



A Family Literacy Community of Practice

George Herrera of Rowland Unified School District, Rowland, California describes some of the challenges, activities, and outcomes of a family literacy community of practice that included both teachers and parents.

Who was in your group? What prompted you to meet? How often did you meet?

Our community of practice (CoP) focused on parent involvement in support of family literacy has been meeting once every three or four weeks for almost three years and consists of a steady core group as well as a revolving group. For the past two years, we have met in a CoP structure supported to some degree by the school district; we meet on our own time around a question we choose, but the district provides a small amount of resources for professional development materials, and we can access two sub days a year for all-day meetings or classroom observations of one another. We have had some coaching from individuals outside of our school (one from a foundation and one from a university) who helped us think about our questions and provided some facilitation assistance.

For the first year, we were a group of teachers exploring how to build and develop family literacy. After being exposed to community mapping through a PD event we all attended, as well as from information one of our members gleaned from a graduate class, we decided to engage in community mapping to identify resources in the community that would support school-based literacy. Last year we intentionally expanded our CoP to include two parents who would engage in this work with us and help us think about how family literacy work should listen to and learn from parents and not just provide them with suggestions to support their children's literacy. As a result of this work, the administration is supporting us in bringing our work to a broader scale in the district. Our CoP is now working with a parent and a teacher from every school in the district and engaging them in a community mapping process.

This process isn't a typical "roll out" of professional development. Our CoP is at the heart of this work, now focused not on what we can learn about the community but on how we can help other parents and teachers engage in their own journeys of learning with and about the community. We're also intentionally involving the other teachers and parents in a CoP experience. Our community mapping CoP now has almost fifty members—teachers and parents learning together—and our original CoP meets to design, plan, and engage in inquiry about how to help teachers and parents learn and work together to support a reciprocal school–community relationship that has the potential to impact student literacy.

Main Challenge or Question

What is the main challenge or question that your group was working on?

The main challenge for our original CoP group this year is, “How do we get parents and teachers to collaborate authentically in the literacy development of students?”

Activity

Describe a specific meaningful activity your group participated in and your experience of it (e.g., a conversation, a working session, a project, etc.)

In an effort to include parents in the conversation about how to include parents in the literacy development of their children, we organized a series of inquiry-based meetings with both parents and teachers so that we could collaborate on meaningful questions. We started out under the mistaken impression/assumption that getting parents and teachers in the same room would constitute collaboration. An eye-opening activity was separating educators and parents to have a conversation about how we work together. When the groups separated, suddenly there was a lot of energy and conversation about the conditions that need to be in place for authentic collaboration to happen. In commenting about parent involvement and parent–teacher collaboration, a parent passionately told the community of practice, “Just because you say it, write it, and approve it—it doesn’t make it so. I don’t know exactly what makes me feel welcome in a school, but I know it when I feel it.” Since then, our group has been grappling with understanding the characteristics of authentic collaboration between parents and teachers.

Application

As a result of this activity, what changed in your practice?

As a direct result of this activity, we began to create norms for how we work together. First, each group—parents and teachers—charted what they thought were important norms for creating the conditions that would foster authentic collaboration between parents and teachers. We then came together to look for the commonalities between both groups’ ideas. Although we are still in the learning process, one of the most important changes in our practice thus far is being intentional about putting into practice the optimal conditions that we identified as most likely to help us fulfill our group objectives. These include creating an inviting space, which includes physical appearance; arranging seating to facilitate conversation, and generating visual representations such as charts that show the collective voice of all the participants in the group.

Reflection

Individual: Explain how this activity contributed to your effectiveness and or changes in your practices.

Parents have the potential to be exceptional partners in the literacy development of their children. The greatest change in our practice is making an effort to be clear and consistent in sending the

message to both students and parents that their worlds are not only welcome in the classroom but actually critical to the sustainability of student learning. As group leader, I realized we hadn't put enough time into designing the conversations between parents and teachers. I also realized that I sometimes unintentionally shut out the voices of parents in our CoP and that I have a long way to go in recognizing how my natural ways of interacting and my perspective can silence the voices of parents. It's not enough to say to the group, "Just go ahead and talk." I need to learn strategies to listen, to hear, and to shift my own perspective. And I need to help us develop norms for our group that help us do what doesn't necessarily come naturally. I'm also beginning to acknowledge my own discomfort and to recognize that when we feel uncomfortable, we are "going as a group together," as one parent put it. It's okay to feel uncomfortable, and if we're really going to collaborate in new ways, we should.

Organizational: Explain how this activity contributed to the effectiveness of your group in achieving its goal.

We realized what perhaps may seem obvious to some: you don't just put teachers in a room together to work on a project and call that collaboration; such a group needs intentional design for what that conversation looks like and how to interact. We were focused solely on the content of the conversation and not the processes for it. Once we realized this, we persuaded the district to give our CoP sub money for a full day of planning together on how to design our meetings.

Now What?

What do you see as the next steps for you and your team/ your school, etc.? What challenges remain? What questions do you still have about this topic or situation?

We have committed to working at every meeting on the "conversational norms for creating parent and teacher collaboration," referring back to them at every meeting and fleshing them out further. We plan to talk about these norms for at least a little chunk of every meeting, occasionally picking and focusing on one for that meeting. We have a long way to go in creating genuine collaboration, in which both parents and teachers feel safe to ask questions and share perspectives honestly even when that means exposing conflict or difference. We are trying to figure out how to better design meetings to support this kind of conversation in ways that lead to positive change.

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