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Deepening the home-school connection:  
Collaborating with diverse families to accelerate  
student learning

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# Deepening the Home-School Connection: Collaborating with Diverse Families to Accelerate Student Learning

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As reading interventionists, we often have the difficult tasks of telling parents that their children need extra help learning to read and write, and requesting their help at home.

This conversation can be particularly challenging when the parents and teacher do not speak the same language. Communicating with parents is critical, however, as research indicates that a positive relationship exists between home support for literacy activities and students' school achievement levels (Darling & Westberg, 2004; Lareau, 1989).

In this article, we first address two perspectives on working with parents: the deficit model, which looks at families' perceived weaknesses, and the sociocultural model, which focuses on strengths. We discuss how to support children's transition from home to school by focusing on cultural and linguistic strengths, and we suggest that considering the parents' perspective is key in home-school communication. We then share effective practices that teachers from across the country use to work collaboratively with families of all students at the beginning of the Reading Recovery<sup>®</sup> lesson series, throughout lessons and at the end of the year. The practices described can be used with all students, regardless of race, gender, culture, or home language, but we focus on English learners (ELs) because language can be perceived as an added barrier to communication and because we have

many years of experience successfully working with EL families. We use the terms *parents* and *families* to denote guardians, caretakers, and people close to the child.

## Building on Students' Strengths

Home-school literacy programs often stem from one of two perspectives: a deficit model or a sociocultural perspective. A deficit model focuses on what is lacking in children's homes from an academic perspective, such as a variety of reading materials. Home-school partnerships that are based on the deficit model may try to "fix the problem" at home rather than respect the home culture. Deficit model-based partnerships are often characterized by one-way communication from the school to the home, so parents' input may not be sought (Dudley-Marling, 2009). In addition to showing a lack of respect for families' home lives, one-directional communication (school to home) also diminishes the impact of parents' help at home, as the parents may not buy into what they are being asked to do (Paratore, Krol-Sinclair, Páez, & Paratore Bock, 2010). For example, some Native American cultures have quiet homes without a lot of talk (Plank, 1994). Telling parents to increase the amount of talk at home would contradict their culture and therefore would not be a respectful approach to partnering with the family.

In contrast, a sociocultural perspective builds on families' cultures—including their use of talk and literacy in the home—in order to transition to academic literacy (Dudley-Marling, 2009). This perspective reflects the principles of Reading Recovery and Descubriendo la Lectura (DLL) that (a) value what students know and can do, and (b) build on the students' abilities and home language to bridge to school literacy. For example, if a family member reads the news every day, he could read a brief article aloud or ask the child to identify known letters or words. Interventions that build on what is already part of the family's normal routines and culture are easier to implement and more likely to last (Paratore et al., 2010).

## Children's Transition from Home to School

How do teachers approach home-school relationships through a sociocultural perspective? One way is to build on the family's "funds of knowledge" (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992, p. 139). Before children arrive at school they have already learned a lot about their world and their home language from parents, preschools, and other important people in their lives (Clay, 1991, 1998). However, some children's home learning may not correspond well with the content or expectations of school (Compton-Lilly, 2007, 2009; Moll et al., 1992; Paratore et al., 2010; Purcell-Gates, 1996). For example, Purcell-Gates found that low-income families primarily read food containers such as milk cartons and cereal boxes, the TV guide, and parts of the newspaper such as adver-

tisements and coupons. The families often wrote shopping lists and to-do lists. The genres of text Purcell-Gates found in the low-income homes she studied are typically not introduced in school in the first few years; consequently there may be a disconnect between what children experience as reading and writing in school versus at home.

Just as Purcell-Gates (1996) found that families of low-income students practiced literacy in ways that differed from schools, Moll et al. (1992) and Compton-Lilly (2007) found that working-class Latino families had knowledge and resources that could be strategically incorporated into classrooms. Using students' home knowledge sources validates their culture and allows them to focus on new conceptual learning.

Clay (2005a) echoes Moll et al.'s (1992) concept of funds of knowledge, stating this:

Children who come to school speaking any language will have a preparation for literacy learning that is to be valued, whatever that prior language is ... We need to see them as competent children who speak and problem solve well in their first culture and who are lucky to be learning a second language while they are young and active language learners. It is surprising how rapid their progress can be. (p. 6)

It is the teacher's responsibility to help children use what they know to learn to read and write. Reading Recovery/DLL teachers may use students' funds of knowledge when composing a story, making an alphabet book, or orienting a student to

a new book. Teaching with content that is familiar to the child, or using the known to get to new, can help to accelerate the student's learning (Clay, 1998, 2005b).

## Considering the Parents' Perspective

Parent-teacher communication can be challenging even when parents are English speakers and well-versed in school systems. For example, Purcell-Gates and Strickland (2005) share Purcell-Gates' experience as a mother of a child being evaluated for special education. Despite her experience as a special education teacher and as a director of two university-based literacy centers—including one at Harvard University—Purcell-Gates "unwillingly but inevitably fell into the role of an observer and a mother of the child being talked about by others" (p. 277). Purcell-Gates spoke the same language as the teachers, including the specific language of special education, but still felt marginalized at the meeting. Her personal example sheds light on how schools' interactions can unintentionally marginalize parents, especially when children are not doing well in school.

We have found that some parents may feel nervous or defensive when a child is identified as needing Reading Recovery or DLL. Clay (1991) reminds us that the child is a reflection of his home, so some parents may feel judged rather than appreciated based on their child's school performance:

The school represents external evaluation; opportunities for success and failure ... *Beliefs and practices which are followed in the home will come under the scrutiny*

*and challenge of community norms and values* [italics added for emphasis]. The personal hopes and aspirations which parents have for their children now will be tempered by the reality of performance. (p. 55)

Parents may be concerned about how teachers perceive their child's academics (Clay, 1991) or behavior (Doyle & Zhang, 2011). Parents from different cultures, whose norms and values may not correspond to those of the school, may be particularly susceptible to the school's scrutiny (Compton-Lilly, 2007).

Sensitivity to parents' feelings may facilitate more-collaborative parent-teacher relationships. For example, "Your child is reading below grade level and needs extra help," is different than a more supportive, "Your child has a lot of strengths. I understand that you're concerned about her progress in reading. Let's discuss ways we can work together to support her." In our experience, simply acknowledging parents' feelings can open the door to collaborative communication about how to help the child be successful.

#### ***EL parent-teacher communication***

When teachers and parents do not share a language and culture, there are added complexities to parent-teacher communication. Teachers may unknowingly expect diverse parents to conform to mainstream expectations of which the parents may be unaware (Colombo, 2004). Some teachers who do not know the parent's language or culture may be hesitant to communicate (Tuten & Jensen, 2013). Typically, teachers

receive little training on how to collaborate with parents (Wright, Bouchard, Bosdotter, & Granberg, 2010), so they may not know how to implement effective parent communication systems (Jensen, 2011).

On the other hand, families who don't speak the same language as the school may not feel comfortable approaching teachers, and parents from certain cultures tend not to interfere with schooling (Valdés, 1996). For example, Valdés found that the Mexican immigrant families she studied had an immense respect for teachers and would not think themselves qualified to question the teacher. Instead, their role in "educando a los hijos" (educating the children) "included teaching children how to behave, how to act around others and also what was good and what was moral" (p. 125). Parents trusted the school to manage the academic aspect of their children's development.

Regardless of socioeconomic status, ethnicity, language, or culture, all parents care about their children's success in school (Paratore et al., 2010). In fact, research has shown that immigrant families' main purpose in moving to the United States was for their children to have a better education and job prospects than were available in their home country (Dudley-Marling, 2009). Communicating with these families is one way to help them achieve these goals for their children. Below we share practices Reading Recovery and DLL teachers use to build partnerships with EL students' families in a variety of districts across the country, from New Jersey to Washington state.

## **Practices to Foster Home-School Partnerships**

### ***Getting started: Reaching out to families at the beginning of the lesson series***

Reaching out to parents at the beginning of the intervention sets the stage for working collaboratively to support student learning. Whether meeting with parents individually or in a group, positive initial communication is key.

**Bilingual parent-teacher individual conferences.** One way Reading Recovery/DLL teachers in Pasco School District, Washington, reach out to families is by holding a face-to-face, individual conference with each student's parent or guardian at the beginning of the intervention. The meeting takes place regardless of the language spoken at home. If the teacher does not speak the same language as the parent, she asks a parent liaison, DLL teacher, paraeducator, district translator, community member, or another colleague to translate. The families are grateful for the effort the teacher makes to meet and communicate with them, and the result is an open door of communication from the start of the lesson series. During the conference

- teachers discuss strengths they see in the student;
- teachers provide parents with a general overview of Reading Recovery/DLL and emphasize the importance of daily attendance;
- parents are encouraged to share information about their child during this meeting, including literacy activities already taking place in the home;

- homework is explained and modeled to avoid confusion at home; and
- parents are invited to observe a lesson.

The conferences provide families with the opportunity to see where the Reading Recovery/DLL lessons will take place and the materials the student will be using. They also highlight the importance of two-way communication and enable teachers to connect their instruction to what the child already knows and can do in the home. For example, children's books and lists were two genres most often found both in low-income homes and at school (Duke & Purcell-Gates, 2003). Building on these genres or other literacy activities used in the home might ease the child's transition to school literacy.

The initial face-to-face meeting with parents emphasizes the importance of working collaboratively to support the child's literacy progress and makes parents feel welcome in the school setting. Speaking with parents provides an opportunity for the teacher to dialogue about ways parents can best support their children. Teachers stress the vital role parents play in the education of their children and the many ways they can help at home based on the family's strengths. The conversation helps parents understand the Reading Recovery/DLL intervention, why their student was selected, and what they can expect along the journey. Most importantly, it begins to build a relationship between the Reading Recovery/DLL teacher and the parent, opening the door for future communication. Families often take the initiative to contact

teachers with concerns or questions after this initial communication. As Reading Recovery/DLL teachers, we can help ensure the success of the intervention by facilitating the home-school connection.

#### **Bilingual group meetings for Reading Recovery/DLL parents.**

Denver Public Schools had a similar strategy for opening dialogue between parents and Reading Recovery/DLL teachers. They held group meetings, with translators, for parents of DLL and Reading Recovery students when parents may already be at school to drop off or pick up their child. The teachers provided coffee, fruit, or sweets, and allowed parents time to network among themselves and share how they work with their children at home. This created a network of support among parents who may speak the same language. The teachers shared an overview of Reading Recovery/DLL, and spent the bulk of the time asking parents about their children to learn more about their interests and home literacy activities. Teachers used this information to select books that might appeal to the children or to help them compose an interesting sentence to write.

At a mid-year meeting, parents of first-round students demonstrated working with their child on the cut-up sentence and reading homework for second-round parents. This empowered the parents and provided them with a network of peers to whom they can talk about supporting their children's literacy growth. Colombo (2004) found that over time, parents help other parents get better at working with their children at home.

Whether meeting with parents individually or in groups, the initial conversation can set the stage for a productive, collaborative relationship.

#### *Supporting families' work at home*

Once productive, collaborative relationships have been established with parents, we have found that ongoing communication supports families. Three creative ways of continuing to support families as they begin working more intentionally with their child around literacy are using video, making books to be read and illustrated at home, and asking parents to share family and cultural stories with children.

**Building a shared understanding of reading through video demonstration.** Madison Metropolitan School District in Wisconsin began its work with parents through inquiry. They were curious about how technology might help build a shared understanding of reading among parents and teachers of EL students. Reading Recovery and DLL teachers sought out parent beliefs about reading through a home visit, conference, or a phone call. Monolingual teachers created a short survey that was translated and sent home. Questions asked included these:

- What are your hopes for your child as a reader?
- What is your approach to teaching reading at home?
- How can the child's strengths be built upon in Reading Recovery/DLL?
- How might technology help you help your child?

Almost unanimously, parents of ELs expressed the importance of their child becoming a proficient reader and identified reading as being the means to greater career opportunities. While many parents included reading comprehension in their definition of reading, when asked about how they help their children most parents only spoke about the need to “sound it out” or “di la primera sílaba” (“say the first syllable”). This finding corroborates Compton-Lilly’s (2005) study which found “sounding it out” to be a “pervasive cultural model of reading” (p. 441) among parents of her urban first-grade students in Reading Recovery. While the Reading Recovery/DLL teachers in Madison agreed with parents that attending to visual information is important, they suggested that students develop multiple strategies for solving words in text in order to develop a more-balanced processing system.

Madison teachers decided to use video to share with the EL parents the strategy the child was working on in lessons. In one case, a Reading Recovery teacher filmed her student, Miguel, performing a slow check of a word in order to confirm his attempt. She sent the clip through text messaging to the cell phone of the parent. When Miguel returned home from school that day, he was able to explain in Spanish how he runs his finger slowly under the word in order to check to see if the word looks right. Miguel’s mom learned a new way to support her child, Miguel’s confidence increased, and his learning solidified. In addition, Miguel’s mother feels that reading at home is fun for them as a mother and son because they learn together. She said she never imagined it would be this way.

In another case, a DLL teacher engaged in conversations with the mother of her student, José, about the many things that José can do to help himself when he gets stuck in his reading. The teacher taped a few minutes of her lessons with José over a series of days. In these lessons, the teacher prompted José to integrate multiple sources by rereading and sampling the first part of the word. The teacher created a DVD of the clips for José to take home and present to his family. When asked how José’s mom felt about her child’s reading, she responded, “I noticed how much more quickly he figured out the new words when he went back and reread parts of the story. . . . There have been a few times when he has been reading at home and we’ve noticed that he does go back and rereads on his own!” In this example, parent and teacher developed a shared understanding of reading support, and José could apply his reading strategy in both school and home contexts.

Madison teachers knew the value of demonstrations over talk from Clay (2005b), and applied this concept to their work with both English-speaking and non-English-speaking families. Video demonstrations for parents align with research by Padak and Rasinski (2006) who recommend using clear demonstrations with parents. In addition, video both builds on the child’s strengths and is considerate of the parents’ feelings as it is an example of the child doing something well.

**Making books for home with the cut-up sentence.** The writing and cut-up sentence homework component of the Reading Recovery/DLL lesson is a low-tech way to connect school to home and builds on children’s funds

of knowledge, as the stories come from their lives and experiences. After *Roaming Around the Known*, teachers invite parents to observe a lesson and demonstrate the homework tasks of reading books and sentence reconstruction. Then Reading Recovery/DLL teachers extend their daily “stories” across a week. After the child has reconstructed the stories, teachers type them and send them home in a book format to be co-illustrated by the child and family member. Teachers in Denver Public Schools have found this to be a motivating experience for emergent readers. An added benefit is that these illustrated books become part of home or classroom libraries, allowing struggling students to join the literacy club in the classroom.

Practices such as making books out of the child’s cut-up sentences follow Padak and Rasinski’s (2006) guidelines for home-school partnerships for emergent readers, such as these:

- Set goals and use effective, research-proven strategies that make the most of families’ precious time.
- Train parents, as communication and support increases the efficacy of the intervention.
- Demonstrate what you want parents to do and opportunities for parents to ask questions.
- Ensure that home activities are easy, enjoyable, consistent and brief (10–15 minutes) so that routines can be easily maintained.
- Provide ways for parents to document activities that can help teachers and parents to assess effectiveness and adapt the parent-child collaborative work accordingly.

Figure 1. Yael and his father's co-illustration of a few days of cut-up sentences



Parents have also extended the cut-up sentence task. Yael's father extended the cut-up sentence homework by illustrating the messages with his son, scaffolding the task and transferring it to his son (see Figure 1).

**Oral language development in the home language.** Just as the cut-up sentences (the child's stories written down) are used for reading practice, parents' oral stories can also be used to support language and literacy development. Clay (1998) identified the importance of valuing and developing students' home language, stating, "It is important that children

develop a rich control of their home language as their first language, even when the language of the school is English; schools can build from there" (p. 11). Some children may require a series of lessons that pays special attention to their oral language development regardless of their home language or the language of instruction. DLL teachers from Jersey City Public Schools in New Jersey determined that the students' oral language was an untapped and underdeveloped resource. Escamilla, Andrade, Basurto, and Ruiz (1996) stated:

The best preparation for literacy learning is learning to talk and having many opportunities to talk. For Spanish-speaking students, learning to talk has meant learning to talk in Spanish, and it makes sense for schools to continue to encourage these children to speak and develop Spanish and to use Spanish as their springboard to literacy. (p. 26)

Knowing that language is children's primary emergent literacy resource, DLL teachers met with parents to map out a collaborative plan to foster students' oral language. The plan was

simple: Tell your child *los cuentos de su niñez*, the stories of your childhood. Some parents felt intimidated by the request, but teachers were responsive to parents' feelings and together they decided to use traditional folktales as well as family stories. In addition to being easy and fun for parents and students, telling folktales provided opportunities for students to hear complex oral language structures and new vocabulary. Learning the traditional stories strengthened the child's cultural identity, as parents tapped into their childhood memories and shared stories with deep cultural significance. It also built on the family's linguistic and cultural funds of knowledge, as their stories became academic content used in Reading Recovery/DLL lessons.

A similar at-home strategy to develop the native language is shared book reading in the family's language. Reading in any language provides students with background and concepts that will support them in school. Hearing complex language structures and sophisticated vocabulary of books in their home language may also support English language learning (Paratore et al., 2010).

The DLL teachers supported the parents' work at home by planning for more student talk during the 30-minute DLL lesson, as Clay (2005b) notes that if storytelling is difficult for a child, it "will be an area of learning that early lessons must develop" (p. 162). Teachers limited their talk and prompted the child to produce more language. Often, the student would retell a folktale to their DLL teacher, requiring students to comprehend the story and convey it in an effective way. At first students

could only retell fragments of the story. Later they began to summarize stories from beginning to end. Both parents and teachers focused their efforts on activating the use of the Spanish language to facilitate Spanish reading, composing, and writing. While the focus was on Spanish oral language in Jersey City, this intervention could be used in any language.

Developing oral language in both the home language and English is important. Clay (2005b) reminds us that extending a child's language is critical and recommends writing down the child's longest utterance as it "provides a rough indication of this child's control over the structure or grammar of his oral language" (p. 68) at a certain point in time. Similarly, Escamilla et al. (1996) wrote, "Early intervention programs in Spanish guide children in their development of the universal aspects of literacy and provide a foundation that can later be used to develop literacy in English" (p. 26). With focused effort, well-prepared, culturally knowledgeable teachers can bridge dissimilarities between school and home.

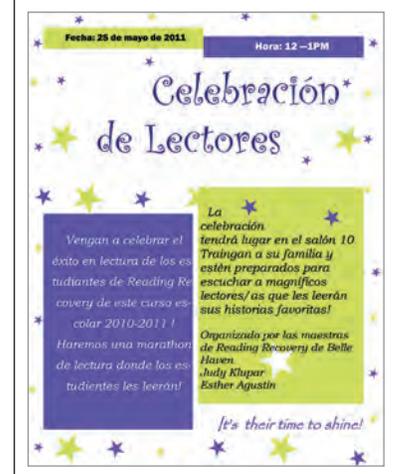
*End-of-year celebrations and ongoing literacy support at home*

After a successful year of parent-teacher collaboration, how do you celebrate your joint success and help families continue their literate practices over the summer to ensure the student continues to progress? This last piece is critical, as "summer learning loss" (Allington et al., 2010, p. 412) can cause a child to regress several months in literacy performance. Two ideas used in a California district are to hold a year-end celebration and to inexpensively mail home new books weekly over the summer break.

**Reading Recovery and DLL student success celebration.** Belle Haven Elementary School in the Ravenswood City School District in California hosts an annual, year-end celebration to spotlight the children who were the most struggling readers at the beginning of the year and allow them to exhibit their newly acquired literacy skills. Teachers call all families of Reading Recovery/DLL students to personally invite them to attend. Bilingual administrative staff, paraprofessionals, and DLL teachers call families who do not speak English at home. School and community members such as librarians, district office staff, school board members, private philanthropists, paraprofessionals, and older siblings are also invited. Bilingual flyers are sent home with students (see Figure 2), but personal contact has been much more effective at ensuring attendance. The Reading Recovery/DLL teachers decorate the room with streamers and ensure there is sufficient seating.

On the special day, everyone gathers in a room at the school and Reading

Figure 2. Spanish translation of the year-end Reading Recovery/DLL celebration flyer



Recovery/DLL students read familiar books to the various guests. A child will read a book to his aunt, for example, and then move on and read a book to another adult, who may be the school principal or may be his classmate's mother. Light refreshments (fruit, cookies, and juice) are served. Toward the end of the hour-long celebration each student is called by name to receive a medal and the gift of free (donated) books.

The Reading Recovery/DLL celebration allows the children to feel special and show off their reading skills as they successfully read their familiar books to anyone and everyone who will listen. Parents appreciate the opportunity to celebrate their child's success, and it helps them to realize the enormous impact Reading Recovery/DLL has had on their child. The public celebration also provides Reading Recovery/DLL with positive visibility among the school and local community. It is a fun experience for everyone who attends — from the students and their families to the teachers and school board members.

**Summer reading program.** The Reading Recovery and DLL teachers at Belle Haven also implemented a summer reading program for Reading Recovery/DLL students. They purchased KEEP BOOKS, published by The Ohio State University, for 25 cents each and mailed one home to every Reading Recovery/DLL student weekly over the summer. The books were in the range of each child's independent reading level. The Reading Recovery/DLL teachers purchased the books, postage, and envelopes, and compiled the mailings before the end of school so no work was needed over the summer break. One of the

teachers simply dropped a few envelopes in the mail once a week over the summer.

Each mailing contained a bilingual (Spanish/English) flyer, translated to Spanish by a DLL teacher. The flyers had different tips for how parents could work with their children over the summer, such as

- reading signs when you're in the car;
- reading about places you or your child might want to go;
- reading to your child in any language;
- encouraging kids to look at pictures and predict what might happen next;
- visiting the public library and allowing the child pick out books; and
- allowing your child to write a letter to a family member or write in a journal, saying words slowly and writing the sounds they hear.

The total cost to eliminate the summer reading slump for 24 Reading Recovery/DLL children was just over \$300. The first year the teachers wrote a grant to pay for their summer reading program. Due to the success of the summer reading program, the school funded the cost the following year.

In fact, the data were impressive! In the first year, about 80% of the students maintained or improved their reading level and avoided the dreaded summer slump. The next year, 95% of the students maintained or improved their reading levels. We attribute the increase to improved

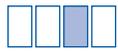
communication with parents about the purpose and importance of the summer reading books before the summer break. Our data corroborates Allington et al.'s (2010) research, which shows that providing books to low-income students, whom "summer reading setback" (p. 412) most impacts, significantly reduces summer learning loss.

Parents appreciate the summer reading program because it solves the problem of students not having a variety of reading materials, and children are motivated to read their new books each week. Since the children are able to read the books independently, it is low stress for parents. It also reinforces the importance of reading over the summer to parents, students, teachers, and administrators.

## Conclusion

We have shared several practices Reading Recovery/DLL teachers use to engage families as partners. As you consider what you will do to further engage parents at your school, ask yourself these questions:

- Do your parent partnerships build on the families' strengths? Or are you wishing the parents had different strengths than they actually have?
- Are you considering the parents' perspective? Are you empowering and respecting parents? Or are you expecting parents to comply with school requests without explaining why or how?
- How are you getting feedback from parents? Or is the communication one-way only (from school to home)?



While the practices we shared can be used with all children, we urge teachers to be culturally sensitive when working with parents of English learners, whose background and perspective may be different from their own. If you have questions about working with English learners, RRCNA publishes a valuable resource, *Achieving Success with English Language Learners: Insights, Assessment, Instruction* (2009), edited by Cynthia Rogríguez-Eagle. RRCNA is also supporting teachers' work with parents by expanding the Resources for Families section of their website. (<http://readingrecovery.org/reading-recovery/resources-for-parents>)

As Reading Recovery and DLL teachers, we have the enormous gift of significantly impacting students' lives on a daily basis. Sometimes we also positively impact the entire family, which more deeply impacts the students. A mother in Denver who observed her daughter's DLL lessons frequently told the teacher leader, "Yo aprendí a leer con usted y con Brenda" ("I learned to read with you and with Brenda"). Everyone is more successful when we work more closely with the home.

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*A Descubriendo la Lectura student works at home with her grandmother and younger sister.*

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