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BRIDGES BETWEEN HOME AND SCHOOL: LITERACY BUILDING ACTIVITIES FOR NON NATIVE ENGLISH SPEAKING HOMES

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Note: Every attempt has been made to maintain the integrity of the printed text. In some cases, figures and tables have been reconstructed within the constraints of the electronic environment.

Building and maintaining the bridges between home and school is a process which can be especially difficult when teachers and parents do not speak the same languages. It is worth the time and effort on the part of the school to create strong bridges which will allow not only the students but also the parents and teachers to communicate effectively between these two most important worlds of children. Gonzalez (1992) suggests that, "In order to motivate the children to become personally involved in their learning, teachers need to include many of their cultural and linguistic characteristics in the curriculum" (p. 32). Students can be encouraged to bring their native language and culture into the classroom, sharing with others their culture's uniqueness as well as the commonalities among languages and cultures. Teachers can help parents recognize that many of the activities which occur during a normal day, whether in their native language or in English, can be used to build literacy and to reinforce the academic concepts children are learning in school.

Creating the aforementioned overlaps between home and school--sharing students' language and culture at school and literacy building and reinforcing academic concepts at home--helps teachers, parents, and students to establish and maintain that communication which is so essential to academic success. Activities done at home do not require extensive commercial materials or time spent drilling a list of letters, words, or facts. Elaborate presentations at school by parents or students are not necessary for sharing language and culture in the classroom. Literacy building activities can be accomplished in ways which follow the natural rhythms of home and classroom environments.

Language and Literacy Development

Children are involved in the language of their homes from the moment they are born and begin responding to the people around them. They spend the first four years of their lives gathering an enormous amount of information about what language is, what it means, how it works, and how to use it to communicate (Chomsky, 1965; Britton, 1970; Halliday, 1975; Genishi & Dyson, 1984). Studies of young children's relationships to and understanding of print (Ferreiro & Teberosky, 1982; Harste, Woodward, & Burke, 1984) demonstrate conclusively that the information children gather in those first four years includes notions about print as well as oral language. Children's curiosity about the knowledge of written language begins long before many ever step into a classroom. Young children's awareness of the print in their environment is apparent when we hear shouts of "MacDonald's!" coming from the two and three years olds in the back seat as we drive past a billboard advertisement.

Although languages differ from home to home, the questions about print are similar: Read this to me. What does this say? How do you write...? When children are surrounded by print and exposed to the reading and writing of adults at home and in school, they need and desire to become involved in the work of print

themselves (Taylor, 1983). As parents and teachers we are able to encourage and build upon those desires, welcoming our children into the "literacy club" (Smith, 1988).

Language is in great measure a social phenomenon (Wells 1986; Fromkin & Rodman, 1974; Britton, 1970). Use of and involvement in written language is no less a social activity than speaking. Through interaction with print and watching adults and older children, young children come to realize that print is used in helping people communicate and make decisions about their lives. Just as children are encouraged to use oral language to make connections between themselves and others and to be more like the adults around them, they can also be encouraged to use written language to make those connections and fashion themselves in our images (Genishi & Dyson, 1984; Taylor, 1983).

Thus we have the two year old who brings us a book at 6:30 Monday morning and says, "Read to me," or the five year old who wants to hear the funny pages read on Sunday. Parents should be encouraged to take the time to honor those requests which help to bring their children into the literacy club. Teachers can reassure parents that it doesn't matter if the two year old doesn't understand the moral implications of "The Little Red Hen" or that the humor in the funny pages is too sophisticated for a child of five, nor does it matter in what language the interactions occur. What matters is the human connection, that two human beings who care about each other are involved in a pleasurable activity which includes both written and oral language (Holdaway, 1979). Development of literacy in any language will give children concepts and insights about how written language works that will help them succeed in school (Cummins, 1979, 1989). Working together, parents and teachers nurture excitement and discovery about reading and writing which will create a strong foundation of literacy for children. Using what is normally found in any home, children can be pulled into active involvement in the world of literacy without commercially produced educational materials, hundreds of dollars spent on new books, or a proficient knowledge of English.

Written Language Concepts

For children to benefit most from them, the books read, the songs sung, the nursery rhymes chanted, and the newspapers and magazines shared should be in the language the child knows best (Cummins, 1989; Krashen & Biber, 1988). When children become involved with the written form of any language they gain important concepts about meaning and use which will facilitate their future academic success (Cummins, 1979, 1989). The fact that print has meaning is a concept which develops from involvement with print in any language. The concept that the meaning within print has tremendous communication potential also crosses language boundaries. And the understanding that children can both create their own print and learn to interpret the print of others is true whether children are involved with Vietnamese, Spanish, Navajo, Hebrew, or Russian.

These three concepts--(a) written language has meaning; (b) the meaning of written language has communication potential; and (c) children can create and interpret written language--transfer from language to language. In classrooms, the sharing of stories, print, and traditions which reflect students' native languages and cultures can help students recognize that they have control of literacy in their own language. Teachers can help students make the connections between their ability to learn their native language and their ability to learn a new language by making explicit how much they already know about how languages work (see Figure 1). Learning the new language will take some time, and it will take understanding and help from adults, but the knowledge that it is possible can give a child the confidence to persevere.

Figure 1. What a six year old knows about language.

Oral and written language can be used to:

1. communicate ideas, thoughts, feelings, knowledge;
2. engage someone in conversation;

3. describe an item or event;
4. ask questions;
5. praise, criticize, argue, joke, rhyme, sing;
6. talk in different ways with different people: friends, parents, younger siblings, teachers.

(List compiled from information found in Genishi & Dyson, 1984; Halliday, 1973.)

This article focuses on how parents and teachers can help bring nonnative English speaking children into the literacy club in both their native language and in English. Although English acquisition is certainly a goal, it need not be gained at the expense of one's native language. Children are entirely capable of learning in more than one language when their native language is valued and used as a firm base to build on. However, many parents in this situation are not English speakers themselves and may also not be literate in their native language. What follows are some of the many ways in which these families can support their children's literacy development and English acquisition.

A strong impression is made on children when parents are involved in their own literacy development. By enrolling in literacy classes parents demonstrate that literacy is important for everyone. When parents and children are both in school the opportunity for shared learning is increased, and each is able to empathize with the other, sharing successes and frustrations together. Many schools and community centers offer classes for parents who wish to improve their literacy skills, learn English, or both. Demonstration of the value of learning is one of the strongest messages parents can send.

Non-English speaking and nonliterate parents can also encourage their children to engage in activities with family or community members who are literate, more proficient in English, or both. Language building activities such as reading together, cooking, and playing board games provide children with opportunities for using their language in supportive, nonthreatening environments.

Helping children with school homework is often difficult for parents with limited English and literacy skills. Teachers and parents can work together to set up a network of volunteers who are bilingual and who can help answer students' questions about school work. Denver, Colorado is fortunate to have an official "Homework Hotline," but individual schools could put such a network in place using the help of the PTSA as well as middle school and high school students.

By involving parents in their own literacy development and providing resources for finding help with academic questions for themselves and their children, the school community aids non-English speaking and nonliterate parents in becoming better able to help their own children with school related issues. Lack of literacy and English proficiency need not be barriers if everyone is involved in the learning process.

Literacy Building Activities at Home

Parents invite children into the literacy club by drawing their attention to the print we use and create everyday. Food containers, newspapers, magazines, grocery lists, letters, and books--all in the home language or in English--are effective materials for involvement with print.

A few print-related activities follow which involve children, parents, and teachers together. When teachers suggest ideas to parents and follow up on these ideas by asking students to share what they've done at home and bring in some of the items they've created or worked with, further support is given to the bridge which connects home and school.

Grocery Shopping

Whether grocery shopping is done at a large supermarket, a corner grocery chain, or a family-owned ethnic market, shopping for food is an activity all families engage in. Children love to become involved in deciding what will be bought and finding it in the store. Young children can help decide what should go on the grocery list. Older children can do the writing (see Figures 2 and 3). Everyone can look through the cupboards to see what is needed, find the items at the market, and put them away when the family returns home (see Figure 2).

Figure 2. Grocery Shopping.

Look through cupboards to see what you still have and what you need.

Have young children tell older children what to write on the shopping list.

At the store, have children search for items on the shelves.

Read over the shopping list and cross out items when they are found.

Match coupons with item labels.

Talk about how items are grouped together (all the soups, all the cereals, all the dairy).

Once home, figure out where different items are stored. Which items are stored together?

What did you forget? Start a new list and keep adding to it during the week.

Figure 3. Shopping List.

(Note: not included in this figure is the list written in a child's handwriting)

Things to buy

milk

pineapple

bolis (like a popsicle)

peanut butter

apples

bananas

juice

vegetables

cookies

and

chicken

As children participate in grocery shopping they are using a number of thinking skills that facilitate literacy development: making direct connections between what is said and what is written, recognizing logos and print on packages, categorizing items, (fruit, vegetables, soup, cereal), predicting what will be needed, and figuring out what is missing. Children have a strong, relationship to food, and grocery shopping creates a meaningful, supportive environment for learning.

The print with which children interact when grocery shopping may be in a different language from the conversation engaged in with parents and siblings about the food they are buying. Even in a Vietnamese cho (market) or a Mexican panaderia (bakery) much of the print on items will be in English rather than in Vietnamese or Spanish. Such language mixing is inevitable and can be used by parents, teachers, and children to make comparisons between the languages. Looking closely at the differences and similarities in the written forms of two or more languages involves children in analysis of the details of written language. Such analysis, within a meaningful, supportive context such as grocery shopping, helps to reinforce what children are learning about written language: it has meaning, direction, links with illustrations, and communicative potential. Rather than interfere with learning, exposure to print in two languages can help children see and appreciate the universalities and interesting differences among languages.

Reading Together

A variety of studies over the years have concluded that spending time reading with children every day is one of the best ways to bring them into the world of literacy (Holdaway, 1979; Butler, 1980; Lamme, 1985; Trelease, 1985). No matter which language they are in, books involve children in the type of literacy experiences they will encounter in school. In discussing the merits of reading aloud, Friedberg and Strong (1989) state, "Internalizing (the) elements of language, style and literacy structures and developing a sense of story are especially important to the acquisition of literacy" (p. 43). By listening to stories being read, children become accustomed to the special cadence of written language, become keyed into the elements of story (beginnings, endings, conflicts, and resolutions), and are exposed to a variety of genres, thus learning that stories can be about many different topics and have many different structures: fairy tales, mysteries, tall tales, poetry. By hearing stories on a regular basis and hearing the same stories over and over again, vocabulary is increased, and the child's understanding of the world and how it works is amplified with every reading. All of these experiences lay a firm foundation for success in school and are not dependent on any particular language (Cummins, 1979). Ten or fifteen minutes spent reading together every day is worth more than one hour of reading once a week. When children read with their parents and teachers every day, the shared experience creates a lasting impression (Holdaway, 1979; Trelease, 1985). The comfort and support of regular time together makes it possible for children to begin focusing on the meaning of stories and print. Hearing stories read in their home language gives children a chance to hear how written languages sound in a familiar context and provides them the opportunity to create strong bonds with their own culture. These four factors (see Figure 4) work together to provide a wealth of literacy experiences which children take to school with them.

Figure 4. Reading Aloud at Home.

Reading aloud at home provides opportunities for:

1. providing comfort and support during a literacy experience;
2. hearing how written language sounds in native language or in English;
3. creating strong bonds with one's own culture;
4. focusing on the meaning of stories in print.

Finding books which reflect the culture of the students may require some digging. Finding books in their home language may be even more difficult. Together, teachers and parents can work with librarians to find books. If librarians know that patrons are interested, they will order children's books in Russian, Spanish, Vietnamese, or French. When publishers see a market for children's literature from other countries and cultures, they will make the books available, but it is up to community members and school personnel to make their needs known.

Children love to hear the same books over and over again. This is good for them; each time they hear a familiar book they learn something new from it (Beaver, 1982). Primarily they learn that books are meaningful, constant, and a source of pleasure. Once children know a story by heart, they begin to notice a variety of details about written language, and this awareness facilitates their continued literacy development. Through revisiting a story on several occasions, a child will, "become familiar with the language patterns and storyline, heightening his risktaking ability and building his confidence as a reader" (Freidberg & Strong, 1989, p. 45). Children begin to notice that the print is the same every time the book is read. They notice that the illustrations go along with and support the story. They notice special words and phrases of written language which catch their ear, help to structure the story, and often find themselves working their way into the children's own speech. For example, several versions of "Three Billy Goats Gruff" end with "Snip snap snout, this tale's told out." Many Mexican folktales end with "Colorin, colorado, este cuento se ha acabado" (roughly translated, "This tale has ended."). The phrases are fun to say, and children love to repeat them over and over again; they also signal the end of the story and help bring closure to the folktale.

As children hear and see books repeatedly, they also notice features of print such as words written with bigger, darker, or different type from the rest. They recognize letters, punctuation marks, where on the page words are written, and what direction the book goes. By choosing a favorite book time and time again, children create a supportive environment for learning within which they can take the risks to talk about what they see. To illustrate, at six years old, Melissa was beginning to read. Together we read "Goodnight Moon" which I had read to her at least 100 times in six years. She paused at the word "telephone," and the following conversation ensued:

Melissa: There was a... I don't know that word.

Mom: What letter does it begin with?

Melissa: T.

Mom: Is there anything in the picture that begins with T?

Melissa: Table...telephone.

But there's no `f!

Mom: The `ph' together make an `f' sound.

Melissa: That's weird (Melissa continued reading).

Melissa felt comfortable enough with the book and the reading experience to stop and discuss what she was not sure about. She engaged in problem solving, gained new information about written language, and even made a comment on English orthography. Far from being inhibited by a lack of knowledge, her awareness was heightened, and she was drawn further into the literacy club through this interaction.

Creating Native Language Books at Home

Though publishers are putting more books on the market every year in languages other than English, not enough books are available in all the languages spoken by children in the United States. One possibility for increasing the amount of native language literature in the home and in school is for families to create their own.

Many families have traditional oral stories that come from their native countries and cultures. Many families

have favorite stories or actual events that they relate orally to others. These stories can be written in their original languages and made into family books which children illustrate themselves. Family books may become some of the children's favorites, to be read not only at home but also at school. Together, parents and children can decide on stories to transcribe which reflect the cultural, ethnic, and language backgrounds of the family. Parents and older children can write out the stories, leaving space for illustrations. This activity not only reinforces all of the literacy behaviors we have already discussed, but it helps strengthen the bonds and identification children need to have with their home cultures, and it demonstrates to children that they can be involved in creating literature, giving them a wonderful sense of control over written language. This sense of control helps develop the confidence children need to become proficient readers and writers in any language.

By inviting parents and community story tellers into the classroom to tell short stories which reflect the cultures and countries of the students, teachers further strengthen the bridge between home and school. Translations done by interpreters or older students who speak both the language of the story tellers and English allow all members of the audience to enjoy the experience. To hear a story told in a language other than one's own helps students gain an appreciation for the language being used and learn to empathize with their fellow students who are just learning English.

Students can later retell and transcribe the stories as a group in both the story's original language and English. Books created from these stories in the original language with English translations will add to the classroom library and allow all students to share in each others' cultural heritage. Having these stories in the classroom allows for more comparisons of the similarities and differences among cultures, increasing children's awareness of the wonderful diversity of cultures as well as the human universalities we all share.

Using the Library

The number of children's books published in the United States in languages other than English is increasing every year. Librarians in the United States are realizing the need to have books available for non-English speaking and multilingual families. The more these books are checked out and used, the more librarians will be inclined to increase the size of their collections. Parents and teachers can also make specific purchase requests of books they would like to have available.

Going to the library and getting a library card are exciting events for a child. Creating the opportunity to use that card on a regular basis demonstrates to children that libraries are comfortable places to be, that their family values books and reading, and that belonging to the literacy club means being able to spend time enjoying wonderful books and stories. The librarians who work with children's literature are available and willing to help families acquire library cards and to find books and magazines in their home language.

A constructive field trip can be made out of an excursion to the neighborhood branch library, inviting parents to come along. By calling the library ahead of time, staff can be prepared with applications for library cards and may take the time to help students and parents fill out the applications. When teachers give the library some advance notice, letting librarians know their particular needs, a staff member may be able to give the group a tour of the library, pointing out where the books are in different languages, where the folktales from different countries are shelved, and where other books of particular interest to the group may be found. Such an outing can help create a working relationship among home, school, and community which will benefit children throughout their lives.

More Bridges Between Home and School

Enright and McClosky (1988) talk about homework activities which help build bridges for children between home and school. They remind us that the best activities do not create a "time for language drill and practice, but a time for meaningful language play and discovery" (p. 264). Parents and children should be able to look forward to engagement in homework activities. It is important for children to feel that their

home and school worlds are working together. When parents and teachers both reach out to bring the worlds closer, children are the winners.

Many literacy building activities can be done at home and then shared with the class at school. Teachers can create a display of grocery lists from home. This display can be used not only to compare the languages, but also to compare the kinds of foods different families and ethnic groups eat. Children may be motivated to bring special foods from home for everyone to taste. Once an interest in food has been generated, students might like to bring in traditional recipes, comparing names of foods, ingredients, and cooking methods with one another. For instance, it has always fascinated me that so many cultures have a variation of two small squares of dough filled with a meat or cheese concoction, such as won ton, ravioli, and kreplach. Younger children may simply categorize these three versions of the same dish. Older students can compare the cultural traditions and histories surrounding each version.

Children can study names, their meanings, and origins. They can draw and display family trees and compare routes of family migration. Children have written powerful stories about their journeys to this country and the adjustments they've had to make (see Figure 5). Sharing these stories, maps, trees, and recipes may lead to more detailed social studies and geography units in which students discover more about themselves and their classmates while using both their native languages and English in a supportive, academic setting.

Figure 5. Fourth Grader's Story.

(Note: Not included in this figure is the original story text written in the child's handwriting.)

I was born in Laos. I left Laos when I was three years old. I am ten years old now. I come to America. I flew in the airplane. I had five brothers but one died because he was sick. I had two sisters, but they died because there was nothing to eat. They were hungry and tired. My father and Yang's father are cousins. When we come to America we lived in Yang's house because we didn't have money to buy a house. We live with Yang's family for a long time. There are seven people in my family and nine in Yang's

Summary

Activities which help build bridges between home and school do not have to be complex or to involve elaborate, expensive materials. The most successful activities are those which can be done with the materials at hand, in the context of normal daily living, and in which everyone is happy to participate. The best invitation to the literacy club we can give children is to be involved with them, to share our involvement in literacy in any language. As teachers and parents, we need to remember that helping children understand what written language is all about and helping them build a sense of confidence in their ability to use written language effectively is as important as learning the letters of the English alphabet.

When parents, teachers, and children become involved together in literacy building activities in the family's native language, children gain concepts and understanding about written language which will improve their academic learning in any language. Literacy building activities done at home will help support academic success by giving children a foundation on which to build at school. When teachers encourage students to bring their home language and culture into the school, students feel their own lives are valued, they learn to

value the lives of others, and all are enriched by the experience.

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