

The Community Literacy Project:
Crossing Home and School Boundaries

Patricia A. Jessup and Toby Kahn-Loftus

Hayden

By Sherry Morgan

Hayden

Loves books

Babbles continuously, infectious smile, messy little guy

Brings laughter and happiness to my existence

Spark of effervescence

Becoming Charles

By His Dad, Fred Essner

Once you were my little buddy making tracks in fresh cement,

But now you are my able companion.

If I could have one wish for you, it would be to follow your star, the one
that burns in your heart.

I know you can change the world with your courage and drive.

Once you couldn't leave the front yard,

But now you can explore the universe.

You used to be small,

But now you know books.

Once you were my little buddy making tracks in wet cement,

But now you are my able companion.

Sherry and Fred are sharing these poems about their children in the Evert Middle School library. Other pairs of teachers and parents are similarly listening to each other's poetry on this evening in mid-November in rural Michigan. In the process, parents and teachers are learning about one another and crossing the often seemingly insurmountable boundaries between home and school.

In the middle school years, young adolescents often object to their parents' involvement at the school. Some parents have tired of fundraising and chaperoning and are looking for significant engagement in educational activities. Other parents have not been involved during their child's elementary years and frequently remain on the margins of the school community during the middle school years. Educators across communities recognize the importance of parents' engagement in education but grapple to find workable strategies to lessen the barriers between home and school. We offer you a snapshot of the Community Literacy Project as an example of a meaningful way for parents and educators to engage with each other around the education of young adolescents.

Evert Middle School, through the Community Literacy Project, intentionally connected a diverse group of parents and classroom teachers around literacy, a key educational component. Located in rural Michigan, Evert Middle School enrolls

approximately 400 students in grades five through eight. The town of Evart, small, picturesque, and surrounded by farms and wooded recreational areas, has only a few local industries. Many families struggle with poverty resulting in 53% of the middle school students being eligible for free or reduced lunch.

Awarded a Comprehensive School Reform (CSR) grant from the Michigan Department of Education in 2002, Evart Middle School partnered with Michigan Middle Start, a middle-grades comprehensive school improvement initiative, to increase student success. As a part of the range of services Middle Start offers, Kahn-Loftus provided on-site coaching to Evart Middle School. Based on her success with the Community Literacy Project during 30 years of teaching in the Detroit Public Schools, Kahn-Loftus suggested this project as a way to increase reading and writing in school and home, strengthen connections between the school and families by having parents and teachers work together, and extend the strong learning community at Evart Middle School in an authentic and powerful way.

The Community Literacy Project

The Community Literacy Project was modeled after *The Parent Project*, a well-documented and nationally published model that has been used successfully in a wide range of communities (Vopat, 1994, 1998). However, Kahn-Loftus reframed the project as a model for professional development that includes faculty in order to help parents, teachers and administrators build relationships and change assumptions that they often hold of one another, while also modeling literacy strategies for use at home and in the classroom.

Community Literacy Project sessions were held on six evenings in Fall 2003, followed by a culminating family literacy celebration in December. The school leadership team sought a diverse group of parent participants by mailing a letter to the parents of every child in the school. The letter described the project and invited participation on a first come, first served basis. Twelve parents and eleven middle school staff members¹ committed to the entire six weeks.

The parents who attended represented a broad spectrum of the school. As one teacher noted, “If we had wanted a heterogeneous grouping, I don’t think that we could have handpicked it any better.” The group included folks who were and were not college educated, a school board member’s spouse, a mother of one of the two African American students in the 8th grade, and individuals who had attended the Evert Schools and even been taught by teachers participating in this project. Most parents were employed. However, some had low incomes such that their children were eligible for free and reduced lunch. Teachers were excited to see this diverse group rather than the usual group of parents. As one noted:

We have a small group that comes in[to school] but it’s always the same parents. This was not that group of parents. The first night I looked around and I went “What is this group?” That was exciting too.

Project sessions were framed around discussions of parenting, teaching, and literacy. Everyone received a journal and was invited to write journal entries, letters to

¹ In addition to eight classroom teachers, one counselor and two paraprofessionals were involved in the project.

their children, and poetry based on templates, (e.g., cinquains titled “Becoming Me” and “Becoming You”). During each session Kahn-Loftus did at least one read aloud of wonderful children’s literature. Midway through the evening parents and teachers shared a light meal and time of informal conversation. All participants, parents and teachers alike, went home with doable writing and reading assignments that invited their children to read and write with them. The following week participants shared their writing in pairs or triads that included both parents and teachers. In so doing, they learned about each other. Teachers heard parents’ views and concerns for their children, and parents became aware of teachers’ efforts to teach literacy and care for the children in their classes.

As the six sessions came to a close, participants spent time in the school computer lab preparing their writing for publication in *Becoming Us*, an anthology of their poetry and prose. A few weeks after the final session, participants and their families met for a celebratory dinner, shared their poetry and letters, and received a copy of their anthology.

Becoming Us is an apt title, as parents and teachers wrote of their own “becoming” and that of their children. They also wrote letters to their children. Many of the children also wrote “becoming” poems and responded to their parents’ letters.

[The following writing samples from the anthology can be included here or as side bars as space allows. Additional poems are available if desired.]

Becoming Me

By Denise M. French

Once I was a teenager with big dreams,

Now I am a mother with a bigger reality.

Once I lost hope,

But then I found healing.

If I could have one wish, it would be to be able to “do-over” parts of
my life ... like visiting more with my grandma before she passed away.

If I could change the world, the world would see that everyone needs a chance.

Once I couldn't be patient,

But now you should see me walk side by side with my husband (not ahead)

I used to feel I could do ANYTHING,

But now I know restrictions are for a reason.

The one thing I've learned is life goes on.

Once I was reckless,

But now I am responsible, but still a “little” reckless.

Becoming Me

By Ashley Bennett

Once I was so bad at school-work

Now I am very good at it

Once I lost my mind

But then I found it and now I know I'm smart

If I could have one wish, it would be to make it all the way to the cheerleading finals

If I could change the world, the world would see me in the finals with the winner's prize

Once I couldn't cheer

But now you should see me in cheerleading

I used to feel like no one like me

But now I know that they do like me

The one thing I've learned is to never give up at stuff

Once I was bad at stuff

But now I am very good

Letter to My Mom

By Robert Irvin

Dear Mom,

Hey, what's going on? Nothing here. Getting ready for the basketball game. Hope you have fun in class today. I just wanted to say I love you very much and thanks for being there for me when I needed you. I am very thankful for what you have done for me and the man you are making me. You raised me well and keep doing a good job. You are my favorite person in the world and I love ya LOTS. Have fun and keep being a GREAT MOM!

Love ya Lots & Always

Your son,

Robert Irvin

Building Connections

Becoming Us also appropriately describes what occurred between parents and teachers during this six-week project. “Us” and “them” views that too often separate teachers and parents were changed and a literacy learning community was initiated. We invite you to listen to the voices of parents and teachers as they describe how their relationships with each other and with their children were altered. The comments cited come from phone interviews that Jessup conducted with project participants as part of Middle Start’s research activities. Six parents, six teachers, a counselor, and a paraprofessional participated in the interviews a few weeks following the conclusion of the project.

Building Connections Between Parents and Teachers

Those interviewed, parents and staff members alike, agreed that the project helped bring parents and staff members together, increased understanding on both sides, and eased communication. Parents commented on their changing views and growing comfort with teachers and how, in turn, this might help their children in school.

I feel more comfortable talking to the staff members. It just makes them seem more human. One of the staff members, I didn't really like her, until I got to really know her in this separate setting. And she seems much nicer now. I always thought she was real snotty and standoffish but she just comes across differently. It's like I was seeing her in a different light.

It can bring us all together. . . . And that's the part I like . . . everybody felt equal.

I think for me personally it was bridging the gap between staff members and parents. It makes you feel more comfortable to approach them if you need to. And sometimes that can be a big gap so it was nice to have something that brought us all together.

I think it really helped. I feel more comfortable going in and talking with staff members now and I think, if there's any problem, that they'll feel comfortable contacting me.

Staff members also valued the lessening of barriers between themselves and parents. The project helped them understand families better, see parents in a different light, and “reaffirm that students in their classes are someone’s children, and that the children are part of a family that loves them.”

It changed my perspectives on both parents and their students. . . and when [one] mother shared her poetry or her thoughts about her children it really was profound for me. . . . I could tell that she deeply cared for these children and loved them very much. She simply didn't have some of the parenting skills that she needed. . . . So it gave me a different way to relate to the student and also gave me more respect for the parent.

I think I had some preconceived notions about some parents and it was nice just to see them in a different situation and hear their writing. I don't know how to say it, but I felt more like a parent than a staff member in the project because I have kids. We discussed that a lot, so it was being on

that same ground as parents instead of just the parent-staff member relationship.

I think it made it a little easier for both sides to reach out—for parents to feel less intimidated to reach out to the school and for staff members to feel less intimidated to reach out to parents . . . for everybody it made the other side more approachable.

The hardest part for the teachers was to find out how literate some of the parents were. They were really, really good. And it became a situation where some of us were – ‘wow, we haven’t gotten into our depth of writing for ourselves for so long.’ It just stretched us because it was so open.

Several of our parents were absolutely phenomenal.

Building Connections with Children

Parents also found that the project increased their understanding of their children and encouraged communication with their children.

Cinquains made me think about how I felt about my kids; how I described them, how I thought of them. It really brings you into contact. It makes you think about your emotions; it makes your kids think about them too, about how people feel about them.

There were opportunities for us to get to know our own children as parents on a different level and even ourselves . . . There was always

opportunity for internal reflection about ourselves and us with our kids. It was a real relationship-building experience.

Building Literacy at Home and School

In the project, parents and teachers learned engaging ways to work with children around literacy. In addition parents felt that they found out more about how their children learn.

It gave us a chance to test our reading skills. How can we teach our children or make them do something as far as schoolwork and all that when we don't know it? That was the biggest part to me (parent).

[My son's] grades came up. It was interesting for me to go, and I guess that's what made me want to go the more, when I saw how they [my children] reacted to me going. Their seeing me thrilled made them thrilled for me to go. And when I would come in they would ask me "Mother, what did you do today? Let me see your homework" (parent).

Conclusion

The Evart Community Literacy Project was billed as a way to increase one's understanding of literacy and of strategies to use at home and in the classroom to build literacy. Although learning regarding literacy occurred, in the end, it was the boundaries that were crossed and the connections built that will sustain the collaboration between parents and staff members and enhance the education of children in Evart.

I see the literacy project as the first thing I've ever been involved in where the parents, staff members and students have all seen the positive benefits of us working together. The underlying meaning of this is not actually the literacy but making the connections. (staff member)

It was just a giant bridge to bring both sides together (parent).

Initially I thought it was more the literacy-based piece, but I'm thinking now that that's the secondary piece and the relationship piece is really primary. When you get the relationship piece the other things come together. We've provided these quality time experiences, these real quality things where parents and kids were getting engaged. (staff member)

The success of the Community Literacy Project led to a second session during the 2004-05 school year, involving over 30 elementary and middle school parents and 13 teachers. Just as in the first project, parents and teachers changed their perspectives of one another, recognized their mutual interest in the children's education, and built new and stronger relationships. The Community Literacy Project has become an integral part of the Evert schools' community outreach with plans underway to make this an annual event including parents and teachers from all grades, k-12. Evert Middle School found that the Community Literacy Project engaged parents and teachers in a meaningful and education-focused program that significantly lessened the barriers and built new bridges between home and school.

References

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