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## Connecting With Families

*We were visiting the family of Becky, a second grader in an elementary school of 1,300 children in a poor rural county in Kentucky. We asked Becky's parents about Becky's interests, friends, and routines. We explained that we wanted to learn as much as we could about each student so we could best meet the children's academic, social, and emotional needs. The parents eagerly gave us information, watching carefully as we took notes. Finally, Becky's mother said, "I wish all teachers would do this. If Stanley's (Becky's brother) teachers knew him better, he'd be doing better in school."*

*"Yeah," sighed Becky's father. "He's just a number there."*

**J**ust a number. How many students are viewed as just a number, a vague face, another average kid? In today's large bureaucratic schools, teachers find it nearly impossible to meet the demands of their classes and know their students in ways that make each student an individual with specific needs and gifts. In the last few decades, schools have become larger and more diverse, and in recent years, classrooms more crowded with fewer qualified teachers. School violence is on the rise, and teachers, many of them with potential for changing lives, are opting out of the profession.

Clearly, schools have not kept pace with changes in society. Families have become increasingly busy, and they reflect structures other than the traditional two-parent, two-children prototype. New media and technologies emerge almost daily, affecting family time and communication in ways we had not imagined even twenty years ago. Even in the post-September 11th era of "nesting," a lack of family time persists (*Time*,

November 5, 2001). While societal changes in the last few decades can be viewed as positive and progressive, there is certainly no doubt that families have changed since mid-century. Yet, most schools have continued to operate in traditional ways by delivering instruction (perceived as “facts”) that has little to do with students’ present or future lives.

The disparities between the “culture of home” and the “culture of school” are widely known. With her groundbreaking work, *Ways With Words*, Heath (1983) illustrated how literacy discourse patterns in rural African American and Appalachian communities differed from those found in schools operating from white, middle-class standards. The differences between the school and community cultures disenfranchised the minority students and complemented the achievement of the mainstream community. Later work has shown us how differences in Appalachian speech (Purcell-Gates, 1995) and cultural experiences (Powell & Cantrell, 2001), Native Hawaiian ways of communicating (Jordan, 1985; Tharp & Gallimore, 1993), Hispanic language and culture (Moll, 1992; Valdés, 1996), and African Americans’ storytelling and other language patterns (Delpit, 1995; Foster & Peele, 2001; Michaels, 1985) undermine the cultural ways of knowing of these populations and create school failure. These language structures are only one part of the many cultural differences that may impede achievement (Gee, 1990). Thus, the disparity between home and school continues to widen and the need to understand families becomes more urgent.

## ■ CONNECTING FAMILIES AND SCHOOLS: A VITAL GOAL

Creative minds are beginning to tackle this issue in different ways, and this book offers one—how to connect meaningfully with our students’ families. We know that schooling in the twenty-first century *must* be different than it has been in recent decades.

Teachers must see their work as educating the whole student in meaningful ways, rather than merely as delivering instruction. To do this, teachers must reach out to students’ families in ways not traditionally imagined, in ways that help bridge the ever-widening gap between home and school, in ways that help students realize they are known, cared about, and expected to achieve.

Leading researchers on family involvement have explored the impact of alternative, state-of-the-art ways of connecting with families. Epstein,

Coats, Salinas, Sanders, and Simon (1997) and Hornby (2000) offer nontraditional ways of reaching out to create more “family-like schools” (Epstein et al., 1997) that focus on making each student feel included in school through work with families. This is a particular challenge with migrant children, students with gay or lesbian parents (Casper & Schultz, 1999), or others whose cultural backgrounds are different from schools. Yet, when schools focus on meeting the particular

Gayle: I became much more interested in my students and their individual needs, interests, and strengths. Knowing more about them, I became a teacher of *children* instead of a *curriculum*.

needs of families, whether psychological or physical, and hold themselves accountable for student achievement, they can be successful at involving families (López, Scribner, & Mahitivanichcha, 2001).

Our work as teachers and researchers has led us to recognize that one of the keys to successful teaching and schooling is personal connections with students in and outside of school. Knowing the students' outside-of-school interests and passions, their families, families' jobs and interests, home routines, and literacy practices, and then using this information to connect in meaningful ways can have huge rewards in helping to construct happier, healthier, smarter kids.

Our perspective reflects our belief that the differences we find in families can be an asset to our classrooms and students' learning. Many other parent involvement books implicitly suggest that children and their parents, especially poor and minority families, have deficits that need to be remedied, and schools need to find ways to change families. We believe a more respectful approach is to recognize that families have differences, yet all are rich in knowledge. Although this knowledge may not mirror the school knowledge contained in curriculum frameworks, families are rich in traditions, experiences, and skills. Our book shares many ways of reaching out and connecting with families in order to learn what children and their families know.

Gayle: I think it's all part of knowing the situation and what the child is going through, and of helping the other children accept and understand it. All of our experiences are different. Just because you live one way doesn't mean everybody does. We aren't trying to get everybody to be alike. We are trying to understand each other.

## IMPROVING STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT ■

Getting involved with families is not simply a feel-good message that attempts to raise students' self-esteem. We have larger purposes in mind. We want to communicate that viewing teaching in a different way can have considerable rewards for students academically. Our goal is to share how teachers can help raise the achievement level of each student in significant ways through close work with families.

This kind of work is not new. One of the leading and most significant attempts to change schooling to match home discourses and home cultural knowledge was the Kamehameha Early Education Program (KEEP). The primary goal of KEEP was to improve achievement of Native Hawaiian students by redesigning instruction so that it more closely matched the language styles of the children. Among the changes, literacy instruction was focused on *meaning* rather than skills, and it used dialogue (the *children's* style of dialogue) to discuss stories. Results showed much wider participation and comprehension development when teachers used the students'

Gayle: I think I got the reputation for being able to handle troubled children because I would get to know the family and work *with* them to help their child to succeed in school. I don't think it was anything I did other than talk to the parents and try to profit from their experiences with the child.

discourses and cultural interests on which to build instruction (Jordan, 1985; Tharp & Gallimore, 1993).

Current work on changing schooling to reflect home cultural patterns is championed by Moll and González (1993) who use families' "funds of knowledge" upon which to build school curricula. "Funds of knowledge," first used by Vélez-Ibáñez and Greenberg (1992), refers to the various social and linguistic practices and knowledge that are essential to students' homes and communities. In some households, funds of knowledge might consist of craft-making and car mechanics. In another, it might be the Bible and canning. Teachers use a variety of ways to assess families' knowledge and build activities and curricular units around those topics. This not only serves to motivate children, but it "contextualizes" (Tharp, Estrada, Dalton, & Yamauchi, 2000) instruction in what the children already know, increasing the likelihood that the children will learn. In our book, the teachers have various ways of assessing family knowledge, and many examples of how they use this knowledge are described. Along with the studies mentioned above, we have found that when teachers and administrators get to know families in deep and personal ways, they begin to understand both the barriers to school success and how they can remedy the situation. They begin to see how to build on the successes of the community, which in turn may affect school achievement. Many of these studies have also reported increased parental involvement when teachers make these kinds of efforts.

Some family-involvement books seem to advocate parent involvement as the goal to be accomplished. Although we see this as a worthy goal, our book views reaching out and connecting with families as a means. Our ultimate goal is finding ways of making *instruction* in the classroom more effective for more children. We believe that teachers who know their children's families well are more likely to create meaningful, authentic instruction that will engage children and help them be more successful academically. This book offers suggestions based on large-scale parent

involvement efforts as well as brief, short-term ideas that can be initiated by the classroom teacher and that take little time. Our goal is to provide a variety of ways teachers can reach out so all are involved with families in some ways. We do this by providing actual examples and tools from real elementary and middle school classrooms, tips on getting started, and numerous stories and vignettes.

The work we describe takes time and reflection, two resources scarce in the lives of teachers. Yet, we propose ways to do this kind of work that is time, energy, and cost efficient. This book is not a "one size fits all" model for involving parents; we do not believe there is one way to do this kind of work. Instead, our book offers many alternatives that can fit the working styles of all teachers and the circumstances of all schools as they strive to improve student achievement.

Karen: I think *understand* is the key word. It has really made me much more understanding as a person by looking at families and at the individual child. Understanding that he didn't get his homework done, but that's all right; we'll go from there and see what we can do at school. Mom's working two jobs; nobody is there to tell him to do it or to help. Whatever, it's made me more understanding—to know more about each child.

## CELEBRATING DIFFERENCES: SEEING THROUGH FAMILIES' EYES

In this book, our focus is on how we as teachers can reach out to parents in ways that enable us to see school from their perspectives. It is not intended to get parents to do at home what we wish they would do, but instead it is for teachers and parents to share information that can improve instruction at school through the building of lasting, trusting relationships between homes and school. We view parents as experts on their child; they are our primary resources for understanding learners and knowing what and how to teach them.

Our perspective, which has come from years of working closely with families, is one of mutual respect. Yet, we know that at times developing respect is not always easy. We have found that many families have lives different from our own, and yet we have learned to see these as just that, differences, and in no way deficiencies or faults on the part of the families. In this way, our work is different from those who seek to change homes to look more like schools.

Since the fall of 1996 we have been involved in a research study of student achievement in elementary constructivist-based classrooms. We knew early on that to truly understand children's development, we needed to know children in a deeper, richer way, in a way that told us about the whole child, not just the school-academic side. Thus, our work took us into the homes and communities of the students we taught, and we began to look for more ways to build stronger relationships with the parents, guardians, or families (used interchangeably in this book). The families varied a great deal, and we had to learn how to view differences as just that, differences, and in no way, deficiencies, particularly because we knew that many of the families were dealing with major difficulties in their lives.

In our study, the families varied by race, economic group, and background. Twenty-seven percent of the children were African American or bi-racial and the rest were white. Forty percent were considered poor and rural and another forty-seven percent were considered working class and were either rural or urban. From this group, forty-three percent lived with a parent with less than high school education. Seven of the children lived in apartments, nine lived in trailers, and fourteen lived in single-family homes by the end of the study.

A pattern common across most families was that they all faced challenges in their personal lives that (for some) seemed to affect school performance. These challenges manifested themselves in frequent episodes such as hitting, throwing objects, swearing, and tantrums. Through our work with the families, we know that these children, in their young lives,

Karen: My outlook has changed. My focus is much more child-centered. I look at this like a friendship. When you get to know somebody, it's a gradual thing. The more you do for your friend, the more they do for you, and it just grows and grows. I really see that in the relationships I've built with these families. You're not going to have the same relationship with every family. With some, there's more give and take; with some, less. You know those families and what they want for their kids, and you don't want to disappoint them.

had faced such experiences as the death of a father and subsequent remarriage of the mother, the death of an older brother due to “huffing” (breathing in fumes from a household item such as paint, glue, or air conditioner coolant for the purposes of intoxication), parents’ divorce, changes in custody arrangements, an alcoholic parent, sexual abuse, and other such emotionally charged events. The most common challenge across the families was financial stress, or “making ends meet.” The strategies we share in this book represent those we have tried with children who represent this group of wide-ranging exceptionalities.

Yet, there were also many examples of support for education as well. A common pattern of support in most of the families was the close connection the families had with members of the extended family. Many of the families were emotionally, and sometimes financially, supported by family members they saw or spoke with every day or nearly every day. Some lived with extended family members, or they lived near by, “up the road.” When interviewing, it was clear that the families depended on one another for support (both financial and emotional) and company. Children knew their grandparents and cousins well and received love from several adults, not just their parents. It was clear that these other adults took on parental roles, often reading to the children, picking them up from school, or taking them to events.

In the study, the teachers and researchers read professional books for ideas on how to connect school with the lives of students, and we tried out a number of our own. Through the involvement of families, we began to see changes in our students that we had not seen before. Because of the changes we made in curriculum that were based on our deep knowledge of families, we also found results in student achievement. Like much previous research before ours (Johnson, 2000; Tharp, 2001), our research study showed us that for many of our students, achievement surpassed the expected, and we knew we were trekking across important territory. When we talked to other teachers, we found them skeptical but intrigued about what we had experienced. In our fourth year of this work, we decided to write this book.

We knew that developing positive, trusting attitudes with our families was a part of the success of this work. And we knew that with the right attitude, the major barrier preventing this work was time. Teachers are already overburdened with expectations to teach in new ways, participate in curriculum renewal, and help all students achieve at high standards. Raising expectations about connecting with families is not realistic without a corresponding revision in school- and district-level policies about teachers’ time. Our suggestions will help teachers see connecting with families as an efficient way to teach, not a burdensome way, and they will help principals envision ways of supporting teachers’ efforts.

In our book we deal directly with the issue of time by encouraging teachers to work differently, not more. This book contains examples from Karen and Gayle’s classrooms, two authors of this book. It also includes examples from other classrooms with which we have worked, including Vickie Wheatley’s middle school where she and her colleagues have been doing this kind of work. In addition, the book includes the perspectives of three principals who have made family involvement a priority in their schools: John Finch, elementary principal in a small town in the Oldham

County School district; Dena Kent, middle school principal in rural Spencer County school district; and Carol Miller, elementary principal in urban Jefferson County Public Schools.

## WHY WE CARE ■

Knowing the challenges that this effort might present, why do we feel so passionate about its importance? It is because we have experienced, first-hand, the effects these positive connections have had on the children we teach. Gayle and Karen are elementary classroom teachers who teach many poor rural children outside Louisville, Kentucky. They have been participating in conducting family visits for many years and have sought to reach out to families in other ways as well. The other two authors, Diane and Ellen, are university teachers and researchers at the University of Louisville where they participated with Gayle and Karen in a national study of children's development in light of the students' home and family knowledge and practices. This study was funded by the Center for Research on Education, Diversity, and Excellence (CREDE). Through the study, we have discovered many ways that school works better when family connections are made. And as we write, we are continuing to explore possibilities of how to reach out as we talk to and read about others who are engaged in this work.

We know there are no guarantees and that students' problems and school issues are multifaceted. Yet, we know education through positive relationships is one way we can combat the alienation so many children experience today. Success at this kind of education comes from knowing our students as individuals and showing our commitment to them. In the fall of 2001, as we were completing this book, Karen received a poem from a former student she had had the previous school year when he was in second and third grade. We think it illustrates this kind of success:

### Do You Know My Teacher?

By Joshua Clark

Do you know my teacher?

She is the one with the big smile

The one who cracks up over my gross jokes

Do you know my teacher?

She is the one with the great imagination

The one who taught me to give from the heart

Do you know my teacher?

She is the teacher with the wonderful laugh

The one who has a great sense of humor

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REACHING OUT

Do you know my teacher?  
She is the one who gives more than we know  
The one who showed up at my ball games

Do you know my teacher?  
She is the teacher who came to school sick  
The one who gave me a special book for my trip

Do you know my teacher?  
She is the teacher I will never forget  
The one who understood and loved me for two magnificent years

Do you know my teacher?  
She is the one that touched my heart  
The one who I call Mrs. Miller

Receiving a poem like this from a third-grade boy can come only when we know our students intimately and show how much we care. In this book, we share many ways we have learned to show care and build trust. We share multiple ways we reach out to families to build positive relationships that enhance academic achievement.