CHAPTER 2

Home Is Not Where You Live, But Where They Understand You

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Educators agree that family literacy programs are at their best when they create a caring community of language and literacy that envelops everyone involved (e.g., Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Comer, 1995). And yet in too many cases, the school stands curiously distanced from the process. On the one hand, literacy educators devote great time and thought to crafting programs that are effective (as measured by achievement scores and contact hours), and sustainable (through outside funds, grant monies, and existing resources). The efforts of these teachers and parent educators are focused on research-based practices that foster phonological and comprehension skills that will serve children well in their school-based literacy lives. In addition, many family literacy programs also seek to positively influence the literacy levels of the adults who bring their children to school each day, especially through English-language classes. On the other hand, it is the school that is the arbiter of literacy services, while families are traditionally the consumers. The school itself remains unchanged, and the family literacy program is viewed as a means for perpetuating school-based practices.

To borrow a reading comprehension concept, there is a difference between a transmission model, where knowledge emanates from an authority (the author), and a transactional model, where meaning is a co-construction between the reader and the text (Rosenblatt, 1995). Reading educators understand that what the reader brings to the text enriches and extends it beyond the author's words. It is this fundamental quality that fosters discussion among readers. Likewise, a family literacy program that situates itself as the authority limits the discussion—it becomes a one-sided lecture with none of the exchange of ideas that leads to new understandings. Yet when the school itself remains

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open to the possibility of being changed through an interface with families, innovation can blossom.

German poet Christian Morgenstern is credited with writing almost a century ago, "Home is not where you live, but where you are understood" (1918, n.p.). In a place like school, where symbols of preferred knowledge such as academic reading and writing abound (see Chapter 7 in this volume), some families may be unintentionally alienated because they do not see a clear link to home life. School then remains misunderstood because these families avoid entering it, sometimes feeling as though they are intruding into a space where they have nothing to offer (Lapp, Fisher, Flood, & Moore, 2002). This is the transmission model come to fearful life—another generation learns that school is a place to be avoided as an adult, and another generation of students pass through classrooms as learners who are detached from their families, and who are therefore not fully understood by their teachers. The family assumes the role of a rare creature, spoken of by the child but only glimpsed briefly by the teacher. As educators, we are left to peer through the doorway and wonder what we might do differently to involve families in the literacy lives of their children. We return to the drawing board, tweak the activities, offer a new incentive, and hope that attendance will increase.

A transactional approach to family literacy programming could help these efforts more fully realize their promise. By examining the characteristics of strong families, schools could foster those same elements in their organizational structure. In other words, redefining school as a place where families are understood can correct a fundamental flaw in traditional family literacy programs: Our job is not to make homes more school-like, but to make school more home-like.

Making School More Like Home

What might be the effects on a school that became more home-like? Researchers in this book discuss the merits of a home-like school, albeit indirectly. When Paratore, Krol-Sinclair, David, and Schick (Chapter 12 in this volume) investigated the trajectory of the lives of participants in a family literacy program called the Intergenerational Literacy Program (ILP), they discovered that shared time with other family members was an important element; "the ILP is my other home," said one participant (p. 284). As well, in their review of the literature

on family literacy, Hoover-Dempsey and Whitaker (Chapter 3 in this volume) describe how a sense of efficacy is vital in order for a parent to help a child learn. They caution that this is not cultivated through a prescribed list of activities but rather "is shaped by personal experiences of involvement success, observation of similar others', verbal persuasion by trusted others, and personal emotional and cognitive investment in their children's school success" (pp. 56–57). The BELLE Project (described in Chapter 4 in this volume) seeks to tap into this social network by positioning itself within well-child visits at the pediatrician's office. Each of these researchers indirectly highlights a factor that, collectively, could represent a next step in improving schools for families.

However, if school is to become more home-like, then we as educators must understand what home means. Too often we superimpose our own family experiences onto the members of a community and use those experiences as a yardstick for determining whether they measure up. The problem is that an examination of one's own personal history is inexorably bound in the context of the time and the culture of the community in which we lived. These differences are further compounded when the family histories of teachers and their students are widely disparate. Consider the national demographic statistics for school-aged children in the United States (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2008):

- 32% are members of a single-parent household
- 18% live below the federal poverty level
- 22% are members of an immigrant family (at least one parent is foreign-born)
- 6% do not live with either parent
- 41% do not have Internet access at home
- 31% do not have a computer at home

Compare these to the national demographic portrait of teachers, collected during the 2000–2001 census ("Teacher Demographics," 2004):

- 90% are white
- 79% are female
- Median age is 46
- 56% have a master's degree

In addition, society itself has changed in many ways from the family structures of the 1960s, when many of those teachers were children themselves. Mobility rates have increased, leaving more people living at great distances from their extended families. More women have entered the workplace, resulting in a higher need for after-school care and supervision. One national survey reported that up to 60% of families with children in the home reported feeling stressed by the tension between work lives and time spent with family (Jacobs & Gerson, 2005).

It comes as little surprise that those who design family literacy programs are likely to begin with assumptions about what constitutes a family. Even those who are knowledgeable about the needs of the community are still vulnerable to assumptions about what constitutes a "good" and "supportive" parent. These measures typically include attendance at parent–teacher conferences, school performances, open houses, and PTA/PTO meetings. The common thread here is that first and foremost what is valued is family attendance at school functions. In fact, throughout this book, family attendance is reported as a chief measure of success. However, the ability to attend school functions is mitigated by practical considerations like the ability to take time away from work and to obtain transportation. If parents do not attend, they are viewed as being unsupportive and uninvolved. In their study of teacher perceptions of new immigrants, Suárez-Orozco, Suárez-Orozco, and Todorova (2008) put it succinctly: "Coming to school [is] a critical symbol of parent involvement" (p. 76). This attitude comes at a high cost. Weiss, Kreider, Lopez, and Chatman (2005) caution, "All too often, school personnel treat poor parents from a deficit perspective, which becomes a barrier to family involvement" (p. xvii).

On the other hand, a strengths-based approach can reveal new insights into the ways in which a school–home connection can be fostered. It is the family structure itself that should inform this direction.

Understanding the Characteristics of Family

To borrow a phrase, seek first to understand before being understood (Covey, 2004). The literature on family dynamics is vast but relatively unknown to educators. This is ironic, given that schools represent the second organizational structure a child will know. Family systems theory applies a biological model to understand symbiotic and supportive relationships that occur within a family structure. Importantly, it also recognizes that there are subsystems within the

overall structure, such as the relationship between parents and relationships among siblings (for a thorough review, see Beels, 2002). Application of family systems theory is perhaps best seen in the health-care field, where treatment protocols invariably include plans for addressing the needs of the family. Both the American Psychiatric Association and the American Medical Association require that the family of the patient is considered in the treatment plan and recognize that the family may benefit from specialized care themselves. Although it may seem obvious, it is important that schools recognize these subsystems and acknowledge that the school's relationships with various members of a family will differ and will require specialized supports that work best given the person's position within the family.

Family systems researchers have sought to define the qualities that mark resilient families whose members are capable of supporting one another. Note that these qualities are not bound by defined roles because a family unit has less to do with blood relationships and more to do with affinity. These qualities include the following (Stinnett & DeFrain, 1985):

- Affection and appreciation
- Commitment
- Positive communication
- Ability to cope with a crisis
- Time together

These qualities could describe a home-like school setting as well. In what follows, I will explore each of these qualities through the lens of family literacy and make recommendations for further expansion of quality family literacy programs to build home-like qualities.

Affection and Appreciation

The direction of a journey is often determined with the first step. Similarly, the adoption of a belief system influences every subsequent aspect of a program's implementation. A strong family literacy program that is designed to augment resilient family structures is oriented toward an overall sense of affection and appreciation for what the community can offer. Moll and Cammarota's discussion of funds of knowledge (see Chapter 13, this volume) describes "methods to help define working-class families as possessing valuable cultural resources

for instruction [and] challenging any perception that they would be lacking in such assets" (p. 289). In particular, the discussion of selective acculturation, which balances the school-based culture with home culture, provides a bridge to the concept of mutual appreciation. Using the lens of selective acculturation, the school is cognizant of the potential rifts that can be created within a family when children grow distant from a home culture that relies on certain language and communication styles. Moll and Cammarota note that parents' ability to provide guidance and discipline for their children is a linchpin to school-based success. A design approach that assesses a community's funds of knowledge can represent an important first step in creating a home-like school.

Commitment

A second quality of resilient families is their commitment to one another over a lifetime. In a similar fashion, a home-like school follows students not only across the grade span of the school but also beyond as students enter feeder schools. The role of a parent liaison can be critical for accomplishing this element. Parent liaisons are employed by a school to foster family involvement and a sense of self-efficacy within families (Sanders, 2008). Hoover-Dempsey and Whitaker (Chapter 3 in this volume) emphasize the importance of parents' self-efficacy in making schooling decisions and assuming an active role in their children's learning. They note that self-efficacy is built through both direct and vicarious mastery experiences. We often conceive of mastery as being experienced by an individual, but the authors note that the observation of other parents being successfully involved in the school serves as an important motivator for families who are not yet ready to become active members of the school community. The parent liaison can provide insights into the ways in which families can witness such events from a safe distance. For example, Sanders (2008) describes a reading event that shifted location from the school to a large apartment building where many of the school's students and former students lived. Families could participate or observe the event in a more comfortable and less intimidating setting. Partnership teams across schools can also coordinate events so that older and younger siblings can participate, which is vital for families with children attending more than one school, who must otherwise make choices to miss one event in order to attend another.

Positive Communication

For many families, the only opportunities they have to communicate with the school come in the form of parent–teacher conferences. These meetings are fraught with anxiety as parents brace themselves for negative feedback about their child. Some parents feel that they lack the language to fully participate or view the formal social and hierarchical structures of school as off-putting.

Lee (2005) interviewed first generation Korean parents whose children attended U.S. schools and who were labeled as "uncooperative" by the school because they did not participate in school functions and rarely responded to communications. She discovered that a number of barriers existed that made communication and participation unlikely. In particular, she discovered that scheduled events often conflicted with work responsibilities and unintentionally preferenced families who had a stay-at-home parent or who worked in a 9 to 5 job. Families that worked more than one job, had complicated child-care schedules, or worked in the late afternoon and early evening could not attend (Lee, 2005). She also found that oral communication left many families feeling uncomfortable as they were likely to misunderstand the American social norms of interruption, turn taking, and disagreement. Indeed, the expectation by school personnel that parents are expected to ask questions and challenge ideas often differs from societal expectations in other countries (Suárez-Orozco, Suárez-Orozco, & Todorova, 2008). One Korean parent reported that it was "barbarian" to disagree with the teacher (Lee, 2005, p. 305). The same study also reported that the brief and decontextualized nature of written school communications (e.g., field trip notices, bus schedule changes, and school event announcements) made it difficult for families to determine what was important, especially when only some items were translated. One parent told the researcher that "she only read what was translated into Korean, leaving out information relevant to the whole school. She assumed that information directly affecting her children would be translated into Korean, when this was not the case" (Lee, 2005, p. 305).

Sociologist Annette Lareau (2003) conducted an ethnographic study of poor, working-class, and middle-class parents across several racial and ethnic groups. Her findings are a caution to educators to remember that differences in culturally bound communication styles should not be confused with personality traits:

> The same parents we observed silently accepting different teachers' (sometimes contradictory) assessments of their children were firmly vocal with their cable companies,

> landlords, and local merchants. Working-class and poor parents are capable of being demanding with other adults. Rather, they do not define this approach as appropriate when dealing with school or medical professionals, perhaps in part because they lack the requisite vocabulary to effectively challenge such individuals. (p. 199)

Schools can develop a culturally responsive approach to communication (Gay, Chapter 7 in this volume) by using tools as a form of differentiation. Within a given class, some parents may prefer to receive communication logs—an ongoing journal of written notes that travels in the child's backpack. Others may wish to receive information in the form of a phone call. Still others want to communicate directly in informal arrangements, such as during a conversation that takes place at the classroom door after school. Just as it is unlikely that every child in the class will learn in exactly the same way, it is also true that families will have preferred communication modes. As families become more comfortable with relaxed communication styles, they will become more at ease with asking questions, making requests, and offering new ideas.

Ability to Cope With a Crisis

When faced with a problem, some families will draw together to pool resources and support one another, growing stronger in the process. Others fracture because the crisis overwhelms the family system. The ability to weather problems is referred to as resilience, and it has many parallels to the home-like school. While the term *crisis* connotes a large scale problem, in fact we can reinterpret its meaning as a challenge in the context of a school. Students in our schools face crossroads related to their academic and personal lives, and a home-like school sees itself as part of the extended family system. This may require that the school look for imaginative locations for delivering supports and services outside of the school walls, such as within the doctor's office in the Reach Out and Read program (Morrow, Mendelsohn, & Kuhn, Chapter 4 in this volume).

One of the most innovative programs in the United States today is the Harlem Children's Zone (HCZ), the brainchild of Geoffrey Canada. The HCZ is really a network of school and family supports and includes Foster Care Prevention Services that seek to strengthen families who are in crisis. One location is the Midtown Family Place, which combines a literacy program with a food pantry and after-school care (Tough, 2008). Several essential assumptions underlie this approach. First is the assumption that educational systems should play an important role in meeting the emotional, psychological, and learning needs of

families. Second, HCZ acknowledges that it is difficult for families in crisis to be fully involved in their children's school lives, and therefore it is important to meet with parents where they are, both literally and figuratively. Importantly, the Midtown Family Place and the Beacon Centers (located in school buildings) are open until 9:00 p.m., six days a week.

Time Together

Time together is arguably the most valued element of all for resilient families. As noted earlier in this chapter, a majority of families feel that they do not have enough time to spend together as a family (Jacobs & Gerson, 2005). It is understandable that busy families who already feel that they are not together enough are going to be unwilling to sacrifice more time for school-related activities. However, if events are structured so that families see these events as time to spend together, they might be more likely to attend. Family literacy programs that are designed to maximize quality time spent together can provide families with valued services. Paratore, Krol-Sinclair, David, and Schick (see Chapter 12, this volume) report that intergenerational literacy programs like the one implemented in Boston play an important role in the lives of the families involved. When a participant reports that the family literacy program is "my other home," it indicates that the physical and psychological spaces created by the program have achieved an important goal.

But Are We Asking the Right Questions?

I have discussed the hallmarks of a strong and resilient family system and likened them to elements of effective family literacy programs. But I am left with a gnawing feeling that our efforts to justify the continuation of these elements are causing us to ask the wrong questions, or at least to overlook questions we should be asking. In nearly every chapter of this book, the studies cited report on the academic achievement results of family literacy programs, especially as measured by standardized test scores, attendance rates, and continued schooling experiences. More rarely, studies in the literacy field have looked at family results as they relate to educational attainment and career advancement. These measures are important, of course, and serve as indicators of change. But if Lareau (2003) is correct, then a major barrier to parent involvement in the school lives of their children has to do with understanding the vocabulary of

education. This vocabulary extends beyond the technical use of language to the communication tools used to make oneself understood. The vocabulary of parent involvement and family literacy includes the ability to question, to disagree, to ask for help, to request clarification, and to make suggestions. Is it possible that this is the true literacy of families that we should be aiming for?

Future research in the field of family literacy could extend the ideas of authors in this book by using qualitative and quantitative methodologies to answer the following questions:

- What are the characteristics of family literacy programs that result in increased discourse between parents and school personnel?
- In what ways can schools create pathways for parents to assume leadership positions?
- How are schools changed due to parent empowerment?

I began this chapter with the quote, "Home is not where you live, but where you are understood" (Morganstern, 1918, n.p.). Family literacy projects have resulted in important changes in the lives of students and families, but schools remain relatively untouched by the process. In order for a program to be truly transactional, all stakeholders must be willing to risk change. Maintaining the status quo is inadequate; we have too many failing students to continue as before. In addition, we are serving communities that are enriched because of their diversity of language and culture. To reach real understanding, we must be willing to teach families the language of resistance and action along with the grammar and syntax of literacy.

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