

What's New in Literacy Teaching?



SUPPORTING PARENTS AS VALUABLE PARTNERS IN THEIR CHILDREN'S LITERACY LEARNING

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As we move in and out of schools and classrooms, we routinely have conversations with teachers about children who struggle. Often, the discussion turns to teachers' concerns that parents are not involved in their children's learning. Teachers report that their efforts to reach out to parents often go unheeded, and from school to school, teachers pose similar questions: Why don't families do more? How can we make connections to families when we don't speak their language or know their culture? How can we help parents become more confident in their ability to support their children's learning? What special practices can we recommend to parents of struggling readers? At times, questions arise because of some sort of failed effort: Teachers might hold an open house or schedule parent-teacher conferences and have very few families attend, or teachers might ask families to engage in a particular educational activity at home and find that few families completed the activity with success.

When parents do not participate in these types of experiences, teachers often conclude that parents are not concerned about their children's education. Yet, there might be an alternative explanation: The particular types of interactions and events that have traditionally represented parental involvement may be a poor match for contemporary parents. The types of meetings themselves, such as back-to-school nights, often provide little opportunity for meaningful contact, leaving some parents confused about the purpose and discouraging busy parents from attending (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1978); parents' lack of English proficiency or reading and writing ability may make the completion of assigned educational activities challenging (Edwards, 2010; Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2003; Nieto, 1992); and parents' unfamiliarity with the norms and expectations of U.S. schools may cause them to avoid interactions with teachers (e.g., Delgado-Gaitan, 1990; Valdés 1996).

In this article, we hope to answer questions about parental involvement by exploring current evidence related to ways that we, as teachers, create effective partnerships with families diverse in race, culture, education, and income. We begin with a brief review of what we know about the importance of home-school partnerships. Then,



we summarize new understandings about the types of partnerships that lead to improved literacy and language learning outcomes for students. We next present a detailed example of one approach to home-school partnerships that led to substantially greater literacy achievement outcomes for participating children. Finally, we conclude with a set of principles to guide the planning and implementation of these partnerships.

Parents and Children's Literacy Learning

The most recent report of the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) by the OECD (2010) includes this finding:

Parents' engagement with their children's reading life has a positive impact on their children's reading performance. Students whose parents reported that they had read a book with their child "every day or almost every day" or "once or twice a week" during the first year of primary school performed higher in PISA 2009 than students whose parents reported that they had done this "never or almost never" or "once or twice a month". (p. 14)

This was not a surprise because we have long known that parents play an important role in their children's academic success. For literacy development, in particular, the importance of family literacy interactions dates back to Durkin's (1966) seminal work showing the strong positive relationship between reading and writing experiences at home and children's early literacy development. In the years since Durkin's study, her early findings have been confirmed and elaborated. We have learned, for

example, that joint book reading between parents and children is a valuable source for children's early learning, specifically as it relates to vocabulary and language development (e.g., Bus, van IJzendoorn, & Pellegrini, 1995; Sénéchal & LeFevre, 2002), a knowledge base that is fundamental for children's success in both decoding and comprehension. We have also learned that *how* parents share books matters. That is, when parents provide feedback to children by elaborating on ideas, modeling their understanding, correcting, and praising, children learn more words (Arnold & Whitehurst, 1994; Valdez-Menchaca & Whitehurst, 1992), and this finding holds for groups of children from families with low incomes and among children who score below average on language measures. Furthermore, we know that multiple readings of a storybook support children's learning of both receptive and expressive vocabulary (e.g., Sénéchal, 1997).

Children's opportunities to learn at home expand beyond shared book reading, of course. The ways that parents use language matters, in that the quantity of adult talk surrounding a child is a strong predictor of children's language development. Simply put, the more words children hear, the more language they learn (e.g., Hart & Risley, 1995; Weizman & Snow, 2001). Yet, the type of language that children hear also matters, in that children who hear more complex syntax and more sophisticated vocabulary acquire more sophisticated language themselves (e.g., Dickinson, Griffith, Golinkoff, & Hirsh-Pasek,

2012; Duke & Carlisle, 2011). When parents engage children in language play, such as reciting nursery rhymes and songs, they support their children's development of awareness of and sensitivity to sounds in words (e.g., Baker, Fernandez-Fein, Scher, & Williams, 1998; Fernandez-Fein & Baker, 1997), an important prerequisite for word reading. Moreover, when parents engage specifically in teaching their children about reading skills, the children make significant progress in those skills.

Home-School Partnerships and Children's Literacy Learning

Clearly, parents' and children's literacy and language-related interactions matter in children's literacy learning, but these are not the only types of parental actions that matter. Studies tell us that there is a strong relationship between parental involvement—generally defined as having high expectations for academic success, talking with children about school, checking homework, and encouraging children to read outside of school—and children's school success (e.g., Fan & Chen, 2001; Gonzalez-DeHass, Willems, & Holbein, 2005; Jeynes, 2003). This positive relationship holds across different racial and ethnic groups and for children of parents with both high and low levels of education (e.g., Fan & Chen, 2001; Jeynes, 2003). Moreover, the relationship persists across grade levels (e.g., Dearing, Kreider, Simpkins, & Weiss, 2006).

However, the particular ways that teachers invite families to participate in school, teacher's attitudes toward families, and the types of activities that teachers ask parents to implement at home are of paramount importance in constructing successful home-school literacy partnerships (Dauber & Epstein, 1993; Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997; Sheldon, 2005). Studies indicate that parental involvement increases in response to both specific actions that teachers take to involve parents (e.g., inviting them to the classroom for a celebration, calling to inquire about a concern) and the particular manner in which teachers communicate with parents (e.g., encouragement and support of parents' efforts; Jeynes, 2011). In particular, Hoover-Dempsey, Whitaker, and Ice (2010) explained that parents are



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more likely to join teachers in parental involvement efforts if (a) the parents feel their involvement will make a difference for their children, (b) the parents receive specific invitations from their children and teachers, and (c) the parents feel that teachers understand the children's home life and the skills that these parents bring to the involvement request.

To build effective home-school partnerships, we must intentionally attend to each of these conditions. So, for example, by helping parents engage their children in home literacy events that are directly related to their work in school, parents and children are more likely to perceive the activities as making a difference and also more likely to directly experience the difference. In addition, when teachers contact parents directly and schedule meetings and conversations at times that do not conflict with the parents' family and work responsibilities, parents are more likely to perceive teachers as respectful and genuinely concerned about the children's school success. Further, when teachers provide parents with the explanation and support they need to follow through with the targeted literacy events and interactions, parents are more likely to develop the knowledge and skills that will, in time, support development of their self-efficacy and perceptions of themselves as partners in their children's learning.

Putting the Evidence to Work: Read It Again!

We set out to put this evidence to work in a high-poverty, urban school serving linguistically, culturally, and educationally diverse families. We

especially wanted to partner with parents of children who were experiencing substantial difficulty in reading to give them additional support in closing the learning gap between them and their higher performing peers. We knew that any effort we planned needed to take into account (a) parents' limited time as they attended to employment and family responsibilities, (b) parents' limited proficiency with the English language and literacy, and (c) teachers' limited time to add a home-school partnership to their ongoing teaching commitments.

As we thought about drawing on parents as a learning resource, we also considered the target children's school experiences. Based on classroom observations, we knew that the school district had made a commitment to use grade-level text with every child as a way to lift learning expectations and expose the children to more interesting and complex texts. Yet, we had also observed that youngsters who were substantially behind in reading rarely received the type of instructional support that helped them actually read the texts. Instead, students who were reading below grade level mostly listened to the text being read aloud. This enabled these low-performing readers to join their classmates in talking and writing about the ideas in the text. However, given evidence of the strong relationship between volume of reading and reading growth (Guthrie, Wigfield, Metsala, & Cox, 1999; Hiebert & Martin, 2009), we knew there was a low probability that this approach would help the low-performing students close the reading achievement gap that separated them from their peers.

In response to our observations, then, we identified two goals: to develop a parental involvement program that would demonstrably increase the volume of reading experienced by these youngsters and, at the same time, to support students' success in the classroom-based curriculum. We settled on Read It Again! (RIA), a program with repeated reading as the target home literacy event. In its first implementation, RIA had three simple steps:

1. At the end of each week, the teacher sent home the grade-level selection that had been the target of the week's classroom instruction.

2. Children read the selection to their parents at least four times during the course of the week. Each rereading was audiotaped using a small digital recorder that the teacher provided to each family.
3. The child returned the digital recorder each week, and the teacher downloaded the audio files and sent home the next take-home reading.

These steps were repeated for 10 weeks.

We chose this particular approach for several reasons. First, substantial evidence suggests that rereading familiar texts supports students' reading fluency, accuracy, and comprehension (e.g., O'Shea, Sindelar, & O'Shea, 1985; Rashotte & Torgesen, 1985; Rasinski, 1990; Samuels, 1979), and classroom assessments showed these to be clear needs of the students we hoped to serve. Second, productively engaging children in repeated readings did not require parents to be proficient in either the English language or literacy; rather, they needed only to listen to their children read. Third, if children progressed as earlier studies suggested they would (e.g., Dowhower, 1987; Rasinski & Stevenson, 2005; Turpie & Paratore, 1995; Weinstein & Cooke, 1992), both parents and children would readily notice improvement and, in turn (we hoped!), perceive the shared interaction as making a difference. Fourth, the approach takes into account the limitations on parents' time, requiring as few as 10–15 minutes four days a week. Fifth, the approach takes into account the limitations on teachers' time, requiring a brief meeting (about 15 minutes) with parents to describe the approach and distribute necessary materials, plus a few minutes at the end of each week of implementation to collect audio recordings and distribute the next week's take-home texts.

Although we knew this design was consistent with findings related to both reading growth and parental involvement, we also knew that sometimes implementation of well-planned ideas falls short of expectations. So, we designed a study (Hindin & Paratore, 2007) to document the outcomes of the first implementation of this approach. In a multiple case study with eight second-grade youngsters in a high-poverty, high-needs urban school who were reading at least one year below grade level, we found that when children read a take-home selection to their



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parents four times, and did so each week for 8–10 weeks, the children exhibited the following:

- Increased volume of out-of-school reading, accumulating more than 10,000 words during the home intervention
- Increased reading accuracy (number of words read correctly) from first to last reading
- Fewer reading errors from first to last reading
- Substantial gains in fluency (words read correctly per minute) from first to last reading
- Improvement on an independent reading measure, with six of the eight children achieving at or above grade level in both oral reading and comprehension

(See Hindin and Paratore's article for a full description of findings.)

Getting Started With RIA

In this section, we describe steps to follow to get RIA up and running, but we do so with a cautionary note: Although these procedures worked well within the community in which we started this work, efforts of this type must often be tweaked a bit for implementation in another setting. Therefore, we describe these steps as a guide, rather than a prescription, to getting started. As you consider the particular students and parents with whom you hope to partner, keep in mind that the practice of repeated readings has been found to have the most benefit for children who are struggling readers, so these should be your target group.

Meeting With Families

After identifying children who seem to be a good fit for RIA, invite their parents to meet with you to discuss your ideas and to seek their response and input. These meetings could be held in conjunction with regularly scheduled parent–teacher conferences, or you could arrange a special meeting. As you plan these meetings, think about parents’ schedules. If parents accompany their children to school in the morning, perhaps an early morning coffee break would work well. Alternatively, if parents pick their children up at the end of the day, an after-school meeting might work. If parents work outside the home during the day, an early evening meeting might work best. If parents are speakers of English as an additional language, arrange to have an interpreter present to facilitate the conversation.

During the meeting, plan to accomplish three purposes: (a) to share with parents what you have noticed about their child’s reading and writing at school; (b) to learn from parents about their child’s reading and writing at home; (c) to determine whether the repeated readings project is a good fit for this family and, if so, to introduce them to RIA. (If RIA is not a good fit, talk together about a productive alternative. See Figure 1 for alternative home reading practices.)

As you plan the meeting, think about the types of questions and prompts that will position parents as partners and “coinvestigators.” For example, you might explain that as their child’s teacher, you know a lot about the child’s reading and writing in school, but they know a lot about their child’s reading and writing at home, and that knowing about each child’s experiences both in school and at home will help you plan and respond to all the children’s family literacy experiences. We have found prompts and questions like these helpful:

- Tell me what you notice about your child’s reading and writing at home.
- Does your child read books? The Bible? Directions to play a game? Cereal boxes (or other environmental print)? Online? What else?
- Does your child write notes or letters? Lists? E-mails? Anything else?

Figure 1
Alternative home reading practices

Finding the Right Fit

If Read It Again! isn’t a good fit for you and the families of the children in your classroom, consider the following modifications and alternatives:

- Instead of having the child be the only reader, the child and caregiver can read alternate pages.
- Have the child complete repeated listenings of the text using an audio recording.
- If it is difficult for the child to read with the caregiver, the child can read with another adult or sibling.
- The following websites allow children to listen to stories read aloud. We like the ones that highlight the print as the story is being read. Some require subscriptions but may be available to children free of charge at the school or library:
 - One More Story: www.onemorestory.com
 - Storyline Online: www.storylineonline.net
 - PBS Kids: Between the Lions: pbskids.org/lions/stories
- Children can also listen to and interact with books with e-reader apps. Some are available as free light versions. Below are a few examples:
 - Dr. Seuss books
 - Sandra Boynton books
 - Toy Story Read-Along
 - The Fantastic Flying Books of Mr. Morris Lessmore

- Does your child like to read? What makes you think so?
- Does your child like to write? What makes you think so?
- When your child reads and writes at home, what languages does he or she prefer?
- Is there anything else you notice about your child’s reading and writing at home?

Next, as you think about how you will implement the program, decide whether you want to ask parents and children to audiotape the rereadings. Although RIA will certainly work without audiotaping, parents have told us that recording helps motivate them and their children to complete the rereadings. The recordings also provide clear evidence of children’s reading improvement over the course of each week,

Figure 2 Sample handout for parents

Read It Again!

1. Find a comfortable, quiet space to read together.
2. Turn on the digital recorder so you will have a record of your child's readings.
3. As your child reads, you can help with difficult words:
 - a. You could ask your child what word might make sense in the sentence.
 - b. You could ask your child to look carefully at the letters in the word and try to sound it out.
 - c. You could tell your child the word.
4. After your child completes the reading, talk about the text, as in the following examples:
 - a. Ask your child about his or her favorite part of the selection and tell your favorite part, too.
 - b. Think about an interesting new word or phrase in the text and share it with your child. Then, ask your child to share an interesting new word or phrase from the text with you.
 - c. Share an important idea that the text made you think about—for example, something about friendship, courage, or hard work—and ask your child to share an idea that the text made him or her think about.
5. At the end of the week, place the text and the recorder in the bag and return it to the teacher.
6. When you receive the new text, start over again!

which is helpful to parents, children, and teachers. If you choose to audio record, you will need to provide a small digital audio recorder for each child to use at home with his or her parents.

Finally, prepare a one-page handout that will help the parent and child implement RIA at home. In our sample handout (see Figure 2), we hoped to guide parents to find a quiet place to read, to guide the child during the reading, and to guide a response to the reading. We sought to keep the text brief, as we knew that some of the parents were emerging speakers and readers of English.

Selecting Take-Home Texts

The selection of take-home texts will depend on the students' reading levels as well as the selection of texts in your classroom. Students should be able to read each text in its entirety in about 15 minutes. The

texts should provide some challenge so readers will be stretched and make notable progress, but they should not be so difficult that children and parents will become frustrated. Choose take-home texts based on your goals for each student:

- Classroom instructional texts are likely to be beneficial if, at the end of each week, the student has not yet achieved fluency, accuracy, or comprehension goals. Rereadings will support students' progress toward these goals.
- Easy-to-read texts will support students' confidence, enjoyment, and inclination toward performance reading—that is, reading aloud to an audience as in Readers Theatre (Adomat, 2012).
- Texts that relate to a student's personal interests or classroom topics will build his or her vocabulary and concept knowledge. These texts should be readable by the student, either because they are matched to the student's reading level or because the student has listened to them or read them in the classroom and can reread them with relative ease.

Sending Home

At the beginning of RIA, provide each family with a specially prepared bag (see Figure 3) that holds the first take-home text, the aforementioned description of RIA's steps (see Figure 2), a strategies bookmark (see Figure 4), and a digital recorder if you have chosen to include audio recordings as a program component.

Collecting Texts and Checking Progress

At the end of each week, as you collect the bags from the students, ask them briefly about their experiences (see Figure 5 for examples of questions to pose). If audio recordings are part of your RIA implementation, also download and save the audio files to a computer and place the digital recorders back in the students' RIA bags. Then, provide the next take-home text. As you exchange texts each week, take notice of students' attitudes and dispositions toward the take-home books. If they do not convey a sense of enjoyment or enthusiasm, it might be time to consider a different approach to a parent-child-teacher literacy partnership.

Figure 3
Sample bag and contents



Figure 5
Child's reflections

- How many times did you read this text at home?
- Did you like this text? Why or why not?
- Did you have a favorite part? If so, what was it?
- Did you find the text easy, just right, or too difficult?

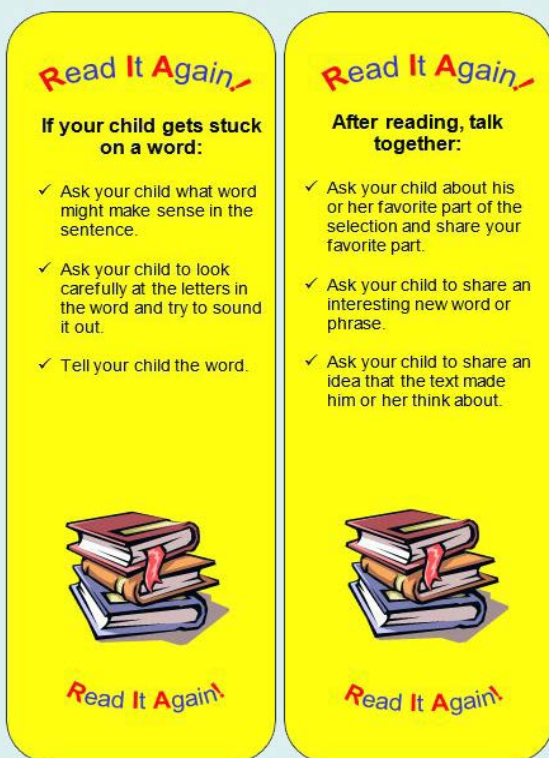
In addition to seeking students' self-reflections, look for changes in their classroom reading behaviors. Do you see any changes in motivation and engagement, reading accuracy and fluency, or comprehension and response? To add to your observations, you could take a quick running record (Johnston, 2000) of the take-home text at the beginning and end of each week and examine any changes in each student's ability to read with accuracy, fluency, and understanding. Alternatively, if you have collected audio recordings of the home rereadings, you could use these to complete running records.

Check in with parents frequently (weekly or every other week) to ask how well RIA is working at home. Explain that you are calling to seek their guidance because their observations of their child's home reading will help you plan the "right" classroom instruction and also guide your selection of texts to send home. Encourage parents to tell you their impressions of the following:

- *The appropriateness of the text:* Is it too easy or too hard?
- *Their child's motivation and engagement:* Does the child like the text? Does the child like reading to the parents?
- *Their child's reading fluency:* Is the child reading word by word, or is the reading nicely phrased and interesting to listen to?
- *Their child's comprehension:* Is the child eager to talk about the selection? Does the child recall and understand what he or she read?

Let parents know what you think and how you will act on the information they shared (e.g., send home a different type of text, spend more classroom

Figure 4
Strategies bookmark



time on comprehension or fluency). During subsequent phone calls, follow up on the previous conversation, letting parents know how you adapted instruction and what you noticed recently about their child's classroom reading.

Although we found substantial differences in students' reading after 8–10 weeks, you might choose a longer or shorter implementation period. The length of RIA should vary based on children's and parents' responses and your observations related to each student's progress.

Building on the Evidence: Principles to Guide Our Support of Parents as Valuable Partners in Their Children's Learning

There is ample evidence that successful home–school partnerships bridge students' home and school learning. Moreover, practices that support parental involvement may have lasting effects through children's secondary school years (Barnard, 2004). We found RIA to be a successful way to acknowledge and affirm parents' interest in their children's school success and to help them provide substantial support for their children's reading development. The design of the program allows parents of all language and literacy levels to participate. It also allows teachers flexibility in text selection. Because rereading the same texts allows clear comparisons, the program is immediately reinforcing for parents and children, allowing them to see and hear the gains children make through rereading. Moreover, this program offers a pathway for teachers to build relationships with parents. By inviting parents to participate and seeking their feedback and counsel all along the way, teachers demonstrate that they value parents' support, participation, and insights in their children's academic learning.

Yet, RIA represents only one way to bring parents and teachers together in ways that are beneficial for children. As you consider the children and families in your own community and work to formulate a way to work as partners, consider how these general principles might guide your work:

- Effective partnerships acknowledge parents' interest and motivation in their children's learning and recognize that parents' family and work responsibilities may require a different time and form of meeting.
- Effective partnerships are built on mutual respect and understanding. This includes recognition that as teachers, we know about students' uses of reading and writing in the classroom, whereas parents know about their children's uses of reading and writing at home. Providing opportunities to exchange information with parents is central to developing effective home–school partnerships.
- Effective partnerships recognize that parents of all income and education levels may lack specific knowledge of how to support their children's reading development. Providing clear and concise guidelines and routines will help parents become effective at implementing target literacy events and activities with their children.
- Planning literacy activities and events that have a meaningful and noticeable effect on students' school success will support parents' and children's awareness of the importance of their home literacy interactions and is likely to result in sustained involvement. Target events and activities should be grounded in trustworthy evidence, such that when parents and children engage in such activities, their language or literacy abilities are likely to improve.



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