

# Strategies for Increasing the Role of Parents in Reading Recovery

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Parental involvement in education has long been a topic of interest among those concerned with optimal developmental and educational outcomes for preschool and elementary school children (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997). In fact, Lareau (1989) posits that the idea that parents can enhance their children's education has become so popular in the United States that it has been referred to as an "educational standard." Yet, while we recognize the importance of having parents and families involved in the education of their children, we still struggle with how to create rich partnerships between home and school. This is an issue that concerns Reading Recovery teachers.

However, Reading Recovery teachers as well as other educators often ask "what constitutes parent involvement with schools?" According to the U.S. Department of Education (No Child Left Behind Act of 2001), parent involvement includes the participation of parents in ongoing, two-way, meaningful communications that involve student's academic success. Yet, parent involvement is a much broader and deeper construct than this definition suggests. There are a host of ways parents participate to further the education and growth of their children: sharing resources from the home to support children's education, sharing knowledge of



*Even on a rainy Arkansas night, more than 300 people from 82 families at Bale Elementary School attended the Math and Literacy Fair in the Little Rock School District in October this year. The Fair is part of ongoing parent involvement in the district.*

children with teachers, sharing expertise with a class, supporting children with schoolwork, helping out in the classroom, etc. Many of these interactions go far beyond simply communicating about academic learning. This participation can take place in the home, in the classroom, at school, and in the community. One well-known model delineates six categories of parent involvement: communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision making, and collaborating with the community (Epstein, 1995, 2001).

One of the reasons parent involvement can be a powerful force for supporting children's learning has to do with the *funds of knowledge* parents

bring to the experience. Funds of knowledge include important events, meaningful relationships, skills, talents, and experiences parents and children share prior to school entry and outside of the classroom that inform children's understandings of the world (Moll, 1994). When parents share these funds of knowledge with teachers, ties are made between home and school that not only can enrich the classroom environment, but also bridge cultural gaps between home and school (Gonzales, Moll, & Amanti, 2005).

Calabrese-Barton and colleagues (2004) have extended this concept by positioning parents and teachers as partners in the education of children.

Each brings three types of capital to their interactions: human, social, and material. How parents and teachers activate this capital within a particular space—parent-teacher conferences, a chance meeting in the hallway, etc.—determines the richness of the interaction. In situations where parents are full partners with schools, parents are central rather than peripheral figures in the education of their children.

Research highlights the importance of parent involvement. Involving parents in the educational process has been found to positively impact children's academic performance (Chavkin & Williams, 1988; Comer, 1988, 2005; Comer & Haynes, 1991; Fan & Chen, 2001; Goodlad, 1984; Henderson, 1988; Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997; Lareau, 1987, 2000) and has been associated with qualities conducive to success in school, including improved self-esteem, behavior, and motivation. Additional benefits include higher educational aspirations and a strong work orientation (Eccles & Harold, 1993; Haynes et al., 1989; Henderson, 1988; Zelman & Waterman, 1998). Parent involvement has also been tied to increased student attendance (Berger, 1991; Greenwood & Hickman, 1991; Henderson, 1988) and has been shown to have a positive effect on children's attitudes toward schooling (Henderson, Marburger, & Ooms, 1986) and parent satisfaction with teachers (Chen, 2001). In a study of 179 children, parents, and teachers in a nationally representative sample, Stevenson and Baker (1987) found that children of parents who are more involved in school activities do better than those whose parents are less involved. It is important to note, however, that

a review of research by Mattingly et al. (2002) suggests that, due to the methodological weakness of some studies on this topic, the benefits of parent involvement may be overstated. While these weaknesses need to be addressed, the majority of evidence suggests that parent-teacher collaboration benefits children in a number of important ways.

Children from low-income families constitute one group for whom these collaborations can be particularly sig-

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nificant. This group of over 73 million children and their parents often differ from mainstream school culture which are populated largely by White women (NCES, 2003) from middle-income backgrounds (Zumwalt & Craig, 2005). Also, when it comes to race and/or culture, 16.5 million of these children are either Black, Hispanic, or Asian, while 7 million come from immigrant families (National Center for Children in Poverty, 2007). Fully 25% live with parents who have less than a high school education, while 52%

live in single parent families (NCCP, 2007). These differences are additive, creating wide gulfs between home and school. Additionally, parents in lower socioeconomic brackets tend to be less actively involved in the schools than parents in middle- or upper-income brackets (Anyon, 1981; Lareau, 1987, 2000).

Additionally, parent-school relationships are important because of the strong teaching role parents play in their children's lives. Research suggests, for example, that there are multiple ways that rich learning environments are created in the home, and that this environment forms the basis for early literacy development. Heath (1983) and others have highlighted parents' roles as their child's first and most-intimate teachers in literacy learning. In a study of 295 early elementary students, the home literacy environment was found to have a greater predictive value than either maternal education or race on general knowledge performance (Griffin & Morrison, 1997). A number of researchers have demonstrated that children acquire their basic cognitive and linguistic skills within the context of the family (Li, 2006; Potter, 1989; Purcell-Gates, 1996; Taylor & Dorsey-Gaines, 1988; Teale & Sulzby, 1986). A critical question to ask is "How do teachers learn to construct ties connecting home and school literacy environments for children from all families?"

Research has demonstrated that teachers who view parents as partners—inviting them to share information about children's early experiences, their home culture, and areas of expertise—stand to gain helpful information and support that can be used to build bridges between home and school knowledge

(Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2003). A meta-analysis of 41 quantitative studies on children from low-income families who attended urban schools found a significant relationship between parent involvement and student achievement (Jeynes, 2005). This suggests that increasing parent involvement may be one means of targeting the achievement gap between students from low-income families and their more-affluent peers. With predicted increases in low-income, minority populations over the next several decades (USINFO, 2006), creating strong ties between these parents and schools at the earliest levels may be one way to help more young children make successful transitions into schools, offering them greater opportunities for success. Teachers who strive to create partnerships with parents are better prepared to support and scaffold all children's learning.

While the research shows us a great variety of ways in which parents might participate in children's education as well as potential benefits of this participation, the individual interactions between parents and teachers may be minimized in this scheme. It is these smaller, more-personal interactions that often shape the ways and extent to which parents wish to participate in their children's education. In facilitating parent involvement, such parent-teacher interactions are key. Teachers who view parents as partners in supporting children's academic success and invite their participation and input are much more likely to have higher parent involvement than those who do not send that message (Edwards et al., 1999; Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2003). For this reason, teachers need to learn how to foster these relationships and partnerships.

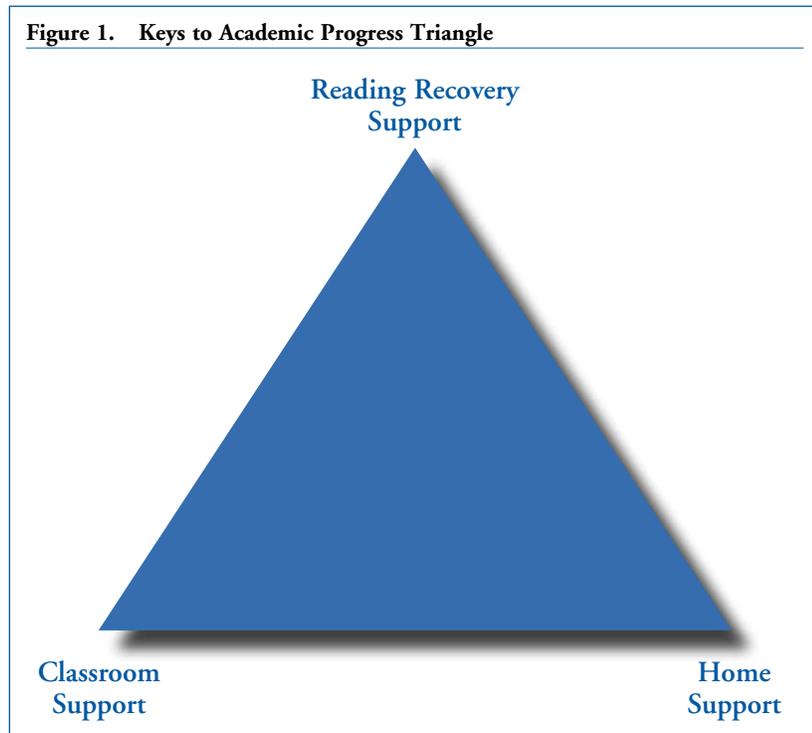
In this article, these parent-teacher relationships will be defined as those fostered by teachers for the purpose of benefiting children's academic success, built upon knowledge of family background, concepts of caring, and the framework of partnerships (Epstein, 1995, 2001). Among a number of factors impacting the facilitation of these types of relationships are teacher understandings about the roles played by parents, including teacher assumptions about what parents are capable of doing, what they are willing to do, and what they feel responsible for doing (Edwards, 2009). Another set of factors concerns teachers' goals for these relationships and what they know about how to facilitate them, as well as the degree to which they desire to interact with parents. In the next section, Leah, a Reading Recovery teacher, discusses the necessary essentials for student success.

### Necessary Essentials for Student Success

Daily Reading Recovery support, quality classroom instruction, and parental support are the three components that are essential for a student to be successful during the period of time in which they receive Reading Recovery instruction. These pieces need to work together simultaneously in order for students to achieve acceleration (see Figure 1). As a Reading Recovery teacher, I observed that if one of these pieces is missing, it is very difficult for a student to make and maintain academic gains.

It is extremely important to examine your instructional decisions and mold them to fit the precise needs of the student. These decisions are made ahead of time in the planning of a lesson as well as on-the-spot during the lesson. Learning how and

**Figure 1. Keys to Academic Progress Triangle**





when to make and implement these decisions is a very complex process that takes continual professional development, collegial support, and extensive examination of the student as an individual learner. As Marie Clay describes, “Acceleration depends upon how well the teacher selects the clearest, easiest, most memorable examples with which to establish a new response, skill, principle or procedure” (Clay, 2005, p. 30).

This process takes time to master and is critical in the development of the student. Each student has a unique learning process, and it is the teacher’s responsibility to make the instructional choices necessary to build the student’s self-extending system. Clay additionally notes that, “Acceleration is achieved as the child takes over the learning process and works independently, discovering new things for himself inside and outside the lessons” (p. 29). This acceleration must be achieved at a faster rate than the pace of learning in the classroom in order for these students to achieve average academic abilities in their grade.

It is equally important for the student to receive regular classroom instruction in addition to Reading Recovery support (Clay, 2005). Receiving both, simultaneously, contributes to a child’s acceleration to the average band of students within their classroom. As Clay describes, “One (the Reading Recovery teacher) simply takes the pupil from wherever he is, however limited his achievements are, and lifts his performance to somewhere appropriate for progressing well with his particular teacher, in his particular class, in his school” (Clay, p. 31). To achieve this, it is important to work with the classroom teacher. It is necessary

to discuss the struggles and accomplishments of the student receiving Reading Recovery and the academic expectations of the classroom as a whole. This contributes to understanding the student as an individual and the daily challenges students face academically in the classroom.

While it is easier to control the components that occur at school, it is much more challenging to gauge

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what is occurring at home. As part of Reading Recovery, parents are expected to complete homework each evening with their child. This homework includes a take-home book that should be read independently by the student (with parental support when necessary) and a cut-up sentence activity that should be supported by the parent. For students who do not have consistent support at home, Reading Recovery and classroom teachers will work together to find a support for the child during the school day that will allow time to complete homework. This ensures

that each child, regardless of the situation at home, has the opportunity to practice and solidify the concepts that are taught at school.

After a student completes a full series of Reading Recovery lessons, how can we, as educators, ensure a student’s continued success? It is important to continue monitoring the student and supporting the classroom teacher, but the biggest challenge is empowering parents to support their students academically. How can we ensure parents will continue to support their students at home? What kinds of supports can we, as Reading Recovery teachers, provide for parents during the time we work with their students to ensure the student’s continued acceleration?

### Possible Solutions

In response to the two questions raised by Leah, we offer a number of strategies. However, before sharing our strategies, we would like to highlight a point that was suggested by Edwards (1989) more than 20 years ago. In particular, she argued for the need “...[to] go beyond *telling* lower SES parents how to help their children with reading. We must *show* them how to participate in parent-child book reading and support their attempts to do so; we must help them become confident readers simultaneously” (p. 248). We agree that this is something Reading Recovery trainers and teachers should consider. We offer these strategies as a framework for increasing the involvement of Reading Recovery parents, especially those parents who struggle to participate in their children’s reading development.

First, we suggest that Reading Recovery teachers develop what

Steve Shelton (2002) calls “social networks” for parents. Wasserman and Faust (1994) defined social networks as the set of social relationships and linkages one person has with other individuals. This context may be an important factor related to the role parents take in their children’s education. According to Bronfenbrenner (1979), social networks act as channels of communication that help people identify the human and material resources they need, as well as share and carry information or attitudes from one setting to another. Others have argued that social networks provide parents emotional and instrumental support and affect parents’ attitudes and behaviors (Cochran, 1990; Cochran & Brassard, 1979).

Parents’ social networks have also been viewed as social capital, a resource that enhances children’s education. Coleman (1990) argued that social capital is important in children’s educational development and that it is a resource that exists within the social relationships par-

ents maintain with other adults. For Coleman and others, social networks help produce social capital to the extent that social relationships encourage the exchange of information, shape beliefs, and enforce norms of behavior (Coleman; Morgan & Sorensen, 1999; Portes, 1998; Portes & Sensenbrenner, 1993; Stanton-Salazar, 1997).

Studies of the effect of parents’ social interactions with others suggest that social relationships may be an important influence on the frequency and type of parent involvement. In their ethnographic study, Lareau and Shumar (1996) found that parents of elementary school students who maintained ties to teachers and other parents regularly gained access to and exchanged information about the school and schooling. Similarly, through interviews with middle-school parents, Useem (1992) found that mothers who were more integrated into a web of informal parent networks knew more about school tracking policies than isolated moth-

ers. Both studies suggest that parents who maintain ties with other parents use them as a source of information and advice, and that network ties can affect parent involvement. We believe that developing social networks of Reading Recovery parents would enhance how these parents work with their children.

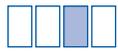
Second, we suggest that at the beginning of the year, Reading Recovery teachers ask parents to complete parent surveys in which they indicate how capable they feel they are in assisting their children with reading and writing. After all, research has indicated that not all parents feel capable of assisting their children (see Edwards, 1995; Lapp & Flood, 2004) and for some parents who cannot read themselves, the idea of reading with their children evokes feelings of inadequacy and frustration (Edwards, 1995). Teachers can use the information collected from these parent surveys to design parent workshops and provide parents with additional support so they can feel successful in helping their children.

In addition to developing social networks and surveying the parents to understand their abilities, we offer a number of other strategies (for more suggestions see Edwards, 2009):

- Have parents sign specific parent contracts which outline exactly how they should help their children with their Reading Recovery homework. After all, some parents are not aware of how they should be helping their children at home. Having a contract that explicitly states what the parents and children need to do at home will eliminate any confusion.



*Discussions between the Reading Recovery and classroom teacher contribute to understanding the student as an individual and the daily challenges faced academically in the classroom.*



- Conduct parent workshops to teach parents about the reading strategies that are being taught during Reading Recovery lessons. Teach the parents ways they can respond to their child's reading, so they can reinforce what the children are learning. Even parents who read with their children may not be aware of all the ways that they can support their children's literacy learning. Holding workshops that explicitly teach these supportive responses will make the process more transparent for parents.
- Videotape a student reading books in the Reading Recovery lesson so parents have an opportunity to see how the child is able to successfully read familiar and new books. Not all parents will be able to attend a lesson in the school, so having the videotape at home gives them the opportunity to watch it on their own time schedule. Also, being able to watch the video numerous times will solidify some of the concepts about what the child is learning and how the teacher supports that learning.
- Write a "Frequently Asked Questions" newsletter that includes questions and answers that parents should ask but have may not asked. Many parents are not aware there are strategies for decoding words other than "sound it out;" therefore, they do not

know to ask for other strategies. Some parents may be embarrassed to ask questions because they feel they should already know how to help their children. By providing the parents with frequently asked questions and answers, you ensure they receive the information without having to ask and encourage future questions from parents (which you can then include in a future newsletter).

### Conclusion

As literacy teachers, our goal is to help every child become a successful, literate person. For some children, Reading Recovery plays a key role in achieving this goal. However, we know that parents play an important role in their children's literacy development as well and, as educators, we need to assist parents in participating productively in this development. We believe that the suggestions listed here will help Reading Recovery teachers continue their efforts to include parents in their children's education.

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