights into writing and writing instruction (62-64).

11. Special Events. Teachers should schedule special events throughout the year which reinforce parental involvement in children's writing development, e.g. "Author's Day" presentations in class; a "Writing Sharing Celebration" on a selected evening once a month; or a weekly "Original Story Hour" at the school, public library, or in some other setting where students

and their families can share aloud their writing with appreciative audiences.

12. **Writing Kits.** An outstanding example of this strategy is D. Ray Reutzel and Parker C. Fawson's "traveling tales backpack" strategy. This idea for involving parents with their children's writing revolves around the use of a special backpack taken home by each child for two nights at a time and designed to carry the "writing as process" approach into the home. Contacted by phone prior to their backpack turn, parents were asked to work cooperatively with their children to create stories using the writing materials and laminated instructions sheet placed inside the pack by the teacher. Parents helped in brainstorming, and, after the child selected a topic, helped decide which backpack materials to use and what form the story would take. They helped the child think through the story before beginning to write, had others in the household listen to the child read drafts, wrote down the home audience's questions and suggestions, and talked with their child about how these could be used in revision and copyediting. The family listened to the child read the final version as a rehearsal prior to sharing the story at school. Parents were invited to come to class to hear their child read the story they had worked on together, the children received positive feedback from their classmates, and the stories were kept on bookshelves in the classroom (224).

A Final Admonition

Epictetus's admonition in 110 A.D., "If you wish to be a writer, write" can be amended for teachers to "If you wish to help your students become better writers, involve their parents in writing instruction" and for parents to "If you wish to help your children become writers, become involved in all aspects of their writing development." Establishing the home/school connection for writing instruction will not always be easy; but if we wish to give children the best possible opportunity to develop as writers, then we must make the effort. Parental involvement should no longer be allowed to remain writing instruction's missing dimension.

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