

# Understanding the American writing process

By Margie Rogasner

## Context

I teach a bilingual (Spanish) first grade class. Of the 25 families, two are from Guatemala, one is from Chile, one is from Ecuador and the other 21 are from Mexico. One family pays reduced lunch fees; all the others are entitled to free lunch. Three mothers have graduated from high school; just one from a U.S. school. It is appropriate to specify only the educational levels of the mothers, since, as both the literature and my anecdotal information indicate, they are responsible for their children's education. While some fathers show interest, they tend not to be the primary "instructor" at home. Further, there is only one mother who is fluent in English, though there are several whose English skills are increasing because of their participation in ESL classes or work outside the home. Although all communication with my families is in Spanish, knowledge of the English language can be an indication of the length of time a family has lived here as well as the amount of assimilation which has taken place. This tends to increase their understanding of school expectations. In almost all cases, those children whose families are more assimilated demonstrate the most academic success.

The school is located in a residential neighborhood on the north side of Chicago. Due to overcrowding, we have two buildings including an annex about two blocks away. The school has one of the most diverse populations in the city, with at least 40 languages represented. Second only to English, the Spanish native language population is growing rapidly, now totaling 40% within the school. There also are large groups of children whose first language is Urdu, Arabic, Russian, Assyrian and Hindi. There are also smaller groups who speak Persian, Greek, Bosnian, and many other "low incidence" languages. As a result, every grade level has at least one self-contained ESL class and from K-3, there is one bilingual self-contained class as well. We also offer many after school and tutoring programs. Issues of language learning, parent involvement and family communication are paramount and are continually discussed. Ideas to enhance the families' participation are both encouraged and welcomed. However, we are not always successful in reaching families other than for report card conferences or Open houses. As in many urban schools, teachers are often frustrated with the low percentage of family participation in school programs.

## Research Question

**How can I facilitate the understanding of the American writing process with immigrant families?**

### Subquestions:

What methods demonstrate the most impact on family understanding?

What are effective ways to encourage parents to participate?

What survey questions are the most effective in learning about the writing process?

## Rationale Summary

According to the literature and corroborated by my anecdotal evidence, one of the reasons immigrant families come to the United States, especially those from Latin America, is for the accessibility of a quality education for their children. Many families are well aware of the limited educations afforded them in their home countries; many of the mothers in my class, received no more than a third or fourth grade education. These mothers want the best for their children and are willing to help them in whatever ways they can. However, their limited education creates a disconnect between what they want to do and what they feel they can or should do to help their children. In my experience, because of the respect that is given the teachers, the mothers are hesitant to take initiative in academic areas unless told to do so by the teacher, for fear they might somehow interfere. Further, in most cases the mothers come from systems of education with different expectations for parent involvement. In their educational experiences, the families and teachers were separate and distinct from one another. Additionally, because the majority of mothers in my class do not work outside the home, do not drive, have limited incomes, and are responsible for the care of all the children, they are relatively restricted in their access to enriching experiences. Therefore my role includes teaching parents about our system of education and our expectations within that system.

A recent publication by Karen Mapp and Anne Henderson ([A New Wave of Evidence: The Impact of School, Family, and Community Connections on Student Achievement](#)) summarizes results from more than 50 studies on parent involvement and its impact on children's academic success in this country. Their "Key Finding" was:

*The continuity of family involvement at home appears to have a protective effect on children as they progress through our complex education system. The more families support their children's learning and educational progress, the more their children tend*

*to do well in school and continue their education.....(They looked at the) **impact of school-based parent workshops** on the achievement of 335 Title I students in nine schools in a West Virginia district. The researchers found that:*

- *students with more highly involved parents were more likely to gain in both reading and math than children with less involved parents. This finding held across all income and education levels.*
- *younger students (grades 2–4) made greater gains than older students (grades 5–8).*

A further rationale is from the "Position Paper on Family Literacy in Alberta, Canada" (Oct., 1995), which states, "there is considerable research to support...that substantial...literacy learning takes place...from birth to age six..." and that "where parents...do not model learning as an important value...their children" their literacy "can be negatively influenced" and "parents are often unable to participate...in the academic activities of their children."

This project has ramifications for looking at home-school connections, teachers' roles with parents, developing classroom community, methods for teaching literacy, and the importance of adapting programs based on the needs of families.

## **Literature Review**

My immigrant families are very concerned about the education of their children, though many are not familiar with our education system or its expectations. Data detailing their interests and concerns was obtained from several sources. The vast majority help with their children's homework; almost all read to their children, as evidenced by the short "book reports" the children write, together with their families, when they take books home. Most respond (at a rate of 80 – 100%) to my biweekly letters home in which a form is included, to be signed and returned, stating they have read the letter, and on which they can ask me a question or share a concern. I know that Mexico's education system relies heavily on rote memorization and copying (see the Colorado Trust article), aspects of learning which in this country are not as highly valued nor practiced. According to a handbook prepared for parents of Mexican students who live in Colorado (Primary Differences Between Schools in Colorado and Schools in Mexico), in Mexico "instruction is more formal since students are seated in rows and work independently...textbooks and workbooks (go) home each night...classrooms often have as many as 50 to 60 students...parents expect a rigid curriculum...(they) may not realize that their active involvement in schools (here in the US) is expected....". This is corroborated by an ERIC article, Forging Partnerships between Mexican American Parents and the Schools (Chavkin and

Gonzalez), which states that "the reasons for limited involvement include beliefs that the roles of home and school are sharply delineated....the school's role (is to) instill knowledge...(and) that one should not interfere...". This was corroborated again in Montecel's and Nicolau and Ramos' articles, which suggest that roles for school and home are very clearly defined: home is for value teaching, for learning positive behavior and respect, and for food and shelter; school is for knowledge. Respect for teachers is on a par with doctors and priests (Nicolau and Ramos). Given these understandings of the roles of home and school, it is not surprising that misunderstandings would arise.

Family income level has been shown to be a significant predictor of academic success. This was seen in a comparison of families in Great Britain, (Webster and Feiler, "The Patterning of Early Literacy Events in Ten Family Contexts and Their Visibility to Teachers") Teachers in the study were asked to suggest which children showed progress in literacy and which they felt were in jeopardy. The children were then studied through observations at home regarding literacy events. The researchers wrote of two major results: 1) all the families exhibited some form of literacy behavior, but the ones who progressed were involved in a wider variety of literacy experiences for longer durations; and 2) the two most significant predictors of success were mother's education and size of family, the fewer number of children the better.

Family roles tend to be clearly differentiated in Latino families. The mother is the caregiver and is expected to be at home with the child for long periods of time. Mothers are responsible for their children's health and welfare and education (Dunsmuir and Blatchford, "Predictors of Writing Competence in 4-7 year old Children"). Given this, it is not surprising that the father's education level was not considered a significant predictor of academic success. The significant risk factors, then, seem to place my families in several at-risk categories: they are all low-income, at least three-quarters of the mothers have had minimal schooling to the 3rd grade, and many of the families have three or more children.

As noted in Reese and Gallimore ("Immigrant Latinos' Cultural Model of Literacy Development"), while immigrant families may read with their children, it is mainly limited to the context of school. Similarly, they do not seem to understand that a child's scribbling is a precursor to writing. The researchers noticed that the mothers had erased many of the writing marks their young children made on their papers. The researchers also stated that reading to a baby was not considered literacy instruction because the mothers believed that since their babies could not talk, they would not be able to understand the words of a book. Language development is regarded as something done only after a child is old enough to understand words. Families seemed to believe that before that age, children were just babies and did not require

linguistic interaction. Many families in this country use linguistic interactions with their children from the time of birth because they realize that language needs to be continuously modeled. The expectations of teachers, therefore, are somewhat different than for those of many immigrant families. According to the same research, only writing that was done neatly and correctly appeared acceptable. This is less important in our education system where more emphasis is placed on "process" writing and on using context clues for meaning.

The finding of the relationship between home literacy behaviors and academic success was corroborated in a Florida study (Fountain and Wood, "Florida Early Literacy and Learning Model: A Systematic Approach to Improve Learning at all Levels"), which showed how learning patterns begin in the early years. Children who entered pre-school with developed pre-reading experiences became the more skilled readers. As reported in Dunsmuir and Blatchford, the quality and quantity of learning and teaching that happened in the home had a significant impact on children's academic success. This teaching and learning did not have to be school-related: rather, the degree to which there was writing of any kind in the home, was the most consistent predictor of writing competence in young children.

These studies made it clear how important families are to the academic success of children. Epstein, and Henderson and Berla ("A New Generation of Evidence: The Family is Critical to Student Achievement") have written extensively on this issue, demonstrating the importance not only of family involvement but also of the intensity and duration of that involvement. Importantly, parental involvement cannot consist simply of one-shot meetings or brief notes home. As Reese and Gallimore state, "telling parents to read to their children...is not likely to be a highly effective method..." because, as noted above, the educational systems and beliefs about learning are too different. Because Latino families are so involved with ensuring the welfare of their children, they are willing to try something else. Change happens when explicit instructions are given over a period of time, or as Reese and Gallimore note, "as part of a regular, on-going....program.." Long-term experiences with families have had the most success in "stimulating changes". The Colorado Trust paper sums it up nicely:

*"Thirty years of research confirms that family involvement is a powerful influence on children's achievement in school....When families are involved in their children's education, children earn higher grades and receive higher scores on tests, attend school more regularly, complete more homework, demonstrate more positive attitudes and behaviors, graduate from high school at higher rates and are more likely to enroll in*

*higher education than students with less involved families....particularly (for) low-income and other students at risk at failure." (p.6)*

Taking these considerations into play, I wonder how I can manage parents' concerns while demonstrating the expectations I have for learning? In early childhood, parents are still the most effective and important teachers and role models for their children. And as stated in Chavkin and Gonzalez, a parent is "the only teacher that remains with a child for a long period of time." Similarly, according to the "Position Paper on Family Literacy in Alberta, Canada" (Oct., 1995), "there is considerable research to support...that substantial...literacy learning takes place...from birth to age six..." and that "where parents...do not model learning as an important value...their children can be negatively influenced" and "parents are often unable to participate...in the academic activities of their children." This means that what children see their parents doing, saying or valuing, will be those things emulated, or at least given credence, by their children. Attitudes toward learning are developed at home, and, according to the NEA article, "Your Child's Success in School Begins at Home", those values "will carry throughout their lives". Throughout the educational literature, there is no question that "parents who are actively involved in their children's learning at home help their children become more successful learners..." (NEA)

I am particularly interested in children's writing and how families can be involved. However, as noted before, the kind of process writing that we incorporate in our classes is rather different from that with which the parents are familiar. It used to be that "writing" meant how to form letters, how to copy well from the board, how to spell, etc. ("Parents Guide to Writing", Judith Puddick, BBC.org). While these are important characteristics of a well-written piece, in the teaching of developmental writing, they should not be the main focus. Developmental writing for young children is a difficult experience, as they learn to put onto paper what they have in their heads. They must apply their own input; they can not as easily use reading strategies which help children decode and comprehend. However, even with these complexities, there can be a greater sense of competence than some develop with reading, simply because all children can make marks on paper which they can then "read" and make sense of. All children "experiment with different ways to form writing before they learn to write in school" by scribbling, drawing, stringing letters together, etc. ("Understanding Beginning Writing", Eduplace.com). Therefore, while learning to write well is both difficult and time consuming, it is something in which all can participate. With developmental writing, one can instill confidence and a sense of accomplishment without the stigma of being considered right or wrong.

Incorporating these two issues, the desire for parents to help and encourage their children combined with the difficulty of teaching and learning to write, I wonder what effect would offering workshops for families on the developmental writing process have on my students' writing?

For the parent facilitation sessions, I used a modified version of two parent writing experiences, one used in Los Angeles and one used in Detroit. In the study in California, "Parents as Authors" from Loreto Elementary School, under the auspices of the National Network of Partnership Schools at Johns Hopkins University, teachers helped parents of fifth graders learn the writing process by having the parents write. Their position is that the best way for parents to understand the writing process is by going through their own writing process. The more the parents understood, the easier it would be for them to help their children. This project was conducted with a population similar to mine: immigrant families who "have minimal schooling and/or writing ability." The other study, "Children benefit when parents are part of the literacy loop", was done under the auspices of the National Writing Project. For this project, a teacher in the Detroit Public Schools worked with parents of sixth graders to demonstrate the value and importance of writing and how that attitude can be transferred to children. Since each case suggested how important it was for the parents to do their own writing, my sessions will include this as well.

## **Tools**

I used four different sources of data collection: parent workshops and video portions made from them, parent reviews of children's journals, survey questions from both the workshops and the journals, and my own reflections.

The **parent workshops** were offered during three consecutive weeks, in three one-hour sessions. I initially informed the parents about the workshops (and that a raffle would be held after each session) through my biweekly newsletter, with a form at the bottom. A reminder notice was sent before the first session, and phone calls were made before the third one. Each workshop was offered twice, once immediately after school and once in the early evening, each with free babysitting, a raffle and a snack provided. The workshops were advertised as a chance to experience the students' writing process, in which the participants put themselves in the place of their children. At the end of the three sessions, parents answered two short questions about 1) any differences between the writing experience here as compared to that of their native country, and 2) the most important or useful skill they learned. These were not analyzed as part of the research, but they were useful information for future workshops.

Each of the three afternoon sessions was **videotaped** for about 15 minutes by a colleague. Each videotaped portion occurred in the middle section of the workshop. The video portions were analyzed by checking the duration and the variety of participation by parents as well as by me. The videos were an important source of information about how the sessions were going and what kinds of experiences were evident.

The **children's journals** were sent home three times. For each review, a short survey was attached to give focus to the parents' reviews. The first survey covered a large time span, from the beginning of the year until January (when the journals were first sent home), asking parents their thoughts about their child's progress and also what they will do at home to encourage their child's writing. The second survey covered just the month of February, and asked specific questions such as "In what way did the child make progress?" rather than asking whether or not the child made progress. The third survey covered the month of March, with very specific questions about handwriting, the number of details in each story, and periods at the end of sentences. There was also a question asking parents to compare February's and March's writing. A final question on the March survey asked if the family had any questions for the teacher.

The last source of information came from **my reflections**. After each day's workshops I wrote a paragraph of my reactions to what had happened. This helped to give me an idea of not only what I saw, but also what I might try the next time.

## **Data Description and Analysis**

Of the 25 families, 10 mothers participated in the parent workshops at least once. Each workshop focused on a different strategy of writing/reading. Each strategy was selected not only because of the ease in teaching it or the short time needed to learn it (due to the very short time of each workshop), but also because each could easily be taught in the home. The first two strategies experienced were a "picture walk", where we "told" the story from the pictures in advance of reading the words, and the second was to stop before the end having the "students" write their ideas of the ending. The second workshop focused on the strategy of looking at only the cover of a book, then using a graphic organizer to write ideas about the beginning, middle, and end of the book. Before they wrote, they had a short discussion, as their children do in class, done to develop both vocabulary and creativity. On that same graphic organizer, they wrote what they thought would be the ending, and then their ideas about the middle section. I explained that the middle is the hardest to write for children, so, acting as their children, they



would follow this same pattern. I then read the book to compare their ideas. The third workshop was devoted to evaluating each child's journal, also using a graphic organizer.

The afternoon workshops had a higher and more consistent attendance than the evening ones. In the afternoon, the sessions were attended by six, four, and five mothers, respectively; in the evening the attendance was three, two and two. The double sessions were offered in order to include as many parents as possible. It made sense to have one session when the children were already at school, as most of the mothers walk to pick up their children at school. For those whose access to cars was limited, an evening meeting seemed ill-advised.

Three mothers participated in all of the workshops, and three participated in two of them. Of the ten who attended, five were mothers of children who were doing well, three had children who were making progress, and two had children who were progressing at much slower paces. There was a correlation between the mothers who actively participated in the workshops and the children who are doing well. While I noticed that all the mothers participated in the writing portions, they did so on varying levels. There was a correlation between those who wrote using details and understood the strategies with those who verbally participated and attended consistently.

The workshops were advertised as sessions in which parents "take the place of their children" to learn what happens in class. I did this so as to not give families the impression that I thought they could not write. Much has been written about parent "writing workshops" with the suggested purpose of teaching families how to write better so they can help their children. While parents may become better writers, teachers need to believe that parents are capable. I believe that asking parents to come to a workshop in order to learn to write seems too critical of the families. My reticence to use the "writing workshop" nomenclature proved appropriate because one parent wrote to me that she would not be coming because "she already knew how to write". I immediately sent home a short follow-up note to all families explaining that I hoped they knew that I was not going to teach "writing" because I knew they knew how to write. I then further explained what the workshops would entail.

From the videos, I noted that in sessions one and two, it took almost the entire segment for the more reticent mothers to participate. If the workshops could have been scheduled for longer periods of time, perhaps those shyer mothers would have participated even more. However, most mothers had to leave right after the hour was completed, so longer sessions seem prohibitive. I also noticed that in both sessions, during the first seven to eight minutes, I continually offered explanations for what and why the mothers were writing. Next time I will ask the mothers for their input. This will encourage more conversation. In the third video, when

the mothers reviewed their children's journals, I interrupted twice as they were writing to explain what to look for in the journals. Next time I will give each participant a list of what they should look for as a guide to review the journals. This would enable a more focused discussion. Also in the third session, I read a list of ideas of what they could do to help their children in their homes and gave the list to them afterwards rather than giving that list to the participants first, from which a discussion could ensue. This would have given the workshop more of a facilitative feel, as opposed to what seemed to be a "teacher-student" one.

The questions after the final workshops were revealing. For example, when asked about the differences between the teaching of writing here versus in their native countries, there were several very astute observations. One responded that the "teaching of vocabulary is more direct here." In our sessions, we had discussed different ways to increase vocabulary and its importance. Another respondent noted that "The teachers in Mexico didn't explain much. They only wrote words on the board and the children had to copy them". We discussed that copying is an important skill which the children do in class, but that it is not the most important part of the writing process. Other comments included: "There was nothing about syllables. There was no writing for expression" and "I always read to the teacher and she would always correct me a lot. Here the children are allowed to practice reading letters and words". Not only did the mothers recognize some of the major differences between the two education systems, but they could articulate it as well.

They also could explain what they would do to facilitate writing at home. At the beginning of the first session, the mothers made a list of places or times when we "write". The meaning of "writing" was initially very limited (stories, alphabet, homework). But by the last session, based on their responses, the mothers expanded their views of what writing is and where it should take place. For example, "I will try to help him with reading words, but I don't always understand them myself". This was a surprisingly revealing comment from a mother who was rather shy in the workshops and whose son was not progressing well. Other comments included "I will read and write everyday", "I will help him to write *fun* stories", "I will help him to learn by "playing" with him as practice so as not to be so boring", and finally "I am going to buy paper and pencils so she can write at home when and what she wants. I will buy her books that have places to write things in them. I will make sure to be enthusiastic about whatever she writes, no matter how small a note or a card".

It is clear on the videos and from my written reflections that a byproduct developed from these workshops was a community of parents. Teachers know the importance of developing a

community of learners in their classrooms. The same should be true for parents, especially for my particular group of families.

Developing a community of mothers was an unexpected benefit, though in retrospect it makes sense. Many of the mothers are isolated from other families, since, according to my anecdotal information, they do not go outside of their homes except to go to the store, to church or to relatives' homes. And, in those instances they always take their children. The mothers are also removed from their own natal families, most of whom are still in either Mexico or another Latin American country. The support that one receives from family, therefore, is often not available to these mothers. Some have related to me their fears about going outside, when in fact, our community is relatively safe to walk around, especially in the daytime. The mothers, especially those who do not work outside the home, have limited experience interacting with other mothers. However, on the video, and in the evening sessions, the moms joked with each other, including me in their humor, and they asked each other questions about their respective children's behavior.

More importantly, because of the comfort level which had developed as a result of the experiences I had had with these families, after one of the workshops, I was approached in confidence by two parents who told me of a very serious situation in one of the families. They felt that I would be able to inform responsible persons who could get help. The personal nature of the after-school activity provided a forum and fostered a caring community which the parents probably would not have had with either an all school workshop or in a large group experience. These same mothers thanked me for giving them the opportunity for the workshops and expressed their wish that other teachers would do the same.

Another example of the importance of developing a community of parents was when one mother was delighted to meet the mother of a particular child whose name she had heard repeatedly in her house. Another mother offered a ride to a mother who had walked to the school, even though they had not met previously.

The issue of isolation was highlighted when one of the mothers, who came twice, was initially wary of leaving her six-year old child, a boy from my class, in the babysitting room. The child cried bitterly as the mother departed. The babysitter is Latina and the school's babysitting service is one which all mothers use when they take ESL or other adult classes. I expressed my surprise. In reply, the mother stated that she had never left any of her children with anyone, other than her 12-year-old son and then only briefly. Similar to some other mothers, she took her children everywhere. I wondered if the other mothers who had not attended the workshops would have come if they had been able to keep their children in the room

with us. While I do not think this would have been helpful for the parents' participation in the workshops, perhaps older siblings could be utilized in some way in future workshops.

The journals were sent home three times, in January, February and in March. The first set of journal questions (sent home in January) covered a long period of time; the second and third set only a one-month period of time. The responses to the first set of survey questions were not as in depth as they were for the next two survey question sets. Perhaps that is because, as with children, adults respond better when there is not an overwhelming amount of data to which to respond. One tends to skim when there is too much information to absorb. Additionally, the first part of the children's notebooks took place at the beginning of school. For the first several weeks, the children learned how to copy from an overhead projector. Therefore, the words and sentences were, for the most part, correctly written. It would not be surprising if there were some confusion as to why their children suddenly began writing with what seemed to be random letters.

Realizing that the parents may have been confused about these very different "writing" experiences (the copying versus their own developmental spelling), I realized that I had not been consistent about having children write the dates at the top of the pages. I would have avoided considerable misunderstandings if I had asked parents to only read pages with particular dates. The dates were written on the pages for the next review of journals.

The time frame for the second journal review was more delineated (the month of February), and the situations were different: families were asked for their "thoughts" about their children's progress, as I hoped to garner reflective responses. I purposefully asked reflective and open-ended questions so as not to influence the parents' responses. However, while reflective questions can be appropriate, I believe they should be asked of the parents only after at least one other specific set of questions had been sent home. For example, of the 23 responses to the question "Did your child make any progress in the month of February, and, if so, how?" 17 either wrote about forming letters, were not sure, or did not respond.

Since I was hoping for a more in depth response about the quality and content of their children's writing, I changed the questions again for the March journal review. This time the questions were specific, including details in the stories or comparisons with February. There were more specific responses on this third set of parent questions. . Another reason may have been the specificity of the questions. Although 20 families sent their reviews back to me, one only wrote the child's name but no response. Of the other 19 responses, all said their child wrote using at least one detail. Only two of those, however, actually wrote an explanation of their answer; all the others simply answered with "Yes".

For a question related to the consistency of putting periods at the end of their sentences, 16 said their child did put periods at the end, though again only two answered with more than a one-word "Yes" response. Interestingly, in Mexico, periods are not emphasized as they are here. Similarly, the capital letters are not emphasized. Perhaps needing to evaluate the writings for periods and capital, made parents more aware of these differences.

Another question, comparing February and March, elicited the most comments and reflection. No one answered with only a one word answer "Yes" or "No". For example, one said their child was making fewer errors in spelling. Another said it was easier to read than in February. Another commented that she wasn't sure what the word meant (in Spanish the word she referred to is "ortografía", the actual act of writing) but that she felt her daughter was trying very hard. Another noted her daughter was able to better write complete sentences. Another wrote in some detail about the details in her daughter's writings. Still two others noticed that their children were writing more than before and working harder. All of these responses were an accurate reflection of the respective child's writing. The mothers who attended the workshops wrote about the complete sentences and the details. The reflective nature of the parents' comments for this question suggests that having tangible comparisons may be a more appropriate way for parents to gauge their child's progress.

Finally, I asked if there were any questions about the notebooks. In most cases, the responses were concerns or observations rather than questions. For example, one mother noted that her son did not have any "plans" for his writing in advance of writing (a mother who attended every workshop). Another said she was not sure what to write because she did not know how to compare her daughter with others in first grade. Another commented that her daughter needed to put periods and to separate words more. One mother wrote of her concerns that her daughter confuses the letters "b" and "d" and that they are trying to help her though she has problems writing them. Another commented that she had difficulty evaluating her son's notebook because he wrote so little (she attended one time). In all these cases, though the responses were not questions, they were wonderful observations. The fact that seven families did not respond to the question with a question made me wonder if I needed to reword the last one and make it more open-ended, such as "What are your concerns or thoughts about your child's writing?" However, the previous experience of asking open-ended, reflective questions, had not elicited thoughtful responses.

One reason for more detailed responses from the parents on the third review may have been because they had previously made responses and were therefore more prepared to respond. This offers a good rationale for continuing the parental analyses over time. As with students,

adults perform at higher levels with repetition. Another reason for the more in depth responses may have been because the questions were much more focused and gave the families not only more specific characteristics to look for but also illuminated those areas which we consider important. This, too, makes sense since the families are not familiar with what we value in terms of process writing. Teachers must "model" for parents as well as for their students.

The families who responded using terms or ideas from the workshops were from the mothers who attended (four of them). This suggests that the workshops made an impression. However, as three of their children are some of the more advanced writers in the class, it is unclear how much impact the workshops had on their journal writing. There may have been impact, however, on what the mothers learned and can do at home with their other children. The mother who attended all six sessions wrote about her son's lack of "planning" in his writing. Although her child is not one of the more advanced writers in the class, what the mother learned may have an impact as time goes on. Another mother who attended twice did not include any of the ideas from the workshop, though she commented at the meetings how pleased she was to attend since she had not been able to complete more than three grades in school. She especially asked for help with understanding the mathematics curriculum. This is interesting because her son is one of the best mathematics students in the class, but she feels unable to help him. Her experience makes it clear that including more families in the workshops could make a difference, if not for that particular point in time, then to enable parents to understand the learning processes for a later time and or for other subjects.

The high numbers of families who responded on each of the three waves of the questionnaires (22/24, 23/25, 20/25) is an indication of the sustained interest the families place on helping their children. Even though this was a difficult experience for some of the families, as indicated by some of the vague and misunderstood answers, it is clear that they encourage their children's academic success.

## **Reflections and Suggestions for the Future**

One of the advantages of offering small group experiences for the families is the camaraderie that is developed. I feel much closer to the parents who came regularly. Two of the moms are still trying to get me to come to the knitting and sewing class they teach. They were the same families who I asked, as a part of the process for an award, to be my parent representatives with the observers. The teachers from the award evaluation committee commented to me later that each of the parents noted how much they had gotten from the parent workshops and how, as a result, they feel closer to me. Because of the comfort level that we

developed as a result of these workshops, two of the moms felt enough at ease to confide in me their worries about a serious issue (referred to above) confronted by one family.

I think the workshop group developed a level of camaraderie with me as well. On the videos it is clear how we enjoyed ourselves during parts of the experience. They also felt comfortable enough to correct my Spanish. I encouraged that by my also being a participant in the writing experiences and, like the children do, we corrected each other's papers. I think their correcting my Spanish empowered the mothers, demonstrating that they had something to teach *me* and to offer to the workshops. I think it made the workshops less intimidating for the mothers. My being an active member of the group, and not just an observer, gave the participants the message that we are all learning. Children also learn this in the classroom: we all work together helping each other. When the parents realize that they, in fact, are much better at something than the teacher, barriers are broken. Parents gain a sense of confidence because it suggests that they are equally as capable as the teacher, an idea which may translate into the realization that they can help their children at home, that the roles do not have to be so separate. (See Chavkin and Gonzalez regarding the clear divisions Mexican families make between school and home.)

I learned the importance of writing clear, concise and focused questions. When the journal review questions were broad and reflective ("what do you think..." "what kind of progress do you see...", etc.), there was less understanding of what was being asked. When I asked very specific questions about aspects of the writing, the parents answered more easily. This makes sense, as I am asking families to react to something with which they are not familiar. In order for the families to become familiar enough to answer the reflective questions, they have to understand what they are reflecting about!

I think that if I were to send home the journals for analysis **in advance** of the workshops and with the appropriately worded questions attached, the parents would then have a frame of reference for discussion in the workshops and more of an understanding of what they need to know. The journal analyses in advance of the workshops may spur more interest by more parents as they would pick up on issues with their children's writing. This might also limit the misunderstandings and the vague responses. Also, it makes sense to have available a written guide for reviewing the journals during the workshops. After all, the purpose of these workshops was to demonstrate to the parents the expectations for writing in the United States. Assuming that their expectations are different, how could I expect the families to know what they should evaluate? A list would not only have guided them, it would also have served as a statement for what I consider important. It would have been a tangible teaching and learning tool. I should

also have sent my writing rubric home with each set of questions and with each journal. This, too, would demonstrate to families what is valued. The rubric would have also given a context for analyzing the journals.

I think it was a good idea to send the journals home. It gave parents a better idea of how their children's writing was progressing. It also showed the families the kinds of writing performed in the class. They also got a sense of what "developmental spelling" means through their children's writing, without my having to give a formal explanation. Also, it is easier to see a range of writing over time in order to evaluate progress rather than to see each piece of finished writing, as is usually done in class. This was borne out with the deeper responses to the question comparing the children's writing between February and March. Next time, I need to respond to the families about their written comments for the journal reviews. Not only would this indicate the seriousness with which I take their participation, but it could facilitate more learning about the writing process. This would also reinforce the home-school connection which I referred to at the beginning of the article. This is corroborated by such articles as that from the National Education Association (NEA) suggesting that parents need to understand that the values and attitudes towards learning are developed at home and are instilled in their children for a very long time. It is very important for children, especially younger ones, to see that what happens in school is being reinforced at home. They will see that learning does not happen in a vacuum nor does it end after leaving the school door. The article from Alberta, Canada showed that what the children see everyday at home is what is valued by them. And on the other side, it is very important for parents to realize that what goes on in school can and should be reinforced at home. Having the children's journals to review, gives parents a glimpse at the curriculum as well as a look at those writing experiences which are considered important here in this country.

In the journal reviews, I thought more people would write about an issue that we had discussed at the workshops. But, perhaps this just points to the difficulty and the considerable amount of time it takes to really learn something. I also know that a one-day workshop is not nearly as effective for me as a learner as is one of longer duration in which there is time to reflect on what is being learned, to try out some new ideas, and to revise thinking. So, why shouldn't it take the same large amounts of time for the parents to learn something, which for them is totally new? In the literature, Reese and Gallimore showed very clearly the necessity for long-term experiences with parents. It is harder for adults than for children to learn new skills, especially when they have been taught skills previously in different ways.



Another change I want to make is to offer the workshops in the fall. I think parents would be more interested in getting to know me and my curriculum at the beginning of the year, and to highlight some of the differences between kindergarten and first grade.

Another avenue to explore would be the efficacy of offering the three workshops on a weekly basis. I purposely held them in that way, thinking that parents would be less likely to forget the schedules if they were close together. I also knew that to develop trust within the group, especially for those less verbal participants, I needed to have the sessions close together in order to maintain the rapport that developed among the parents, as well as with me. At the end of the last session, I asked the mothers who were the most consistent participants for their suggestions regarding the schedule of workshops and the times for them. Each of the four mothers said, independently, that having three in a row was better for their schedules and that the afternoons were especially good for them because of their commitments at home. In the Loreto Elementary writing project, in Los Angeles, the teachers worked with a consistent group of participants over time, perhaps because they offered their workshops during the school day: the principal paid for substitutes to teach their classes during the workshop times.

I think it would have been helpful to have given a short questionnaire at the end of each workshop. We teachers are often asked to write "Exit" slips after workshops which help to both evaluate the experience for the participant and to suggest to the presenter directions for the next workshop. Doing this would enable me to reflect on the teaching and learning and to guide the next workshops according to what the mothers wanted. This would also give them the sense that their opinions were valued, and would encourage the mothers to continue because they are instrumental in tailoring the workshops to their needs. Similarly, at the beginning of the first workshop and at the end of the third one, as a kind of "pre-test" and "post-test", it would be useful to ask the moms to write their own ideas about writing. This could be used as a way to evaluate learning by the parents.

From the research it is clear that immigrant families, especially those from Latin America, respond more to personal interactions than to letters or notes (Colorado Trust article, for example). For each of my workshops I sent several notes home as reminders and explanations, in each asking the parents to tell if and when they were attending. Since I was offering the workshops twice each time (after school and early evening), I needed to know in order to notify the childcare of the extra children who would be coming, and for having enough "raffle" prizes for each session. I reminded those parents I saw at school dismissal time of the workshops, but only for the first session. After that, I let my reminder note be the message. A much more effective way would be for the three parents who attended regularly to call the other

parents who had either come previously or who had written of their interest on my reminder slip. To do this, at our first meeting I would have to get permission of the participants to use their phone numbers. If this were not feasible, I could call each previous participant the day before, as I know that one-to-one contact is most effective.

## **Policy Implications**

### **1) School events, celebrations, or workshops need to be offered at times appropriate for all families.**

Offering these experiences only in the evenings is exclusionary. Not all families work 9-5 jobs, have access to cars and use babysitters to go out in the evenings. Also, there is a cultural consideration in which many immigrant fathers are concerned about their wives going out in the evenings. Considering these issues, why can't Open House, curriculum events, science fairs, etc. take place both during the day *and* at night? Why can't Report Card Day start earlier and go later at night, with a longer break in the middle of the day for the teachers? For those teachers for whom having two presentations might cause problems with their own personal situations, there could be a sharing of the responsibilities: one teacher provides the service during the day, while another does so at night. This might even have the added benefit of demonstrating to families that all the teachers at the school are teaching similarly, that their curricula are aligned, that each teacher is as good as another. It would also allow for families to meet each other.

### **2) Parent involvement cannot be an add-on or an afterthought.**

Research shows very dramatically that those children whose parents play an integral part in the activities of the schools, from all income and educational levels, achieve at higher levels than do those whose parents are not active (Epstein; Henderson and Berla; Shepard; Reese and Gallimore). And, even in my small sample, the greater number of mothers who were the most active participants in the workshops were mothers whose children are progressing the most. Teachers need to offer opportunities for parents to work interactively with their children on activities from the classroom. Parents and children writing together, at least once a month, could become part of homework assignments. Writing together would give the child a role model and would help the child see words and sentences correctly written. It would indicate to the child that what they do at home matters and has consequences academically. Plus, this would help the parents learn about the curriculum in a less threatening and more meaningful way. Parents would learn ways to help their child practice writing, and would suggest the level at which the

child is progressing academically. Doing this might make conference time more meaningful because the parent would already be aware of how their child is functioning.

### **3) Parent workshops should be offered by the individual teachers, not as a whole school activity.**

Karen Mapp and Anne Henderson showed the impact of school-based parent workshops on student achievement. But these workshops need to be offered by the child's teacher. Families want to get to know their children's teacher, they want to know the curriculum of their children's classroom, and they will feel comfortable with a teacher with whom they have regular contact. The child's teacher becomes a kind of "ombudsman" for the larger educational system that the families must negotiate. As the literature suggests, immigrant parents usually will follow through on whatever suggestions are made by the child's classroom teacher. However, this can only happen if there is a trusting relationship that has developed between the teachers and the families. One way this can happen is by personal contacts. The teacher can arrange teaching and learning based on the knowledge of the students in her/his classroom.

This was shown to be an accurate assumption when I was asked to offer this same series of 3 workshops again to all of the bilingual classes (preK-3). I sent flyers home several times to all the other classes and encouraged mothers who I saw personally to attend. Even though most of the families in second and third grades knew me, still only four out of the 11 families who participated were from classes other than my own (and only from kindergarten and second grade). None of these four families participated in all three of the workshops. There was more consistent participation from the seven families from my class: one mother came all three times, four came twice and two came once. There may also have been an issue related to the level of encouragement with which the other teachers supported the workshops.

If there is a whole school event, the announcements should be sent to families signed with each individual teacher's name for each classroom. In that way, the parents will see that their child's teacher requests their participation and will be part of the event.

### **4.) It is critical to develop a community of parents.**

Teachers understand the importance of developing a positive classroom community among their students. The same is true among the families. They can use each other for babysitters, for securing rides, or for finding information about resources. They can use each other for help with their respective children's work. Or, as it happened in my workshops, the community of parents act as a support group.

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