PARTNERING WITH PARENTS IN THE WRITING CLASSROOM

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One thing teachers don’t have is enough time. This article suggests strategies that teachers can use to partner with parents and multiply time in the writing classroom.

I recently sat down and interviewed a second-grade teacher about the Writing Workshop in her classroom. I was conducting a case study focusing on the perceptions of an excellent teacher of writing. Through this interview process, I hoped to uncover a groundbreaking innovation for the traditional Writing Workshop, but I received an unexpected response. When I repeatedly asked what could be done to improve the Writing Workshop, the teacher responded, “I wish I had more time. I wish we had more time.” This theme emerged throughout the rest of the teacher’s interviews and left me with the question: How do teachers acquire more time to teach writing?

With new standards, legislation, and assessments siphoning instructional time to math and reading, many teachers are left wondering how to dedicate time to other subjects such as writing. Soiferman, Boyd, and Straw (2010) described writing instruction as a “prisoner of time” (p. 3). Writing is a complex act that requires students’ concentrated time and effort to master—time and effort that teachers strain to find in a crowded curriculum.

This presents a problem because, instinctively, teachers know students need writing skills to be successful in the 21st century, and the research substantiates this impression (National Writing Project & Nagin, 2006; Yancey, 2009). Some call this the Age of Composition, with texting, e-mail, blogs, and Twitter lending a textual dimension to human relationships beyond what has been seen in the past (Yancey, 2009; Zinsser, 2001). Students need writing skills to participate in the workplace, in academia, in the economy, and in democracy.

Writing's importance in this context cannot be over-emphasized: “Writing today is not a frill for the few, but an essential skill for the many” (National Commission on Writing in America’s Schools and Colleges, 2003, p. 11). If writing really is an “essential skill,” teachers and administrators must seek creative solutions to find time to develop students into effective writers.

I would like to propose one overlooked resource to address this lack of instructional time for writing: students’ parents. I submit, along with Nistler and Maiers (2000), that parents are a “powerful, underused source of knowledge” (p. 679). Maybe by enlisting the help of parents and families, teachers can acquire the time and resources needed to effectively teach writing.

Reasons Parents Are Not Partners
Since the 1980s, mainstream education has acknowledged the benefits of engaging parents in education...
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(Douville, 2000; Leithwood, Patten, & Jantzi, 2010; McKenna & Millen, 2013; Padak & Rasinski, 2010). These benefits extend to all: students, parents, and teachers (International Reading Association [IRA], 2002; Kindervater, 2010; McKenna & Millen, 2013; Whitmore & Norton-Meier, 2008). However, based on my experience, some teachers do not consider asking parents to assist with writing education. Why do some teachers fail to include parents in their children’s writing development?

Brashears (2008) attempted to answer this question when she proposed three reasons teachers do not involve parents in writing instruction. First, she said, because the literature and universities fail to communicate the research on the positive effects of parent participation, some teachers are unprepared to partner with parents (IRA, 2002). Second, although rare, is that some parents do not respond to student writing in an encouraging manner. Third, some teachers mistakenly “perceive parents as being indifferent to educational issues” (Brashears, 2008, p. 14). Possibly for these reasons and others, teachers, to their own detriment and the students’, purposefully or inadvertently exclude parents from their children’s writing instruction.

**Reasons to Partner With Parents**

Certainly, involving parents in writing instruction requires time from the teacher: time to plan, train volunteers, write newsletters, or take phone calls. However, parental involvement is “imperative” to student learning (Warren & Young, 2002, p. 217), and the research supports that parental involvement bolsters students’ writing development (IRA, 2002; Kolodziej & Columba, 2005; Morrow, Kuhn, & Schwanenflugel, 2006; Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998). Any time spent coordinating or communicating with parents will be recovered and multiplied in the future as parents become allies in the writing classroom.

For example, most teachers and parents acknowledge that storybook reading promotes early literacy, but few realize the benefits of joint writing. In one study, Aram and Levin (2002) found that joint writing allowed parents and children to focus more on letter knowledge and grapheme-phoneme mapping than with storybook reading. They wrote, “Maternal mediation in joint writing correlated substantially with all independent emergent skills” (p. 215). Other research corroborates this same finding that students benefit from collaborating with their parents in writing (Aram, 2010; Lin, McBride-Chang, Aram, & Levin, 2011; McTavish, 2007).

These benefits can also extend to gifted students and students from low-socioeconomic backgrounds. One study by Garrett and Moltzen (2011) studied 10 gifted writing students and found that interpersonal and environmental factors encouraged or restricted the students’ writing development. Though intrinsic motivation was crucial, parents and teachers played important roles in spurring on students’ writing.

Neither is this impact limited to gifted students. The IRA (2002) explained the need for family involvement among at-risk students: “Children with low income and culturally and racially diverse families experience greater success when schools involve families, enlist them as allies, and build on their strengths” (p. 3). The IRA found family involvement proved to be a stronger predictor of student literacy achievement than parents’ economic situation or prior education. As
all of these studies demonstrate, students at any grade level or educational strata benefit from parental involvement in the writing classroom.

**How to Partner With Parents**

Before creating a laundry list of approaches to involve parents in writing instruction, it is important to stop and consider again the purpose of partnering with parents. Planning one family literacy night is not the answer. The goal is to come alongside parents and capitalize on the knowledge, resources, and opportunities of families to best encourage emergent writers. The IRA (2002) wrote, “There are no formulas for creating effective programs; rather, educators must be prepared to ask questions about the particular situation and build family-school partnerships based on the answers they receive” (p. 4).

Some of the questions teachers can ask include: How can I promote parent involvement in my classroom? How should I change my classroom instruction to match what I know about students’ families and their ability to help at home? How can I challenge and change traditional school forms of parent communication? After pondering questions such as these, teachers must initiate any parent partnership with clear communication (Padak & Rasinski, 2010). Most significantly, teachers need to communicate the importance of writing and of parents’ involvement (Kolodziej & Columba, 2005).

With the goals of partnership and communication in mind, educators may consider means to include parents in the writing classroom. I have used some of these strategies in my own third- and fourth-grade classroom, and some are the results of others’ work that I would like to implement. Strategies for partnering with parents include asking parents to respond to writing, creating family writing projects, encouraging parents to serve as writing role models, inviting parents to volunteer in the Writing Workshop, and supporting parents as they create their own writing experiences at home.

**Ask Parents to Respond to Writing**

As Brashears (2008) stated, some parents, with the best of intentions, respond to students’ writing with feedback only focused on grammar, spelling, or handwriting (probably based on their own school experiences). This deters many teachers from asking parents to serve as audiences for student writing, but most parents really do want to help their children succeed. McKenna and Millen (2013) wrote, “If we listen closely to parents—their wishes and dreams, fears and concerns—we find that there are lessons and suggestions that emanate from a deep sense of caring” (p. 10). To engage these parents, teachers need to highlight the purpose of writing, its

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**A Fourth-Grade Student’s Mixed-Up Fairy Tale**

Once upon a time there was an egg. That egg was made of the gold of the morning clouds and the shine of the sun itself. That goose was hatched from the most beautiful goose in the land.

She was so proud of her goose, she paid attention to the attention that was being given to the egg, but took the attention as it was hers. When the egg hatched, she felt proud of herself. She was born with her golden beak in the air. That goose’s name was Karri. Karri went to school once she was old enough.

She made a lot of friends... well, that’s what she thought.

They only paid attention to her popularity, like her mom, not her real self.

One day she was 16 and playing out side by herself with a shiny gold ball that her mother gave her for her ‘BEST GOOSE’ award.

Then her ball rolled away into the bushes.

She went to get it and found a beautiful paradise land. “Wow,” Karri said, “this place is amazing... like me.”

Karri walked over to the pool to introduce herself to the crowd. Karri made three friends. But again, they only liked her popularity.

There names were Danny, Sara, and Lila.

Lila said, “Hi, Karri! I love your ball! It’s so shiny!”

Danny was not as cute as her but she liked him a little.
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A Fourth-Grade Student’s How-To Story

**Kitten care**

If you have questions about your cat, then you should read this. Because kittens are as delicate as you are. When you go to the store, there are many choices. But I would choose what most people would get a cat. When you come home with your cat, get it’s supplies ready. We had a pillow under a blanket in a slightly deep basket.

We left her alone for a day so she could have lots of time to get comfortable. We had one person over to our house and told her to ignore the cat unless she came to you. If she rubs up against that person, then she likes that person, do it with other pets too. But don’t bring other pets in the house unless she has had experience with that animal.

Make sure you vaccinate your cat so you can take it outside. Different ages of cats need different food. Look at the chart below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age of Cat</th>
<th>Food Needs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Under 6 mo</td>
<td>3-4 meals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6-12 mo</td>
<td>2-3 meals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Above 1 yr</td>
<td>2 meals</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**“By being proactive, teachers can use parents as audiences for student writing.”**

parents’ important role in writing development (Brashears, 2008).

By being proactive, teachers can use parents as audiences for student writing. Teachers can share and model strategies for responding to student writing in developmentally appropriate ways (Douville, 2000). For example, Burrows (1994) studied parents’ noted three helpful verbal responses from parents. First, no matter what the child produces, the parent can acknowledge “that the child is a sharer of meaning through writing” (p. 329). It is important to label the child’s work as writing rather than scribbling. Second, the parent can assist the student with his or her specific requests for help, such as with spelling a word or forming a letter. Third, parents might comment in a way that scaffolds a child’s development to extend the child’s understanding of writing.

Though this study by Burrows (1994) focused on preschool students, these same principles can apply to a parent responding to any student’s writing. The article encourages parents to focus on the message of the writing and positively reinforce that attempt to communicate through writing. Parents also can allow the child to take ownership of the writing and offer help only where the student indicates. Finally, parents can offer one or two opportunities to extend the child’s writing development. Rewriting a child’s paper is detrimental, but providing one helpful suggestion is scaffolding. In this regard, teachers should encourage parents to err toward providing too much positive feedback rather than too much constructive criticism. The goal of writing instruction should be to encourage lifelong writers rather than perfect writers.

When presenting these tips to students’ parents, I like to talk about “The Three Steps for Coaching Writing”: (1) Focus on the meaning. (2) Offer help when asked. (3) Extend the learning in one or two ways. To share these steps with the parents of my third- and fourth-grade students, I would explain our classroom’s Writing Workshop during a parent preview.
night and then provide a small checklist with the three steps for responding to students’ writing. I would go on to model how I would respond to a piece of student writing. Parents said they appreciated this communication and direction, and when students brought home their writing, the parents knew my expectations and how to respond appropriately. Teachers could also share these three steps at a school preview meeting, family literacy night, or a parent–teacher conference.

Once parents understand how to constructively respond to student writing, they can serve as authentic audiences for student writing. The literature repeatedly states the importance of authentic audiences for students’ writing development—audiences that reach beyond the classroom (Brown, Morrell, & Rowlands, 2011; Duke, Purcell-Gates, Hall, & Tower, 2006; Kixmiller, 2004). Rather than writing for the teacher alone, students understand writing’s communicative purpose and receive helpful feedback when they share their writing with others.

In my classroom, students shared their writing with parents through a Poetry Coffee House, a classroom newspaper, and a Young Authors’ Day. During our Poetry Coffee House, the students served coffee and hot chocolate to the parents before their show began. Then the students performed poems they wrote and also ones they memorized. One parent said, “I am amazed at how well written some of these poems are. The students were confident and seemed excited about what they were learning.” Students were energized to share their work, and their parents were impressed by and supportive of the students’ progress.

By using parents as authentic audiences for student writing, students receive not only more feedback but also more encouragement as they go through the complex, iterative process of writing. After our school’s Young Authors’ Day, the students viewed themselves as true published authors. A quiet hum fell over the classroom as parents sat in beanbag chairs and around tables reading the students’ stories. All the parents and students brought home the finished books as treasured possessions.

A Fourth-Grade Student’s How-To Story

To keep your cat safe, keep electric items away from the cat. If your cat is ill do as the chart below shows.

- Make sure your cat is relaxed. Then put your index finger between your cat’s teeth as the picture shows.
- Then carefully place the pill as far back on the cat’s tongue as possible.
- When you’re trying to keep your cat from climbing your furniture, put a treat on a table. If it tries to climb it, take it off before it eats it. Then keep doing this for 2 hours (this is average for a cat). This will take a lot of time and commitment. If it still doesn’t listen, it shouldn’t be an indoor cat. When your cat grows older, it won’t be as playful and now you know how to take care of cats. But if you still have unanswered questions ask your vet. Note from author: Have a happy life with your cat. Because a cat is a privilege to have. Thank you.
students (Barillas, 2000; Burkhart, 1995). These writing projects carried out at home not only ensure collaboration with parents but also give parents voice in their children’s education (Barillas, 2000).

In *Breaking the Parental Barrier*, Burkhart (1995) describes her use of family writing projects and the perceived effects. She began her family writing projects by introducing students to the genre of biographies. After reading biographies and practicing writing them at school, students interviewed a family member and wrote a biography about him or her. Overwhelmed by the positive parental feedback about the project, Burkhart asked parents for suggestions to continue family writing projects and assigned one project each month. At the end of the year, she concluded, “When parents participate in specific activities and projects that they have helped plan, they continue to contribute to the success of their children” (Burkhart, 1995, p. 635). She attributed the camaraderie and collaboration she felt with her students’ parents to the family writing projects.

Likewise, Barillas (2000), a sixth-grade teacher who implemented family writing projects, challenged teachers to plan for, expect, and appreciate parent participation. She initiated her family writing projects by asking parents to write advice to their children and children to respond to their parents. With each family writing project, Barillas asked permission to publish the projects in a book to share with the class. Approximately 75% of parents participated, which is significant since many of the students came from low-socioeconomic-status and non-English-speaking homes. Barillas named two benefits of the program: discussion of reading and writing at home and the validation of families’ cultures and identities. This “celebration of literacy” through family writing projects invited parents, even those who did not speak English, into the classroom’s writing community (Barillas, 2000, p. 308).

**Encourage Families to Serve as Writing Role Models**

Most educators agree they would like parents to feel welcomed into the school and become invested in their children’s education. Cline (2001) wrote, “It is important for educators to develop parent involvement activities that are creative, out of the ordinary, meet the needs of many groups, and ‘open the schoolhouse door’” (p. 237).

One way to “open the schoolhouse door” is to host family writing nights. Family writing nights involve inviting parents into the school to write for a specific purpose. Akroyd (1995) documents her experience as a principal hosting family writing nights. She invited parents...
of her students to come in the evening once a week to write something special for their children. Much to Akroyd's surprise, many parents attended the writing nights and wrote with great fervor. Each meeting, the participants would write for about 20 minutes, discuss in small groups, and then share with the large group. These sessions continued for "ten glorious weeks," as Akroyd said (p. 584).

In the end, Akroyd (1995) found it difficult to put into words the priceless value of these family writing nights; parents, students, and teachers profited from the rich time of connection. One mother from Pakistan wrote the first text of her life and said her husband now saw that she could accomplish much more than he believed. The parents shared stories about their lives with their children, and the children responded to their parents' writing in letters. One son responded, "I love you so much and I love the way you are writing about me" (Akroyd, 1995, p. 584). Another said, "I have been wondering about what you write in your book. I hope that you keep up the good work and I hope that you write at least three pages every time you go" (p. 584). The students watched their parents devote time to writing and treasured the writing dedicated to them.

The idea of family writing nights might seem to lie outside the jurisdiction of a writing teacher. However, the message of these nights is clear: Writing is important. If parents are writing, their children will see its value and receive additional encouragement from home. Though Akroyd's (1995) family writing nights focused on parents writing for their children, the children would surely have benefited from special writing instruction during this time as well.

If I were to host family writing nights this coming year, I would invite parents and students to attend. In a school with various home languages, all communication about the event would need to be translated, and a translator might need to be present at the event. I would bring all the parents and teachers together and share about the importance and value of writing as a family. Then the students and parents would work in separate Writing Workshops to create special pieces of writing for one another.

During the parents' Writing Workshop, the parents would write for about 20 minutes and then share their writing in small groups and with the large group. The students would follow a similar format for their Writing Workshop and create a gift of writing for their parents. After about four weeks, we would celebrate by allowing the parents and students to share their writing with one another. Ultimately, the goal of these family writing nights would be for the parents to serve as writing role models for their children, so the students would be inspired to continue on their own writing journeys.

Invite Parents to Volunteer in the Writing Workshop

Anyone who has worked in a Writing Workshop knows its greatest strength, differentiation, can be its greatest weakness (Atwell, 1998; Calkins, 1994; Graves, 2003; Ray & Laminack, 2001). Teachers can be bombarded by the demands of students working on different assignments at different stages of the writing process. Katie Wood Ray, writing with Lester Laminack (2001), for instance, named her book The Writing Workshop: Working Through the Hard Parts (And They’re All Hard Parts).

For me, the writing block was my favorite time of the day, but it was also when I felt the most harried by all the activity in the classroom. Having just one or two extra adults in the room, such as parents, can ease the pressure placed on the teacher and assure more timely feedback for students.

As with other methods for parent involvement, teachers who take a proactive approach and share expectations with parents for the Writing Workshop are most likely to benefit from parents' assistance. From my experience with the Writing Workshop framework, teachers most appreciate help with student conferencing because it is so individualized and can be time-consuming. Teachers can intentionally prepare parents for roles during this time of student conferencing.

One teacher, for instance, created a list of expectations for conferencing that she "Anyone who has worked in a Writing Workshop knows its greatest strength, differentiation, can be its greatest weakness."
shared with parents (Baker, 1994). The expectations included listening carefully and telling the story back to the author; trying to begin with specific, positive remarks; asking questions to help the author expand his or her story; and helping the author to form a plan for how to continue writing. By sharing expectations such as these at a parent training or in a letter sent home, parents will feel more comfortable in their roles and prove to be vital assets of the Writing Workshop.

Furthermore, inviting parents to volunteer in the Writing Workshop gives parents the benefit of observing the students engaged in the writing process. Baker (1994), for example, described her perceptions after volunteering in her son’s first-grade Writing Workshop. Despite being overwhelmed after her first visit to the Workshop, Baker admitted that the composing process of such young writers intrigued her. In the end, she recognized the close connection between reading and writing. She went on to write,

> The approach to writing that was used in this classroom does not turn all children into prolific writers; some children write much more than others. The approach does allow each child to write successfully, however, no matter what difficulties he or she encounters. (p. 377)

Asking this parent into the writing classroom not only provided assistance to the teacher but also insight for the parent, which led to further support and understanding of the Writing Workshop.

**Prompt Parents to Create Their Own Writing Experiences**

Beyond the classroom and homework assignments, the ultimate writing development occurs through organic opportunities for students to write. Parents and students can find natural reasons to write together at home to record experiences, write letters, or give gifts of writing.

At some point in their education, many students even differentiate the writing they do for school and the writing they want to do at home. Teachers should encourage parents to capitalize on this intrinsic motivation and collaborate on writing projects driven by the students’ interests. For example, my preschool-age daughter is captivated by Disney princesses, so she writes or dictates many princess stories that spring from her imagination. While not tied to a specific academic subject, this writing at home is fueled by her intrinsic motivation. Even though she is only 5, she has a stack of stories she has written and views herself as an author and illustrator.

In Garrett and Moltzen’s (2011) study of gifted students, the subjects defined their identity as writers apart from the school context and considered real writing to involve flexibility of choice and time. These students often kept diaries or journals and wrote stories distinct from their school assignments. Parents and teachers should encourage these types of writing behaviors by providing the tools students need to write, such as journals, blank books, or colorful pens. Students may also need the time and space to write: a writing desk in the bedroom or a window seat away from the distractions of television or siblings.

Additionally, teachers can share concrete models with parents to encourage writing experiences at home. For younger students, parents might use the Language
“Parents who write to or with their children will develop family intimacy and pass down memories and legacies through the generations.”

Experience Approach (LEA), which encourages students to dictate sentences about shared experiences. These texts then become building blocks for future conversations about comprehension and reading skills. Students can practice reading these texts created at home. About this method, Douville (2000) wrote, “The LEA fosters the idea that what is thought can be spoken, what is spoken can be written, and what is written can be read” (p. 179). I adopted the LEA model when I took my daughter to a butterfly exhibit at the zoo. When we returned home, she dictated sentences about what she observed and enjoyed at the butterfly exhibit. After my daughter made pictures for our story, we proudly placed it on a bookshelf and shared it with our family. As my daughter is learning to read, she occasionally looks through these homemade books, and we reminisce about those shared experiences.

For older students, parents might use Scaffolded Writing, an approach that is similar to the LEA but gives more ownership to the child in creating the text (Douville, 2000). Parents draw lines for the dictated words and model writing the words or ask the student to fill in some of the letters or words. Both the LEA and Scaffolded Writing encourage application of reading and writing and result in shared texts that can be placed proudly in a family library or presented to other family members.

Heart of the Family
Parent involvement with writing education is not only helpful to the writing teacher and student; it is also of great value to the family unit. In Stillman’s (1998) book Families Writing, he wrote,

Writing should lie at the heart of family—that if we don’t value ourselves on paper, if we don’t write to, for, about, and with family members, it must be because we haven’t bothered to think deeply about what holds families together. Certainly it should have to do with our cherishing the imperishable voices from our family’s past and adding our own voices to theirs. (p. ii)

Parents who write to or with their children will develop family intimacy and pass down memories and legacies through the generations. Stories about family members who immigrated to America, worked through the Great Depression, or fought in a war will be lost without intentional recorders of family history. I witnessed firsthand the power of this when I wrote a short article about my grandparents, who emigrated from Sweden. My grandmother withdrew all their savings to pay for their first home the day before the banks closed during the Great Depression. This story of provision might be lost to the future generations of my family if not written down.

Stillman (1998) wrote an entire book about ways to write to benefit the family. He encouraged, “Write to and with your loved ones to establish the importance of your family now, and you are unavoidably writing to and with members of your family hence” (p. 3). Other reasons to write as a family include writing to learn, writing across space and time, writing to remember, and writing to find out. Stillman also reminded writers to record not only the important life

TAKE ACTION!

1. Partner with parents to give helpful and encouraging feedback to students about their writing. Parents can serve as authentic audiences that can motivate students to communicate powerfully through writing. Teachers just need to communicate and model expectations for how parents should give constructive feedback.

2. Ask students to complete family writing activities at home. Families can work together to create pieces of writing they will treasure for years to come. Again, the key is communication, partnership, and understanding as families write together.

3. Create opportunities for family members to write and serve as role models for students. Some schools have successfully created writing groups offered in the evenings for parents to write for their children. With a similar format to the Writing Workshop, parents form a community of writers who write, reflect, and share. Students could be included in such a writing group, and the parents and students could come together at the end to share and celebrate their writing.

4. Invite parents to volunteer in the Writing Workshop. Most teachers would agree that an extra pair of hands in the Writing Workshop would be helpful. However, parents need to know the teacher’s expectations and their roles before joining the Writing Workshop. By communicating these expectations beforehand, the parent can be a vital asset of the Workshop.

5. Encourage parents to continue creating their own writing experiences at home. Students who write for purposes outside of the classroom will be more likely to form firm identities as writers. If they would like, families can use the Language Experience Approach or Scaffolded Writing to create shared texts. Students will also benefit from journal writing or writing self-motivated stories at home.
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events but also all the little things (like how laundry was done at the turn of the century or how Grandma was afraid of snakes). Those little details make up the heart of a family and will allow that family to transcend time and continue to influence the family to come. Many families are intimidated by the thought of writing, but Stillman wrote, “It has to do with rediscovering what you knew beyond doubt at age five or six: that you could write as well as anybody and that doing it was mostly a joy” (p. 6). Writing truly can lie at the heart of any family.

Conclusion

Teachers already have an overwhelming amount of responsibility and do not need more added to their plates. The premise for this article, however, is to save time by recruiting parents as partners in the writing classroom. By asking parents to respond to student writing, to write with students at home, or to confer with students in the Writing Workshop, teachers’ time will be multiplied. Many parents would embrace the opportunity to form a partnership that would help teachers, encourage students’ writing development, and bring families together. For all these reasons, invite parents into the writing classroom today.

REFERENCES


