

Fostering High-Leverage Family Engagement

by [*Teresita Galarza*](#) and [*Sheldon Watson*](#)

The Home-School Connection to Language and Literacy Development

The nature of home literacy practices can be drastically different depending on a variety of home and family characteristics, including sociolinguistic context. Variation in home literacy practices may have even more impact on children when the language spoken at home differs from the language of instruction at school. Students learning English have additional needs when it comes to support of language and literacy development in the home. Given that a child's oral language development and literacy interest increases when literacy support is a mutual effort between family and school (Frijters, Barron, & Brunello, 2000) it is vital to build mutually-supportive relationships with families. This can be achieved when educators make family literacy a priority in their curricular models and pay careful attention to the needs of both students and families. The hallway workshop is an example of one strategy for family literacy that is consistent with this vision.

Family Literacy

Most parents are very interested in supporting their children's skills in reading and writing at home. If parents know the advantages of particular activities for their children, they may be more likely to facilitate those experiences (Edwards, 1995). The significance of home literacy practices cannot be understated (Payne, Whitehurst, & Angell, 1994). One study of Mexican American preschoolers found that the home literacy environment had a greater impact on literacy skills than many other factors, such as the home-school relationship, family composition, and family history (Ezell, Gonzalez, & Randolph, 2000). A number of specific activities have been found to contribute to a child's home literacy environment. These include

- frequency of shared picture-book reading,
- age of onset of picture book reading,
- duration of shared picture-book reading at one sitting,
- number of picture books in the home, and
- frequency of caregiver's personal reading time.

We often find, however, that the culture of educators and the school is different from that of the family. Sociolinguistic context can include different ideas and values related to how children learn, relationships between families and educators, and home literacy practices. In these cases, educators need to make a conscious effort to engage families in ways that do not communicate messages that parenting skills are judged negatively or perceived as inadequate. Perceptions by families that they are being judged negatively may simply be the result of divergent perspectives emerging from interactions with educators, but these perceptions can quickly become reality for families. The following are conversational tips to help avoid the potential alienation of adult family members:

- Limit use of school jargon and acronyms (e.g., IEP, SAT, SBAC, CCSS).

- Don't begin the relationship, or most interactions, with a focus on problems about the children.
- Avoid negative language, like "Your child does not/cannot/needs to..."
- Focus on assets of the child, such as "Your child is able to/good at..."
- Seek their input, such as "How do you feel about...?" and "What happens when...?"

Approaching conversations with family members in this way will contribute to more positive feelings toward the school and educators, and helps reduce negative or adversarial perceptions. The whole point is creating a partnership to support children based upon mutual respect between family and school. How we talk and interact with families is where this begins.

Case Study: The Hallway Workshop

Fostering family involvement requires more than requesting adult attendance at school meetings and teachers disseminating information. It is about engaging families in authentic conversations concerning language and literacy development. These conversations should include suggestions and supports for what they can do with their children. However, these strategies for home literacy must be practices that family members are (1) able to do, and (2) feel comfortable implementing independently at home with their children. An engagement strategy that we call the *hallway workshop* is an example of one such experience that promotes language and literacy practices at home. It has proven highly effective in positively engaging increased numbers of kindergarten families in home literacy behaviors in the Pre-K–8 urban school where it has been developed.

At many schools, families are present and bustling throughout the building at the beginning and end of every school day. This is even more true in urban environments where young children frequently walk to school. The hallway workshop is a family engagement experience that strategically occurs directly when and where families are most likely to be found. The hallway workshop is designed to be a brief 10–15 minute conversation. Adults are individually invited to participate in a manner that is intentionally planned as nonthreatening and low stakes. Disseminating information is not the primary purpose of the conversation, rather it is to promote a personal connection. The educator's conversational role is that of advocate and active listener in an interaction framed from this perspective. Developing the capacity of families to support home literacy will hopefully be an associated outcome of this interpersonal exchange.

The invitation comes in the form of a complimentary gift offered as adults pass the teacher's table in the hallway. The gift is a book available for them to take home and share with their child. It is inside a folder that contains an assortment of materials to use with the text. These Family Literacy Toolkits each contain: the book, a dry erase marker, highlighter, and laminated worksheets that include an alphabet chart, basic sight word lists, and lined paper. The teacher has a casual conversation with the adults about how they can use these resources to read with their child at home. The importance of language and literacy at home is discussed as well as the principle that they are their child's first teacher. This principle is particularly important for families of English language learners because we want to promote the native language as an essential resource in the academic growth of the child. Native language exchanges between parent and child: (1) extend dialogue, (2) prompt questioning, and (3) expand vocabulary, which

is then transferred to English. Basic steps and strategies are demonstrated for how to *teach* their child with a focus on developing language and literacy skills using the book as the foundation for conversation in the home environment.

Impact

The hallway workshops had an immediate impact on all stakeholders. They increased the frequency and quality of conversations between family members and teachers. More adults are now engaged in positive interactions with the school and are supporting literacy behaviors at home with their children. As a result of the hallway workshops, adults that participated in previous weeks now take the initiative of bringing other adults to the table. The unsolicited feedback from families has been extremely positive.

The toolkit materials are presented as simple tools that families can use to teach their children at home just like teachers do at school. Family members confirm the success of this objective. They note how they use the materials with their children, that their child wants to “play” like they do in school, and that the activities motivate their child to want to read books at home. These first steps, established in the context of warm and supportive conversations at school, hold the promise of developing even stronger home literacy practices over time.

References

- Edwards, P. A. (1995). Combining parents’ and teachers’ thoughts about storybook reading at home and school. In L. M. Morrow (Ed.), *Family literacy: Connections in schools and communities* (pp. 54–69). New Brunswick, NJ: International Reading Association.
- Ezell, H. K., Gonzales, M. D., & Randolph, E. (2000). Emergent literacy skills of migrant Mexican American preschoolers. *Communication Disorders Quarterly*, 21(3), 147–153.
- Frijters, J. C., Barron, R. W., & Brunello, M. (2000). Direct and mediated influences of home literacy and literacy interest on prereaders’ oral vocabulary and early written language skill. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 92, 466–477.
- Payne, A. C., Whitehurst, G. J., & Angell, A. L. (1994). The role of home literacy environment in the development of language ability in preschool children from low-income families. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 9(3-4), 427–440.

Dr. Teresita Galarza is a veteran educator in the Hartford Public Schools, a former principal and district administrator, and a specialist in second language acquisition and bilingual education. Her doctoral research focused on classroom conversational interactions and their impact on language development and academic performance. Current research focuses on literacy and family engagement. Dr. Galarza facilitates professional learning on language and literacy development for educators in Connecticut and Massachusetts.

Dr. Sheldon Watson is an associate professor in the Department of Educational Leadership, Policy, and Instructional Technology at Central Connecticut State University. He has developed graduate courses in sheltered English instruction and program administration for English language learners. Dr. Watson has facilitated professional learning on language and literacy development for both teachers and administrators in Massachusetts. His research focuses on educational policy, professional collaboration, and family engagement.