

Inviting Families to Celebrate in the Writing Process

Families play an important role in helping children to develop writing skills. Learn how to promote successful parent engagement and develop bridges between school and home.

**Anna H. Hall
& Ysaaca Axelrod**

Family involvement has been found to play an important role in developing social capital for children's writing success in school (Coleman, 1988; Ren & Hu, 2011). Coleman (1988) describes social capital as a network of social relationships that exist in the family as well as between the family and school. Moll and colleagues (1992) describe these social networks as flexible and adaptive groups of individuals in the community that work together to facilitate the development and exchange of resources to build on the "funds of knowledge" of a community. As families become interconnected through social networks, they increase their ability to thrive and their children's ability to read and write in formal settings.

The term "funds of knowledge" refers to skills and practices that families or communities possess that have been developed through labor histories and/or shared community experiences. Teachers and schools are encouraged to learn about each child's or communities' "funds of knowledge" in order to build on their rich cultural and cognitive resources.

Seminal research including Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (1979) and Epstein's Model for Parent Involvement (1995) focus on the child as the learner, the child within the family, and the systems and factors that impact their lives. These theories suggest children's lives are embedded in their families and communities; therefore successful early childhood experiences are dependent upon strong partnerships with families (NAEYC, 2009). Furthermore, NAEYC's position statement on standards for early childhood professional preparation programs, the second standard—Building family and community relationships—specifies the importance of involving all families in their children's development and education. Although it is evident that advocacy for strong school and family relationships exists, many teachers and

schools struggle to find ways to engage families in their classrooms. At the same time, research on families from diverse cultural and linguistic groups points to differences in perceptions of what it means to be involved, support children's education, as well as assumptions about education (Dantas & Manyak, 2010).

While in this article we are talking about a traditional form of family engagement during writing celebrations, we attempt to find ways to create bridges between family and school cultures that can serve as a foundation for more meaningful relationship building around literacy practices since family involvement has also been identified as a strong predictor of improved child literacy in recent literature (Dearing, Kreider, Simpkins & Weiss, 2006; National Research Council, 2001). We also address some of the ways in which families can be invited and involved in their children's writing celebrations including families of culturally and linguistically diverse children.

**Strong
partnerships with
families promote
successful early
childhood
experiences.**

The Importance of Sharing —The Writing Workshop

Process-oriented writing strategies such as the writing workshop focus on teaching elementary school children

the craft of writing by guiding them through the writing process (i.e., prewriting, drafting, revising, editing, and publishing; Fletcher & Portalupi, 2001). As children observe their teacher model writing through daily mini-lessons, write individually on self-chosen topics for extended periods, and regularly share their writing with their classmates, they begin to view themselves as authors.

As young children begin to view themselves as authors, they simultaneously develop their sense of audience (Wollman-Bonilla, 2001). The sharing of children's work with other members of the class, posting on bulletin boards, or invitation to families to join in sharing of publications is an excellent way to get families and peers involved in children's writing. Although all parts of the writing process are important, allowing time for children to share and celebrate their writing often provides purpose for all other stages of the writing process (McCallister, 2008).



Photo by Elisabeth Nichols

Early writing skills develop with the support of families and teachers.

Writing celebrations can include all families.

Writing celebrations (i.e., special times or events designed for children to commemorate their accomplishments in the writing process and share their writing with an audience) provide a purpose for writing and an “outlet for the irrepressible human desire (and need) to share stories and experiences” (McCallister, 2008, p. 463). They also serve as a culminating activity, which celebrate the accomplishments of young authors and show growth over time (Ayers, 2012; Jensvold, 2011).

Therefore, inviting families to participate in writing celebrations provides a supportive audience for children, informs families about the school writing curriculum, and helps build a connection between home and school literacy practices (McCallister, 2008). As children prepare for celebrations, they take time to reflect on their writing; often looking through all of their pieces to select their favorite for revising, publishing, and sharing.

Families serve an important role in writing celebrations because they are viewed by children as a non-threatening audience. As children test how their writing affects their families (i.e., their intended meaning), they are given the opportunity to gain confidence in their reading, writing, and speaking abilities. They begin to find their “voice” and become willing to take risks. Allowing the entire class to share reinforces that everyone's writing has value and improves students' interactive social competence (McCallister, 2008). Children who speak mul-

iple languages can serve as language and cultural brokers by providing translations across languages for their families and classmates. This opportunity allows them to both include family members who might not speak English, as well as providing opportunities for these students to share their linguistic and cultural resources with their families as well as their classmates.

Tips for Successful Writing Celebrations

While writing celebrations may vary in format, there are many key features that help create an event that is meaningful for teachers, children, and families. The following tips will help make families feel welcome during celebrations while celebrating young authors' successes throughout the writing process.

1. **Make families feel welcome.** Invite families to writing celebrations in a variety of ways. Use weekly newsletters, email, and class websites to keep families

informed. Phone calls and texts are always helpful. To create a more personal touch, have children make handmade invitations for families. (Figures 1 & 2) Provide comfortable chairs for parents, borrow from other classrooms or ask the school custodian's for help. Carpeted areas around the room provide opportunities for families and children to gather together on the floor.

2. **Consider family work schedules.** To accommodate family work schedules, plan the writing celebration early in the morning or in the evening (Parsons, 2005). *Author's Teas* are often held in the morning and involve children in the planning process by making invitations, selecting the sharing format, and preparing refreshments for the event. *Writing nights* are another event that is family-friendly and can serve as an educational tool for families to learn about their child's writing program. During a typical writing night, family members are invited to join their child in a writing workshop experience where the teacher leads the class in a mini-lesson and then the families join their child in writing during independent writing time. This is a good opportunity for families to learn more about the literacy instruction in the classroom, as well as an opportunity for teachers to learn about family literacy practices through writing.
3. **Make sure all children feel included.** It is important to arrange events so children without family guests (this can include extended family members, an older sibling or other adult in child's life) do not feel left out.

Figure 1

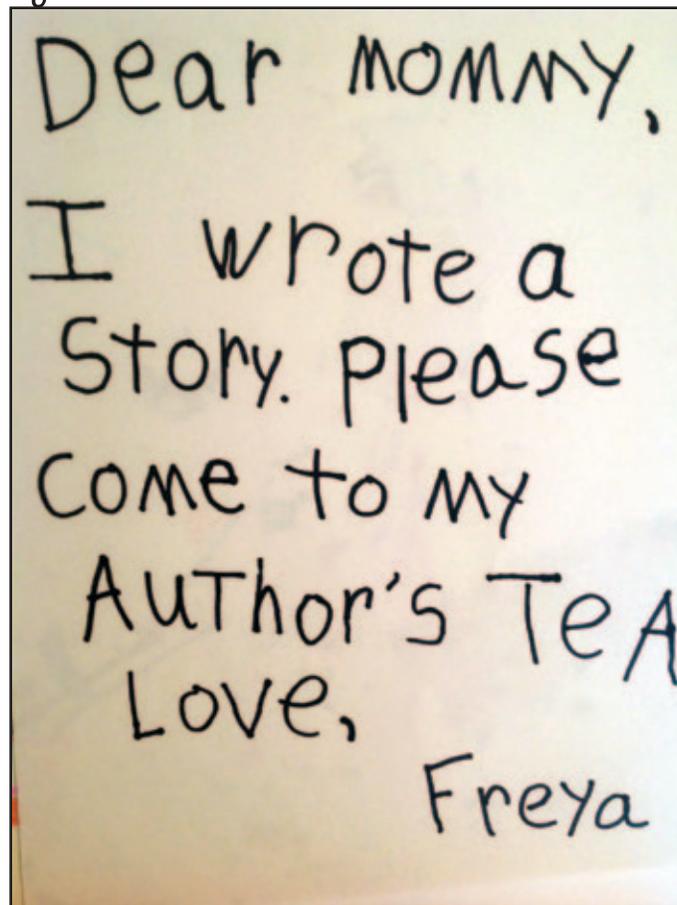
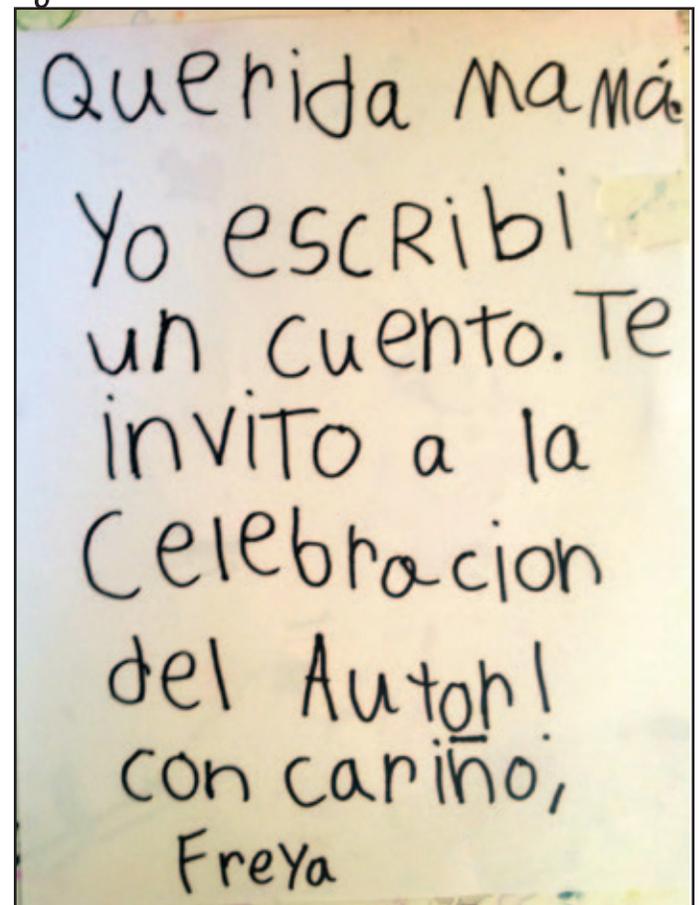


Figure 2



For example, small discussion groups can be led by 1-2 parents who interview children about their writing progress instead of pairing students only with personal family members for sharing (Ayers, 2012). Also, compliment sheets (including space for family members to record things they liked about each child's story) can be provided for the audience during a whole-group sharing celebration so all children can receive feedback regardless of whether or not their families can attend (Snowden, 2012). Finally, digital sharing

opportunities can be used to involve family members who would like to be involved from a distance.

4. **Encourage families to give feedback.** It is essential when teachers plan writing celebrations that they celebrate young authors, not solely the writing. By inviting family members to ask questions and give feedback during celebrations, children can focus on their writing growth over time instead of one perfect final piece. Two writing celebrations that invite feedback from families are “Meet and Greet”

and “Museum” celebrations. The “Meet and Greet” is modeled after book signings with professional authors. Children are invited to set up their desks with their most “famous” published pieces as well as rough drafts that led to their final pieces. Other children and family members visit each author and learn more about them during short one-on-one conversations (Jensvold, 2011). “Museum” celebrations begin with small groups of children and family members at each table. Each child shares their writing with the small group and then the group walks around the room to view other pieces. Comment sheets are available next to each piece of writing for children and guests to record compliments or questions (Parsons, 2005).

5. **Share beyond the walls.** In this digital era, there are endless opportunities for children to share and celebrate their writing with their families. In addition to classroom celebrations, all families can be invited to visit online writing galleries where students post their work using publishing software (e.g., Microsoft Publisher, Prezi) and iPad applications (e.g., StoryKit, Book Creator). Teachers can also display children's writing on classroom blogs or arrange synchronous online celebrations with families using Skype or other real-time Internet resources.
6. **Encourage linguistic diversity.** Inviting families into classrooms to share in their children's writing is also an opportunity for families to share their home languages and be engaged in the classroom. If the celebration



Photo by Elisabeth Nichols

Strong school/home partnerships ensure successful learning experiences.

includes opportunities for families to write, encourage families to write in their home languages. Provide translators or ask families who are bilingual to help translate for other families to create an inclusive community where all families can participate.

When teachers choose to celebrate writing, it sends a strong message to children and families that they value writing and that writing is a skill the school values as well (McCallister, 2008). By inviting families to participate in these celebrations, literacy pathways are strengthened between home and school, and families and children both realize that everyone's stories are worth telling (Dearing et al., 2006; National Research Council, 2001).

Although teachers must guide children through the writing process and teach them important skills along the way, the top priority should be to ensure that enjoyment and writing coexist. Routman (2005) states "We are much more apt to do optimum work when we know our best efforts will be supported and celebrated and when we believe we can succeed" (p.18). Celebrations are a time for children to soak in the moment of accomplishment, not a time for judgment or assessment (Ayers, 2012). When teachers acknowledge

their children as young authors and invite families to be involved in the pure joy of sharing writing, everyone has reason to celebrate!

References

Ayers, R. (2012). Writing Celebrations with Ruth Ayres (PODCAST). Retrieved 20 September, 2012, from <http://www.choiceliteracy.com/articles-detail-view.php?id=1108>

Bronfenbrenner, U. (1979). *The ecology of human development*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Coleman, J.S. (1988). Social capital in the creation of human capital. *American Journal of Sociology*, 94, 95–120.

Dantas, M. L., & Manyak, P. C. (Eds.). (2010). *Home-school connections in a multicultural society: Learning from and with culturally and linguistically diverse families*. New York: Routledge.A

Dearing, E., Kreider, H., Simpkins, S., & Weiss, H. (2006). Family involvement in school and low-income children's literacy: Longitudinal associations between and within families. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 98(4), 653-664. doi: 10.1037/0022-0663.98.4.653

Epstein, J. L. (1995). School/family/community partnerships: Caring for the children we share. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 701-712.

Fletcher, R. & Portalupi, J. (2001). *Writing workshop: The essential guide*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Jensvold, P. (2011). Celebrations in the writing workshop. Retrieved 16 September, 2012, from <http://bestwritingconsultant.com/celebrations-in-the-writing-workshop>

McCallister, C.A. (2008) Essay review: From the past "The author's chair" revisited. *Curriculum Inquiry* 38(4), 455-471.

Moll, L., Amanti, C., Neff, D., & Gonzalez, N. (1992). Funds of knowledge for teaching: Using a qualitative approach to connect homes and classrooms. *Theory into Practice*, 31(2), 132-141.

National Association for the Education of Young Children. (2009). *NAEYC standards for early childhood professional preparation programs*. Retrieved 20 September, 2012, from <http://www.naeyc.org/files/naeyc/file/positions/PSDAP.pdf>

National Research Council. (2001). *Eager to learn: Educating our preschoolers*. Washington, DC: National Academy Press.

Parsons, S. (2005). *First grade writers: Units of study to help children plan, organize, and structure their ideas*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Ren, L. & Hu, G. A comparative study of family social capital and literacy practices in Singapore. *Journal of Early Childhood Literacy*, 13(1), 98–130.

Routman, R. (2005). *Writing essentials: Raising expectations and results while simplifying teaching*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Snowden, J. (2012). Workshop classroom. Retrieved 20 September, 2012, from <http://workshopclassroom.blogspot.com/2010/10/writing-celebrations.html>

Wollman-Bonilla, J. (2001). Can first-grade writers demonstrate audience awareness? *Reading Research Quarterly*, 36(2), 184–201.

About the Authors

Anna H. Hall, Ph.D., is an Assistant Professor of Early Childhood Education at Clemson University in South Carolina. Anna was an early childhood classroom teacher for nine years. Her research now focuses on early writing development and the writing attitudes of teachers and students.

Ysaaca Axelrod, Ed.D., is also an Assistant Professor of Early Childhood Education at Clemson University in South Carolina. Ysaaca is a former kindergarten teacher and her work now focuses on language and literacy development of young emergent bilinguals.