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## Building Bridges between Home and School

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## **Building Bridges between Home and School**

Anna Hall and Qianyi Gao

“It takes a village” is a famous quote that not only rings true for raising children, but also for raising writers. Let’s face it; writing is challenging. It is a social and cognitive process requiring fine motor skills, a shared understanding with readers, and a proficient vocabulary. When teachers take on the sole responsibility for teaching children to write, it is a hefty load to bear. Fortunately, families can serve alongside teachers as powerful writing role models and help welcome children into the world of written language.

Involving families as team members in your writing instruction is not always easy. It takes more effort to develop and maintain reciprocal relationships with families than it does to utilize one-way communication through newsletters and emails (Daniel, 2009; Ferlazzo, 2011; Halgunseth, 2009; Tran, 2014). However, once you put the extra time and energy into building relationships with families, you will reap the benefits that come from creating an extended writing community within your classroom (Lopez & Caspe, 2014; Tran, 2014). When teachers and families share openly about writing goals, instructional strategies, and children’s progress, children feel supported, motivated, and inspired. Instead of viewing teachers as the all-knowing experts, families realize that they too are their children’s first writing teachers.

### **Building bridges and connecting with families**

To engage families in the classroom writing community, teachers need to build bridges between home and school. Bridges are two-way streets that connect two significant places and suspend over endless possibilities. They are not easy to build and are sometimes tricky to cross, but once established on a firm foundation, they allow open sharing and infinite opportunities to work together. As you begin building bridges with families, it is helpful to reflect on your

writing attitudes and practices and to ask families to share their beliefs about writing. Do you like to write? Do you encourage your children to write often and share their writing with others? Do you write for enjoyment, or to complete daily tasks? Sharing your beliefs about writing and writing instruction will help nurture deeper family relationships, which will further support your students' writing development.

When you ask young children if they are writers, the majority will say they are despite their current phase of writing development (Hall et. al., 2019). As a teacher, it is important to nurture children's natural self-efficacy in writing instead of extinguishing it. Building bridges between home and school and cultivating reciprocal relationships are the first steps in this important process. We hope this article inspires you to begin building bridges and talking to your colleagues about celebrating the unique writing contributions of all families.

### **Establishing a Writing Community**

*Community: a unified body of individuals who share a feeling of fellowship, as a result, of sharing common attitudes, interests, and goals.*

Writing is an activity that bonds a class together as a community of learners. It can be a highly personal form of self-expression and has the power to bring people together through shared experiences and form a unique community within the classroom. We sometimes write about our lives during mini lessons. The children then come to know our families, our hobbies, and our passions. They may say things like "How's your husband's sore knee?" or "When will you visit your grandmother again?" after hearing our stories. Although they may never meet any of our family members or visit our favorite places, they know all about them from our writing. Sharing this helps them to feel a part of our world.

We also learn about the children's lives as they read their writing to the class during daily sharing time. We know that John was excited about losing his first tooth and that Peyton was

extra tired because his new baby brother was keeping him up at night. When families visit our classroom to see children's writing, parents, grandparents, and siblings would join our sharing circles and contribute their unique feedback and praise. Because of what is shared in writing, we don't remain just a teacher, classmates, and families; we became a close school family.

To create an extended writing community, all members must share in the experience of writing. This means the teacher writes, the children write, and families write together. Writers within the community lean on each other for support, ask each other questions, and provide helpful feedback and praise. Here are some essential practices to establish an extended writing community:

- Include time for children to talk, write, and share their writing each day with you, their classmates and their families.
- Encourage collaboration among peers and helpful talk during writing time.
- Create a comfortable space for writing and sharing and allow children to choose where they write each day (e.g., desk, table, floor, reading area).
- Lay the groundwork for responding respectfully to others and building trust when writing is shared (in whole group or peer conferences). Don't expect this to come naturally.
- Model writing daily for authentic purposes (e.g., making a list, writing a story about a favorite pet, recording research on an interesting topic). Let your voice come through in your writing so your students will feel comfortable sharing their voice as well.
- Demonstrate taking risks with your writing and making adjustments when your choices don't work the first time around.
- Practice asking each other questions about your writing and provide compliments and suggestions for revisions.

- Celebrate the writing process each step along the way instead of just the finished product (Make peer conference day just as exciting as your Author's Tea, which celebrates completed pieces).
- Feature teacher and student writing throughout your classroom and refer to it often.
- Invite families to join you on special publishing days, participate in writing conferences, and join in during writing celebrations.

Just like any other type of community, shared values are established when you create a writing community in your classroom. Through watching you write, being invited to write, and seeing their families writing, children learn that writing is essential and that it has many purposes in our society. Children also recognize that each member of their writing community makes unique contributions and that every step of the writing process is critical.

### **Building a Bridge of Communication**

*Communication: The successful conveying or sharing of ideas and feelings by speaking, writing, or using some other medium*

Imagine showing children's writing samples from different time points during the year to their family members. It is hard to explain writing progress in a letter or on a report card, but during these conferences, it is easy for families to see words, sentences, and paragraphs lengthening over time. Their positive reactions will not only be because of the progress they notice in the samples. The smiles will also come from seeing their names in their children's stories and from recognizing the comfort their children feel in sharing their lives with their classmates. After looking through writing samples together at family conferences, families may start explaining the nuances behind their children's stories and sharing how their children are writing at home or inviting their family to write together.

In thinking about building bridges between home and school, it is critical to foster two-way communication with families and to remember that there is not one correct way to communicate (Daniel, 2009; Ferlazzo, 2011; Halgunseth, 2009). Teacher communication shifts as new technologies become available and depends on the unique needs of the families you work with each year (Burris, 2019; Parnell & Bartlett, 2012). It is vital to use a variety of methods so that families can select the one that best suits their lifestyle. In choosing communication methods, it is important to consider if they allow for one-way or two-way sharing (Ferlazzo, 2011; Ferlazzo & Hammond, 2009). For example, if you are using a group texting app, can families reply to the thread or you individually? Can the technology you are using maintain the privacy of your families and children? If you are using a classroom blog, is there space for family comments or a place to upload photos and writing samples? Here are some examples of ways to encourage two-way communication about writing with families:

- Educational social media apps like Edmodo or SeeSaw<sup>1</sup> which allow families to join a private group and post comments or ask questions.
- Class websites or blogs which invite families to view children's writing and to send in photographs or home writing samples to post.
- Educational texting apps like Remind which allow teachers to use a private phone number for group or individual texting so they can share links with families and families can respond with comments or questions.
- Weekly folders with writing samples and comment cards for families.
- Writing nights that invite families to join their children in the writing process

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<sup>1</sup> Social media apps listed here does not constitute an endorsement by SECA.

- Family volunteer opportunities during conferencing days to provide individualized suggestions for revisions or help children with final edits.
- Class visitors to share what they love about writing or how they use it in their daily life
- Phone calls to report progress noticed and to ask families what they have noticed at home (Rotate five per week until you get through your class role).
- Two-way conferences – ask parents beforehand to bring in their children’s writing samples or topics their children like to write about at home.

### **Building a Bridge of Respect**

*Respect: Due regard for the feeling, wishes, rights, or traditions of others*

At the beginning of each school year, as customary, you could send a letter to families inviting them to tell you about their children. You could ask them to tell you about what their children like to do, where they like to visit, and what makes them special. You could also invite them to send in photographs that would conjure up their children’s favorite memories, maybe a trip to the beach or a first bicycle ride. By sending this invitation before meeting the families, you are sending the message that you welcome and respect each child in your class and each family’s unique contributions to the classroom. The letters and photographs will remain in children’s writing folders and become valuable resources when they need to brainstorm new ideas for writing.

Demonstrating respect for families goes beyond being courteous and kind and extends to showing interest and valuing the unique contributions of each member of your extended writing community (Ferlazzo, 2011). Respect begins with recognizing that every family has important social and cognitive resources and special traditions that enrich their children’s lives and the life of your classroom. Respect is demonstrated when you ask families to share with you as often as

you share information with them and when you honor their cultural contributions. It is also shown when you invite families to join your classroom in a variety of ways that take individual scheduling, transportation, and childcare needs into consideration.

Just like bridges, trust and respect are and must be developed over time. Developing respectful relationships involves understanding that families' prior experiences with writing (positive or negative) may influence their participation in your classroom and that family engagement is a choice. It is essential to respect each family's involvement level, whether it be minimal or high. Ultimately, respect is shown through sharing, listening, and understanding. Try to put yourself in the shoes of your families. Consider the pressures of balancing work, attention to all their children, and other life circumstances. Here are a few ways to develop a respectful relationship with families:

- Send a postcard welcoming families to your class before the first day of school.
- Send a letter during the first week of school inviting families to tell you about their children.
- Call families the first week of school and at least once a month throughout the year to share good news about their children and to ask families if they have anything they would like to share.
- Plan conference time equally among sharing with families and inviting families to share with you. Build in enough time with each family so that no one feels rushed. This could be achieved through home visits or 20-30 minute school conferences.
- Celebrate the many cultures and traditions represented in your classroom and make special occasions inclusive of all families' heritage.

- Invite families to share their expertise with your class (An editor can tell the class the steps authors go through to publish a book, A chef can explain the importance of writing a sequencing piece).

### **Building a Bridge of Support**

*Support: to give encouragement or assistance to someone because you want them to succeed*

Unlike the stages of walking and talking, writing approximations are not widely talked about or understood in mainstream society. It is hard for adults to remember how they went from learning the alphabet to constructing conventional words and sentences. Conventional writing does not happen on a particular day, like a child's first steps, and it is often hard for families to know the best ways to support their children along the way. Building a bridge of support for young writers includes sharing developmental writing milestones, demonstrating strategies for modeling and guiding writing, and talking to families about how to set up a welcoming writing environment at home.

In supporting families, it is helpful to talk about what their children could do in writing instead of what they could not. For example, you could say “See how John is using initial and ending sounds when he writes “ct” for “cat”. He knows so much about sounding out words. Pretty soon, he will start to hear the vowel sounds, too when he stretches his words, and he will add in the “a.” By focusing on children's capabilities as emergent writers, you empower families to support children at their current developmental level. You also validate the ways they are already supporting early writing behaviors at home.

A bridge of support is designed to help teachers and families set writing goals, share instructional strategies, and monitor progress together throughout the year. As the saying goes,

"Two heads are better than one." When families and teachers discuss catalysts for children's writing and support children in similar ways, it leads to less confusion for the children, comparable expectations among adults, and extends learning between home and school. For example, if teachers and families both encourage invented spelling by asking children to stretch the words orally (C-A-T) and use an alphabet chart to match the letters with the sounds they hear, the children will become more independent writing new words at home and school. Here are some other ways to build a bridge of support:

- Invite families to tell you their children's preferences for writing at home (location, type of writing, do they like to share?).
- Share how you set up your writing environment (materials, time, flexible arrangements).
- Demonstrate ways to encourage invented or phonetic spelling and decrease children's dependence on adults for spelling words.
- Tell families how topic choice increases children's writing motivation – ask what topics they notice their children enjoy writing about at home.
- Show how you model being a writer in the classroom and ask families how they use writing at home (e.g., texting, social media, work, diary). Reinforce that they are their children's first teachers. Explain to families that they are a powerful role model for their young writers.
- Talk about your focus on the writing process and how real authors go through the steps of prewriting, drafting, revising, editing, and publishing. Ask if they have noticed their children going through these steps at home when they write.

- Discuss the phases of writing development and set goals for helping children progress throughout the year.
- Share ways that you provide feedback during writing conferences and sharing time (e.g., asking the children to tell you about their writing, pointing out things they know about writing and are doing well, focusing on one teaching point instead of many)
- Invite families to share ways they celebrate their children's writing at home (e.g., hanging it on the refrigerator, listening to their children read their stories aloud)

### **Why Bridges are Important to Support Writing**

Children's emergence as writers is steered by interactions with the materials, environments, and people they encounter in their day-to-day lives. As they participate in and observe writing at home and school, children internalize their perceptions and understandings about writing. Although most children follow a similar developmental trajectory when learning to write, their distinct journeys are embedded within their own experiences and history.

Building bridges of communication, respect, and support with families can catalyze writing development by encouraging plentiful opportunities to write, availability of writing tools and materials, adult modeling, scaffolding, encouragement, and meaningful peer interactions focused on writing. Bridges can also support families in providing language experiences that help children build their oral and written vocabulary and modeling functional uses of writing in their everyday lives.

Children make judgments of their writing abilities based on their writing performance and messages they receive from significant adults in their lives (like teachers and family members). These judgments (or self-efficacy levels) are significant because they affect

children's levels of persistence and perseverance. In turn, children's effort levels lead to their level of writing achievement in school and beyond. By building bridges, you can empower families, increase family involvement, and improve the writing outcome of your students.

### **Making Time for Bridge-Building**

The hardest challenge of being a teacher is fitting everything that you deem important into your school day and incorporating every new idea that you hear into practice. We may all have experienced leaving professional development sessions with pages of notes and brimming with new ideas and possibilities, only to realize that, like New Year's resolutions, only one or two new practices would last throughout the year. Every teacher faces endless demands from their students, families, administration, and districts. Sometimes it is all you can do to get through the day without crying (and we all have those days, too). However, the support you will receive in return from families and the progress you will see in your students will well exceed the time you invest in building the bridges. Like any investment, it takes lots of energy up front, but over time, the interest builds, and the community that you establish will do much more than support your writing curriculum.

**Anna H. Hall** is an Associate Professor of Early Childhood Education at Clemson University. Her scholarship focuses on examining the writing attitudes of teachers and students and developing and adapting instructional writing strategies. She believes in forming research partnerships within her own community, as well as the educational community at large, to improve the writing lives of young children.

**Qianyi Gao** is a doctoral candidate in the Curriculum and Instruction program at Clemson University with an emphasis in Early Childhood Education. Her current work focuses on drama-based instruction and its impact on the development of young children.

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