Children, Parents, and Writing: Using Photography in a Family Literacy Workshop

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FROM AN EARLY AGE, young children, when given the opportunity, demonstrate their interest and enthusiasm for writing. Toddlers spontaneously pick up pencils and crayons to make marks on paper, walls, and floors.

Preschoolers’ scribbles are indications of their growing understanding of how print and story work. Their oral stories are often imaginative, enthusiastic explorations of words, characters, and plot growing out of their experiences.

When writing is a natural part of children’s lives at home and at school, children’s concentration on writing is more focused, giving them and their parents, friends, and extended family enjoyment and satisfaction. In their scribbles, drawings, words, and symbols—their sign systems—children show that they have something important to say. As they gain greater control over their writing, their sign systems become more elaborate and intricate.

Parents, children, and writing

Parents who actively create a learning environment that supports and encourages writing stimulate children’s interests in language and reading (Harste & Woodward 1989). Encouraging a young child’s writing development promotes the child’s positive self-image as a capable learner. The positive interaction between parent, child, and the child’s writing attempts builds a foundation for future learning successes. Parents who encourage their children’s writing let them know it is valued.

Researchers and program developers who have involved both parents and children in writing activities report increased parental involvement, improved child literacy development, and enthusiasm for reading and writing, and increased home-school communication (Sides 1994; Albee & Drew 2001; Kirkpatrick 2002). Hurtig also reports benefits for the parent participants. When immigrant families and
From our many years of experience as teachers and administrators in public schools, we know firsthand that there is a lot we can learn from all families—they have knowledge and strengths to share and from which researchers can learn.

Vygotsky's [(1934) 1962] learning theory has implications for our work with parents. His notion of the zone of proximal development (all the functions and activities that a child or learner can perform only with the assistance of someone else) applies to all learners. We see our role as interveners in a scaffolding process, beginning at parents' present level of knowledge and skill and moving them toward a higher level of skill and understanding.

Also affecting the connections learners make are the socially constructed norms, attitudes, and behaviors (Gee 2001) that shape actions and interactions and influence how literacy is defined. Providing new or unfamiliar content in a social setting, with appropriate support, helps parents take their connections to a new level of understanding.

families of low socioeconomic status participated in a writing initiative, the result was a positive impact on adult participants' self-perceptions and identities, as well as on their children's reading and writing (Hurtig 2004). Parents who wrote to and with their children become positive role models whom the children want to emulate. Such interaction can also contribute to positive parent/child bonding.

Programmatic factors in family literacy projects can have a positive impact on family literacy practices (Caspe 2003). This article describes how using photography in a family literacy workshop helped parents better understand children's literacy development and shape their home literacy practices with their young children in light of their new understanding.

Since photography and writing are both composing processes, they help children develop their visual as well as linguistic competencies.

The Picture It! Publish It! Read It! Knowledge Exchange family literacy project was a pilot study of how the Regional School Board and a local family resource center in rural Nova Scotia might work together as community partners on literacy undertakings. The focus was on improving the literacy skills of single mothers so they could support their young children's literacy development. The school principal and the director of the family resource center contacted parents on our behalf. The school was used as the workshop site. We two researchers, representing Saint Vincent University, designed and carried out the project with a research assistant—a teacher at the school—and a program assistant who worked at the school. A Knowledge Exchange Grant from the Canadian Council on Learning funded the project.

Six single mothers and their children, ages 4 to 6 years old, participated together in a series of literacy workshops. Staff at the school and the family resource center felt that both the parents and the children would benefit. They engaged in activities focused on early writing development and also created books about themselves and about subjects of personal interest, using photos the children took on a walk around the neighborhood with their parents.

Adding photography

Labbo, Eakle, and Montero (2002) believe photography has “an important role to play in facilitating children’s literacy experiences” (p. 6). In a nursery school in Scotland, Gooch (2002) found that when preschool children used digital photography to record their home adventures with classroom teddy bears, they increased independence, story writing, sequencing skills, creative skills, and language and communication skills. As well as being fun, the photos were a visual reminder of their adventures. Later, they played an important role in helping the children recount their activities with the bears.

Since photography and writing are both composing processes, they help children develop their visual as well as linguistic competencies. And when parents and children make their own books with their own photos, they are using what they know in meaningful and satisfying ways.

Involving parents and their children in sharing the writing of picture books, using photos they have taken together, has tremendous potential for helping families learn how to support their children’s writing in positive and engaging ways. And because taking photographs is a typical practice in many families, parents and children see themselves as capable participants rather than participants with little knowledge or expertise in a “school activity.” When children and parents create their own picture books using their own photos of familiar subjects, they have not only an impetus for writing, but also a way to share their knowledge and ideas with each other and with others. The photos become a catalyst for conversations, vocabulary building, story building, and confidence boosting.
From design to practice: Session one

We designed the Picture It! Publish It! Read It! workshops to build on the parents' knowledge of literacy, as identified in preproject interviews. From those interviews it was clear that the parents separated the fun activities they did with their children—imaginary play, baking, crafts, computer games, and outdoor play—from what they considered to be more formal, school-readiness activities such as coloring, tracing numbers and letters, and sitting still for stories. They had very narrow definitions of literacy and did not connect what they themselves liked and wanted to do as learners with activities they did with their children as learners. Although parents recognized the importance of reading, none mentioned writing or storytelling as an early literacy activity. Writing for them meant printing or spelling, and stories were something you read at bedtime.

The workshops began with the familiar activity of reading aloud using a variety of picture books, including a number with attention-getting features such as rhyme, repetition, predictability, colorful illustrations, and pop-up and lift-the-flap designs. We modeled reading aloud, conversation starters, and questioning techniques. We built on the interest of both adults and children in lift-the-flap books and introduced an activity in which the child and the parent wrote their own lift-the-flap stories, which they then read to each other. Tentative at first, the parents helped their children decide what character they would hide under a flap (a bear, an alligator, an octopus, and such) and where the character would hide (for example, behind the door, inside the refrigerator, under the bed). Then they helped their children illustrate each page. The six-page books were stapled together for the families to take home.

The first workshop ended with families taking a walk around the community. We gave each child a disposable camera—a simple point-and-shoot camera with a winding device to advance the film—to use to take pictures of themselves and familiar sites and subjects. The use of photography, we thought, would allow the families to take pictures of things that interested the children.

The children took lots of pictures of the school, the playground, their parents, the facilitators, and each other. They were very interested in photographing various body parts, such as their eyes, their mouth (complete with views of tongues and gaps from missing teeth). They were fascinated with the ground and their shoes and those of their friends, and they took pictures of their own and others' hands. They also photographed houses, yards, people
walking their dogs, environmental print, and an assortment of plants and cloud formations.

When we returned to the school to bring the session to a close, we told the children we would take their cameras and develop their photographs, and we would bring them to our next session. They exchanged their disposable cameras for literacy bags filled with books to read and supplies for writing and book making, such as crayons, markers, stickers, an assortment of paper, staplers, fasteners, and magnetic letters—writing materials to keep up their enthusiasm for writing between workshop sessions.

**Making a connection: Session two**

We began the second session with the parents alone. The children went off to the gym with the child care teacher assistant while we showed the adults a PowerPoint presentation we had created about the importance of writing with children (see www.janebaskwill.com). The presentation became the basis of our discussion with the parents about reading and writing activities and the connection between reading and writing. We asked the parents to help us assess the value of the content of the PowerPoint, a role they enthusiastically took on. We then explained the upcoming book activity and how they could help their child with it.

It is difficult to describe the excitement that ensued when the children rejoined the parents. As the children opened their packages with the prints of the photos they had taken, there was a mixture of amazement and pride on the faces of both parents and children. They studied their pictures closely and shared them with each other.

The giggling was infectious, and the language the children used in response to their photos, recalling both the walk and the decision to shoot a subject, confirmed our belief that photography was a powerful tool with great potential for family literacy. The parents were as engaged as the children, asking questions, supplying additional information, and contributing their own reminiscences as they discussed with their child which photos to use in their book. Parents and children had no difficulty moving on to the task at hand, the writing of their books.

For the parents’ part, they took their lead from their children, as together they mapped out their book using the template we provided. There was negotiation, decision making, and supported practice as families created just the right text to go with each photo. Some parents wrote for their child, some shared the writing, and others patiently waited while their child painstakingly wrote (or typed on the computer) what they wanted to say. At the end of the day, each parent and child took home their completed, coauthored book, along with any unused photos. They also received another literacy bag to support their new interest in writing and book making.

**What we learned**

The use of disposable cameras had a number of benefits for both children and parents. The most obvious, as far as the parents were concerned, was a noticeable shift in power relations between the workshop facilitators and the participants. Often, when projects or programs are offered to parents, despite organizers’ best efforts, it is the researchers, the school staff, or the family resource center personnel who, by virtue of their knowledge and training, are seen as having the expertise. We observed a noticeable shift in parents’ comfort levels in response to the use of a familiar device, the disposable camera. Taking photos was something with which they had experience. Photos are common artifacts in most households. Families needed no education or training to take the photos or to view them. It was a familiar and comfortable activity for all participants.

Not only were the simple cameras not intimidating to the participants, which might not have been the case if we had used digital cameras, but they leveled the playing field. Everyone had some experience with photography, either as the photographer or

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as the subject. And with the cameras in the children's hands rather than the adults', parents did not feel the burden of having to be successful. If the photos did not turn out, it was not because they had failed or were lacking in some way. In addition, the photos were a self-esteem booster for both adults and children. The parents were proud of their children's photography ability and the sustained interest and enthusiasm each child showed for the activity. The children were also proud of the photos they took and responded positively to their parents' valuing of the photos.

We also noticed that parents changed their behavior toward their children. Where in previous sessions they had expected their child to use school-like behaviors (sitting still, being quiet and attentive, staying on task) and worked to enforce these expectations, for this activity parents did not seem to have such expectations. There was no school-like standard to which they felt their child needed to measure up. They showed no stress or embarrassment at their child's noise or activity level. The parents had nothing to measure their child's behavior against except the degree to which they all enjoyed the activity. They related that enjoyment to the enjoyment they felt during the other family activities they spoke of in the preproject interview—crafts, walks on the beach, and games. As the parents and children worked on their books using the photos, the atmosphere of the workshop was reminiscent of the atmosphere generated on the photo walk. The workshop had created a link between an everyday activity (the walk, taking photos) and a literacy activity (making a book), and the excitement, enjoyment, and learning in each were comparable.

Postproject Interviews

In postproject interviews, the parents were very enthusiastic about the workshops. They appreciated the opportunity to work with their children doing literacy activities, something they said they had not experienced previously in a community setting. In addition, their responses showed that parents and children had learned a lot. As one parent put it, "I learned all kinds of ideas and new things that I can do with [my child] to make reading fun."

As we explored in greater detail what parents meant by learning new things, we realized there had also been a shift in their understandings; parents had expanded how they defined literacy experiences. In the preproject interviews, all parents stressed the importance of reading and acknowledged trying to read books to their children with varying degrees of success. However, they did not see any connection between literacy and their everyday activities. Literacy meant struggle, school-like tasks, and things they and the children did not associate with enjoyment. However, in the postproject interviews, all participants talked about many kinds of literacy activities—reading words in the environment, reading different types of books, writing messages, writing experience stories, taking pictures, viewing pictures, and writing books. They indicated that they were engaging their children in more enjoyable and diverse literacy tasks as part of their everyday activities. They also noted their realization of the importance of writing down what their child had to say in the child's own words, something we had briefly touched on during one of the sessions.

Literacy had gained a new meaning for these parents, and they seemed to feel a renewed interest and excitement in their children's literacy development. One parent stated, "I'm more involved with helping him at home than I used to be." Another said that "it [participation in the project] made me more interested in what [my children] are doing—what are they learning or what are they not learning, what are they doing at school that I can help them with at home?"

A parent told of how she now encourages her child to pay more attention to words in the environment when they are in the car or go for a walk: "I try to get him to notice more road signs or just words, wherever we are." Another pointed out that now, instead of asking her child how his day was, she helps him "write it in a story and illustrate it in his own way." A parent who had previously explained that her child had difficulty sitting still.
when she read to him said that now he likes to be read to since she makes reading with him more interactive. She stressed that she gets a variety of types of books. An interesting comment came from a parent who explained that she tries to engage her child in more conversation by "listening to what he has to say, elaborating on what he has to say, and getting him to explain more."

An important outcome was that some of the parents felt their work with their children had helped to improve their own literacy learning. For example, one parent explained, "I am learning to hold my interest longer. I am learning to really get at what I am reading, to try to understand the meaning... to pull out the important things. I find it's helping a lot." Another parent informed us that although she struggles with reading, she had gained new confidence in her ability to motivate her child.

**Concluding thoughts**

The Picture It! Publish It! Read It! Knowledge Exchange family literacy pilot project proved to be a valuable experience for the parents and facilitators alike. The partnering we were able to establish between the university, the staff of the local school, the local child care program, the family resource center, and the families themselves demonstrated the value of knowledge exchange projects for all those involved with young children, be it in school or community settings.

But most important, the simple single-use camera had become for us a metaphor to represent the ways in which this inexpensive tool had been instrumental in helping parents change their view of literacy. Just as changing a camera's lens helps the photographer see differently, so too did the use of photography help parents see their children differently and influence the ways in which they interacted with their children as they worked on the photos and the book.

Taking photographs was an idea that captured the imagination of parents and children alike. Through the children's eyes, parents gained a new appreciation of the variety of literacy activities that were possible, as well as the enjoyment to be gained from sharing literacy activities with their children. For some families this experience is likely to be one that will continue to be part of their everyday activities. One parent said, "He loves taking pictures now. In fact, he takes pictures all the time!"

**References**


