Helping classroom volunteers have a positive impact on literacy acquisition

Sheril Lee Bethurum

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HELPING CLASSROOM VOLUNTEERS
HAVE A POSITIVE IMPACT ON LITERACY ACQUISITION

A Project

Presented to the

Faculty of

California State University,

San Bernardino

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

in

Education

by

Sheril Lee Bethurum

June 1995
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Parents have a sincere desire to see their children succeed, particularly as their children enter school. However the acquisition of literacy is often viewed as somewhere between a mystery or the result of many hours of drill and practice. Parents carry a template for school expectations that was developed during their own experience as students and it is usually in conflict with a holistic philosophy of language acquisition. This project seeks to empower parents as facilitators of literacy acquisition from a holistic philosophy.

Literature covering the rationale for volunteers, general information about volunteer programs, the training of volunteers, the whole language philosophy and adults supporting literacy acquisition was reviewed. Volunteers were found to be a cost-effective way to increase the adult/student ratio in the classroom, but that training was necessary to increase the effectiveness of volunteers. Training of volunteers was almost exclusively performed within a lecture format. One studies was found where video training was compared with a "live" training presentation. The results were the video trained group demonstrated equal participation in training and equal mastery of the principles presented in comparison to the group trained by a "live" presenter.

This project is designed as a tool to present volunteers with a
foundation of literacy acquisition from a holistic philosophy. In order to present this in a memorable and highly understandable format, actual interactions of parents and students were video-taped along with narration and explanations of the whole language philosophy. This video is designed as the major part of a training program for classroom volunteers working in the area of language acquisition from a holistic philosophy at the kindergarten and first grade levels. After viewing of the video, the leader would then hold a discussion session to cover the material presented in the video.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Mom and Daddy,

Thank you for teaching me how to work hard, live honorably and love deeply. I love you.

Sheril

Art,

Thank you for your encouragement and for keeping your promise to "bug" me until I finished. It helped to get me started and kept me going.

Love,

Sheril
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STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Introduction

Parents have a sincere desire to see their children succeed, particularly as their children enter school. Up to the first day of school, their child has been rapidly growing and learning new things easily. However, school holds a foreboding for many parents, particularly in the area of literacy acquisition. Questions and concerns swirl about: Will my child be successful? Will my child learn to read and write? Many parents, in their concern over whether their children will be able to join the world of readers, have fallen prey to advertisements touting products and programs claiming to bring success for their children where the classroom has brought only failure.

It is clear that parents desire for their children to become adept communicators within the realm of written language, but the actual acquisition of literacy is often viewed as somewhere between a magical mystery or the result of a process of repeatedly working with and practicing small units of language. Early signs of literacy are likely to be dismissed as scribbling or attributed to memorization. Pictures are sometimes covered as young children read so that they won't merely "guess" the word. When young readers stop at an unfamiliar word, they are invited to "sound it out" despite the fact that the English language has a large number of irregular grapho
-phonemic relationships. Reading is no longer something that is easily within the grasp of a child, but is now mired in a swamp of good intentions mixed with ineffective techniques.

Parents are not to blame for this situation. They are earnestly applying what they know about learning gleaned from their many years of personal experience within the institution of education. The problem is that as literacy acquisition is studied, the educational approach that has reigned for many years, including the years that most parents today were attending school, has been found to be damagingly inadequate. Ken Goodman writes in his book, What's Whole In Whole Language?(1986).

Many school traditions seem to have actually hindered language development. In our zeal to make it easy, we've made it hard. How? Primarily by breaking whole (natural) language up into bite-size, but abstract little pieces. ... Unfortunately, we also postponed its natural purpose - the communication of meaning - and turned it into a set of abstractions, unrelated to the needs and experiences of the children we sought to help. (p.7) The drill and practice of sight vocabulary, completing workbook pages and worksheets, memorizing lists of spelling words, basal reading books without good picture support for the story, and reading without the benefit of an introduction to the story all work against a child's learning to read. Instead of contributing the success
of young readers, these factors make reading and writing difficult, unenjoyable and certainly meaningless.

Parents carry a template, developed from their own school experience, of what to expect in school as their child learns to read and write. For most parents, this conflicts with a holistic philosophy of language acquisition. Therefore, despite their natural desire to be a positive support their child's learning, they are providing input that detracts from their child's efforts at acquiring written language. Frank Smith (1985) cautions us all with this statement: "Learning to read is easy for a child—or should be, were it not for the fact that it is easy for adults, even well-intentioned ones, to make learning to read difficult" (p. 9).

All children who have learned to comprehend a spoken language and who can see sufficiently well to distinguish a pin from a paper clip on the table in front of them have demonstrated sufficient language, visual acuity and learning ability to learn how to read (Smith, 1985). This pronouncement encompasses most children, thereby removing the parental fear of a child's failure at being able to read. The problem remains, how do educators and parents keep from making learning to read difficult for children?

**Discussion of the Problem**

It has been the experience of this author that parents are eager to volunteer as helpers in the classroom. However almost without
exception these volunteers do not have a holistic philosophy of literacy acquisition. The summation of their training in educational philosophy comes from what they gleaned from their teachers during their own educational experience as a student. This almost exclusively puts them in contrast to the philosophy of the author and the program being presented in the author's classroom.

The result of conflicting philosophies within the classroom has at best been ineffective service from the parent volunteer, and at worst brought about a complete breakdown of particular areas of the literacy program in the author's classroom. A variety of problems such as encouraging student dependency on adults to spell for them, students being prompted to "sound it out" when they stop at difficulty during reading, and changing a prompt from "write your story in your journal" to "draw your picture in your journal" have arisen. Attempts to deal with the problems after the fact have brought about some change, but parent volunteers are still at a disadvantage by not having an understanding of the underlying philosophy that drives the activities of the classroom.

To diminish problems caused by differences in philosophy between whole language and their parent volunteers, this project seeks to empower parents as facilitators in literacy acquisition from a holistic philosophy. By gaining a perspective of how children acquire language, both spoken and written, parents will be equipped
to look at early efforts at language acquisition for what they actually are, instead of looking at the distance that is yet to be covered. Discovering the importance of empowering students to use what they know about language and the focusing of written language for communication of thoughts and ideas of the student, will provide parents with a foundation that they can use to support literacy acquisition in their own children as well as students in the classroom which they are serving as volunteers. Parents will be able to encourage and support children as they join the literacy club, that group of people who can read and write (Smith, 1985).

**Theoretical Foundation**

According to Harste & Burke (1982) there are three major models of literacy acquisition; decoding, skills, and holistic. Decoding is commonly referred to as "phonics", meaning the learning of the sound/symbol relationships and applying this knowledge to break apart words in order to read them. This model breaks language down into its smallest units for learning and then moves toward building it into language again to make it useful. Students can begin reading and writing when they have a working knowledge of the alphabet symbols and the sounds they represent in our language.

The skills model consists of learning a set of skills separately and then applying this knowledge to reading and writing activities. This approach is the substance of the basal reading series that has
been popular for many years, but is losing favor with many teachers as they learn more about how to better teach their students. Basal reading series have as a common component a controlled vocabulary. The most frequently used words are presented in preprimer and early books and the language is built upon from that point (Goodman, 1986). Students can begin to read and write as soon as they have learned to recognize a few words, but the text often does not flow well due to the unnaturalness of the language and therefore is difficult for young readers.

The third model, the holistic model, cannot be easily confined within neat workbooks with blanks to fill in and a teacher's manual with all the answers. Instead the holistic model intends children to learn to read and write using natural, meaningful language. The purpose of learning to read and write is communication. From a whole language perspective, students begin reading to bring meaning to books. Once they know that books have stories in them, then children can begin reading.

As children continue to read and write, they also increase their knowledge of vocabulary, prefixes, suffixes, endings, etc. However this is done within the context of reading meaningful literature and writing to communicate. It is learning with a purpose.

This project is based on a holistic philosophy. The whole language theory is rooted in the idea that children need to be valued
as learners and have their attempts at literacy acquisition as well as their natural language validated. By keeping learning meaningful, by keeping reading enjoyable and purposeful, by using writing to communicate the ideas, thoughts and feelings of the writer to an audience, then children will learn to read and write because they want to and need to. Language is best learned when the focus is on meaning being communicated (Goodman, 1986)

Language is the result of the human need to connect and communicate with other humans. Even prehistoric people required face-to-face communication such as oral language (Goodman, 1986). Language is the means by which people come to share the sense that others have made of the world, as they seek to make sense of it themselves (Goodman, 1986). Children are literally driven to learn language by their need to communicate, even for their own survival (Goodman, 1986). Written language is the extension of oral language as a means to communicate, with the added provision of communicating over space and time.

It is this extension that is formally dealt with in school and the one area that is most susceptible to implementation that is devoid of meaning and purpose. By presenting the value to children acquiring literacy to be immersed with meaningful written language, it is the goal of this project that parent classroom volunteers will have a holistic basis for viewing the activities of the classroom and an
understanding of the need to support, validate and encourage early attempts at written language acquisition. With such a foundation, they will be empowered to make a positive impact as they interact with emerging readers and young authors.
LITERATURE REVIEW

A review of the literature revealed a great interest in improving the literacy acquisition of children by the addition of volunteers to the classroom setting. There was strong support for the benefit of parents working with their children at home that could be carried over into the classroom setting. This would be particularly beneficial for the student who does not have the advantage of literacy acquisition support from the home. The following review will focus on a rationale for volunteers and general knowledge of volunteer programs, the training of volunteers, the whole language philosophy and adults supporting early literacy acquisition.

Rationale for Volunteers

Volunteers can be a valuable tool for improving the education of children. Butler and Clay (1989) tell us, "Schools are not able to provide teaching on a one-on-one basis. ... Most learning has to be in a group situation" (p. 37). Parent volunteers help students by providing more individual attention and showing the students that adults do care about schools and the children who are in them True & Ehda, (1980). Bailey (1992) views the effective use of volunteers to be one of the few low cost ways to give children individualized instruction. Powell (1988) sees trained parent volunteers as the answer to raising adult/child ratios in the classroom. Ellenzweig (1990) claims that the introduction of extra adults in the process of beginning literacy is
a key expedient in accommodating varying rates of development and individual differences in learning style.

Dulaney notes that volunteer support often dwindles if there are only one or two ways for people to participate. She suggests using volunteers for everything from making learning materials to tutoring students and staffing homework hotlines. DiSilvestro and DiSilvestro (1985) list the many successful volunteer projects and programs developed at an elementary school in Indiana ranging from volunteers redecorating the teacher lounge to working one-on-one with students. Powell (1986) also includes tutoring as one of the many areas in which volunteers can serve.

Why are volunteers so frequently needed to tutor or work one-on-one with students? Butler and Clay (1987) give us some insight. They state that, "Well-prepared children seldom fail to learn to read but 'ill-equipped' children tend to go from bad to worse" (p. 37). Bailey supports the use of well-trained volunteers to cope with the influx of students who arrive at school unprepared to learn.

It is also important to realize that parents can feel helpless and omitted from everyday school life (Russell, 1989). Parents who become involved as a volunteer at school have the opportunity to see the larger picture of the educational system. This curbs many complaints or concerns about their child's education (Powell, 1986). The parents and the school can then build a strong alliance to
promote the growth and education of the children.

**Volunteer Programs**

Jamer (1961) views the integration of volunteers into the school as a tremendous opportunity to utilize the human resources of the community. All of these resources need to be organized in order to be efficient. Volunteer programs can be developed at the classroom, school or district level. Dulaney (1987) states that,

Volunteer programs that involve the entire school system—supported by teachers, principals, central office executives, and school board members—are most effective because such programs create a climate of volunteerism and make the most efficient use of training. But where a systemwide program is not possible, a school or even a classroom program is a good substitute (p. 49).

Volunteer programs require planning. They need to begin with an assessment of needs and the setting of goals (Dulaney, 1987). DiSilvestro & DiSilvestro (1985) stress the importance of planning areas for volunteers to work in before recruiting them. Specific requests for jobs that need to be performed are more effective in drawing volunteers than a general call for help.

Volunteers, just as other human beings, need to feel that they play an important and welcome role in the educational process. Russell (1989) found that volunteers who are made to feel welcomed,
needed and invited will participate in the educational development of their children in the school. Parents need to feel that they are an integral part of the educational system in order to encourage their volunteer service (Russell, 1989). Fredericks and Rasinski (1990) found that volunteers that are made to feel comfortable with the reading program will be more willing to participate and contribute to the program. DiSilvestro & DiSilvestro (1985) credit the attitude of the principal and teachers as a big factor in getting parents to volunteer. They are enthusiastic about having volunteers and they eagerly seek volunteers.

Despite the task or area of help the volunteer is to participate in, it is to the advantage of the teacher, the volunteer and the students to provide training in advance. Fredericks & Rasinski (1990) list training as one of the five factors vital to the success of any volunteer program. DiSilvestro & DiSilvestro (1985) stress the need to provide volunteers with specific training for the tasks they will be performing. Jamer (1961) considers adequate explanation or training of volunteers to be one of four procedures for a positive teacher-volunteer team. She points out that volunteers are "dependable, conscientious, generous in giving service and anxious to do a good job" (p. 109). It would certainly promote a pleasant working relationship to provide the training for volunteers to be successful in their service to the school.
With a variety of areas for volunteers to serve in, it is important that they work where they are most comfortable and most beneficial (Bailey, 1992). Volunteers that desire to work with students need to be actively involved in that capacity. Since children are spontaneous, flexible, varied creatures, it is important that volunteers engaged in activities with children are empowered to make educational decisions relating to the moment. They need to feel that they are active participants in the learning process as opposed to passive formula followers. From Russell's (1989) perspective parent volunteers should be able to:

- choose or make materials when tutoring small groups or individuals, decide when the activity was mastered or should be changed, and select materials for the next lesson. . . . parent volunteers should be allowed to use their own judgement in performing the tasks entrusted to them. (p. 40)

Working with parent volunteers can be an awkward situation. Teachers do not always know how to effectively use volunteers or how to handle problems. Bailey (1992) found that volunteers thought teachers should be trained to use volunteers to their fullest potential. James (1961) believed that establishing a positive teacher-volunteer team required the teacher and volunteer to become acquainted before the volunteer began working in the classroom. She also thought that it was important for the teacher to have work planned in
advance for the volunteer. This would avoid leaving volunteers with
the feeling that they had wasted time by sitting around and waiting
for a job to do.

A final phase of any volunteer program is showing volunteers
that they are valued and appreciated. This can involve the usual
things such as an appreciation tea or luncheon, but one important
way to show volunteers that they are appreciated is to value their
input and opinions. James (1961) mentions holding an Unmet
Needs Conference. This is an informal luncheon for teachers and
volunteers to meet and offer ideas, make suggestions for improving
the program and to present problems for discussion. The results of
the conference were positive. Many mutually satisfactory solutions to
problems were found and many valuable suggestions for improving
the program were made. Dulaney (1987) gave a list of ideas such as
recognizing a Volunteer of the Month, teachers making time to talk
with volunteers as colleagues in education when students were not
present, and even inviting volunteers to staff inservice meetings that
are relevant to the work the volunteer is performing.

Volunteer Training

The importance of training volunteers was stressed many times
throughout the literature. It was clearly a need that surfaced in every
volunteer program looked at. Parents who are volunteering their
time need to be clued in on relevant information that will help them
to be successful in their service as well as to able to function as knowledgeable, responsible adults on the campus.

It is important to lay a foundation for the use of volunteers in the classroom during the earliest training experience. All participants, whether parent or teacher, needs to understand what their role in the classroom is. McGilp & Michael (1994) tell us that "the school is responsible for managing the curriculum and ensuring that everyday school activities take their normal course. Parent involvement supports, but does not interrupt, the school program, student learning and the teacher's role and responsibilities" (p. 42). A teacher must not turn over her role or responsibilities to a volunteer.

A volunteer handbook developed in Virginia (Richmond Public Schools, 1985) considers the orientation to be the most important training session. This is a time to explain the philosophy of the classroom, school policies and discipline techniques and discuss the expectations of the volunteer and the teacher as they relate to the goals and objectives of the volunteer program. Toole, Boehm & Eagen (1980) included the need to review discipline policies as part of the training of volunteers and the importance of consistency and support for disciplinary actions taken by another adult in the classroom.

Toole, et al (1980) recommended five formal training sessions
throughout the year that could also be considered as support for the volunteer. Subsequent sessions included volunteer feedback on experiences, training on dealing with specific children, and a discussion of the development in the children observed throughout the year. They also presented the idea that the volunteer receives on-going training every day they are in the classroom. Richmond Public Schools (1985) found that training sessions "should be designed on 'How To' accomplish specific tasks or to help children develop specific skills" (p. 12). They also took the perspective that training sessions should be "practical and specific" (p. 12).

Training should be presented by the teacher according to Toole, et al (1980), and should be held in the classroom (Richmond Public Schools, 1985). It is important for the teacher to learn the strengths of the volunteer (Richmond Public Schools, 1985), as well as any special talents or specific skills they may have (Haley, 1985).

The factor of confidentiality in the context of parent volunteers working with students in the classroom setting was brought up as an essential area to be included in a volunteer training program (Toole et al. 1980). It was presented that most parents would not like to overhear their child being discussed by a parent volunteer at the supermarket.

Beyond the importance of particular areas to be covered in a volunteer training program, the effectiveness of the training was
considered. Since video is the means that this author intends to present training, a search was conducted for any previous experiences recorded in the literature. Dangel & Polster (1984) in Kashima, Landen & Baker (1986) tell us that research on the use of video for training parents has been limited. This proved true as this author reviewed the literature. Kashima et al. (1986) provided information on the comparative effectiveness of "live" versus video training of parents with developmentally disabled children in the area of self-help skill teaching. Their findings indicated that the video trained group demonstrated equal participation in training and equal mastery of the principles presented when compared with the group trained by a "live" presenter.

All other examples of parent training involved presentations by "live" presenters. In reviewing the effectiveness of training, Powell (1988) stated that the key to volunteers' retention of a training session was to get them involved with the children as much and as soon as possible. The training program was broken into three parts: an hour of training, followed by an hour with the children and concluded with a half hour of questions and discussions of the classroom experience. The hour of hands-on work with the students was the key to retention, while the question and discussion section gave the volunteers immediate support as well as the opportunity to clarify any concerns they experienced.
McGilp & Michael (1994) recommended giving parents the opportunity to ask questions on information they have been given to help gain clarity on the issues. They also recommended that volunteers "practice skills under guidance and in cooperation with others" (p. 46).

When parent volunteers are working with children in literacy acquisition, as opposed to performing clerical work, they will be making decisions on what to say, how to proceed, how to best support students. These are the same sort of decisions that a teacher makes during literacy interactions with students. This level of involvement was found to require a support system for the volunteers. Toole, et al (1980) built support into their subsequent training sessions as mentioned earlier. Fredericks and Rasinski (1990) found that a support system needed to be provided as part of a volunteer training program. Volunteers need to feel that they are working with professionals, and that they have the freedom to express concerns or ask questions about the work they are undertaking. Rasinski (1988) observed that parents can and should be informed participants and decision makers in any parent reading program. He believed that teachers and parents should talk about the challenges and problems presented by the reading program in a classroom. This would enable parents to be better prepared to provide support for literacy growth in the classroom.
Whole Language Philosophy

In order to provide support for a classroom literacy program, it is important to understand the philosophy that serves as a foundation for that program. This project is based on a whole language philosophy of literacy acquisition. It seeks to provide students the opportunity to become literate. Smith (1985) states that "children cannot be taught to read. A teacher's responsibility is not to teach children to read but to make it possible for them to learn to read" (p. 7).

Schools traditionally have worked to solve the puzzle of learning to read. Goodman (1986) refers to the past educational trend of trying to make reading easy by breaking the task up into small items, such as "words, syllables and isolated sounds" (p. 7), to be learned. "The psychology of learning teaches us that we learn from the whole to parts" (Goodman, 1986, p. 9). Therefore many educators are working to provide literacy programs where written language can be learned as a whole, where language parts are only dealt with "in the context of whole real language" (Goodman, 1986, p. 9).

By keeping language whole, children always have a context within which to work. Goodman (1986) explains:

Three language systems interact in written language: the graphophonic (sound and letter patterns), the syntactic
(sentence patterns), and the semantic (meanings). We can study how each one works in reading and writing, but they can't be isolated for instruction without creating non-language abstractions. All three systems operate in a pragmatic context, the practical situation in which the reading and writing is taking place. That context also contributes to the success or failure of the reading or writing. (p. 38 - 39)

Clay (1991) refers to this interaction as a "questioning or problem solving process in which we search for meaning, sampling only enough visual information to be satisfied that we have grasped the message of the text" (p. 14).

Gaining meaning from print is the purpose of reading. To achieve this, the print needs to be presented in a meaningful, whole form instead of small, abstract bits and pieces. Goodman (1986), in speaking of what children, as well as adults, are doing with print, tells us:

What they are doing is trying to make sense of print. The way to help them do it is to make school a literate environment full of literacy events, with an insightful teacher present to monitor their development toward literacy and help it happen. (p. 24)

We as literate adults are vital to the support of literacy. It is through us that children become aware of written language, why it is important and how it is used. Without meaning, without a purpose
for literacy, children would lack the motivation to acquire it.

**Supporting Literacy Acquisition**

Once children have mastered oral communication, the next step in the natural progression of communication is the acquisition of literacy. Children have learned how to communicate orally and now are looking toward learning to communicate with written language. Therefore the support of literacy acquisition actually begins with the support of oral language development. Butler & Clay (1987) stated that "Many of the activities that prepare children to read involve talking. ... As children gain experience in expressing themselves they gain the kind of control over words that helps them to anticipate and understand the language of books" (p.35). Teale & Sulzby (1989) noted that children's oral language proficiency is related to their growth in reading and writing. Macfarlane (1994) found that small children learn best while playing rather than being formally "instructed", and suggested that parents involve their children in lots of day-to-day activities and conversations to help develop literacy. According to McLain, Victoria & Heaston (1993) a child's oral language skills are the foundation on which other literacy skills are built. Some of their suggestions for encouraging oral language development were the use of puppets and the sharing of words and motions to fingerplays, songs and poems.
In addition to supporting literacy acquisition with oral language development, it is important to provide a literate environment for the child. Children who experienced a literate environment at home during their preschool years were found to be better prepared for acquiring literacy. Strickland & Taylor (1989) noted that children who come from homes where storybook reading takes place are more likely to read before they are given formal instruction. Even those who are not already reading before formal reading instruction, are more likely to learn to read easily when they do begin instruction. Allison & Watson (1994) found that the earlier parents began reading to their children, the higher the child's emergent reading level was at the end of kindergarten. They considered a child's history of exposure to literacy building events before receiving formal instruction as possibly the most important consideration in learning to read. The experience of reading to a child before formal literacy instruction was viewed as so important that they extended the challenge to early childhood educators to read individually to those students who are not read to at home.

Trelease (1989) believes that the "the single most important activity for building the knowledge required for eventual success in reading is reading aloud to children." Parents not only need to read aloud to their children, but they need to let their children see them reading (Macfarlane, 1994). Jim Trelease (1989) claims that reading
aloud regularly improves the listening comprehension of children. He states,

Let us take for example the word "enormous." If a child has never heard the word "enormous," he'll never say the word. And if he's neither heard it nor said it, imagine the difficulty when it's time to read it and write it. Listening comprehension must come before reading comprehension. The listening vocabulary is the reservoir of words that feeds the reading vocabulary. (p. 2)

Without a full "reservoir of words" children will have difficulty fueling their reading. The best way to build the vocabulary of children is through the reading and interaction with them about books.

The act of reading to children is a major step, but it is enhanced by the interaction between parent and child over the books that are read. Interactions between a parent and child during book reading provide the opportunity for the adult to expand and relate the information in books personally to the child (Porterfield-Stewart, 1993). Short (1991) stated that "interactions between readers, whether they be teachers or students, about reading and writing can support literacy and communicate to students that reading involves searching, discovering, and problem solving." McLain & Heaston (1993) wrote, "learning can occur in a very natural way when a parent and a child team up and form a partnership."
Porterfield-Stewart (1993) makes the statement, "What and how parents interact with their children provide a framework for expectations and rules for reading" (p. 13). Teale & Sulzby (1989) state:

The orientation to literacy as a goal directed activity is an important part of the portrait to remember because it shows that the foundation for children's growth in reading and writing rests upon viewing literacy as functional rather than as a set of abstract, isolated skills to be learned. (p. 3)

Interactions between a child seeking to acquire literacy and a literate adult need to focus on reading as a search for meaning from the printed page. When interactions are focused on meaning and acquiring reading strategies, young readers have the chance of becoming independent readers and learners (Short, 1991). Roller (1994) found that interactions between teachers and proficient readers were focused more on meaning and higher level comprehension.

Teale & Sulzby (1989) present some useful strategies for reading to children. They say:

There is no one best way to read to children, but several useful strategies have been widely recommended: preview the book, establish a receptive story listening context, briefly introduce the book and read with expression. We would add two further
suggestions. First, be sure to engage the children in discussion about what is being read. Talk about the characters and their motivations and responses, make predictions and then listen to confirm or disconfirm them, draw inferences, discuss the themes of books, link information in books to real life experiences, examine the author's use of language, and draw connections among various books. ... Also, read the children's favorite books again and again, just as parents who read to their children do. (p. 7)

As students are becoming literate, it is important to continue to have the support of those who are literate. Whether the child is reading to an adult or the adult is reading to the child, meaning from the written word is being gleaned and shared. Macfarlane (1994) believed that a child who has frequent opportunity to read aloud to a willing listener - whether a parent or grandparent or sibling - is more likely to become a fluent reader. The shared meaning between a beginning and a more experienced reader is the essence of passing along the civilization of the written language.

The other side of supporting literacy acquisition is emergent writing. Hogan (1991) tells us that writing develops, not in isolation, but from other aspects of literacy such as talking and reading. Children begin to explore writing at very early ages as they immitate what adults are doing with paper and writing tools. Teale &
Sulzby (1989) tell us that children construct their knowledge about print and their strategies for writing from their independent explorations of written language, from interactions with parents and other literate persons, and from their observations of others engaged in literacy activities. They begin with what we often call scribble and move along, learning and growing into formal writers.

This process of exploration is often stunted upon entering school. Clay (1987) states "As schools have to teach large groups of children they tend to instruct, rather than to let children explore. Discovering print is a preschooler's luxury" (p. 51). It would seem beneficial for schools to provide an environment that resembles a literacy nurturing home. Clay (1987) tells us that homes that foster writing organize a space, time and provide materials for children to write. It is also important to provide meaningful writing experiences for children. They need a reason to write as well as an audience (Turbill, 1991).

Writing needs to be purposeful and meaningful for children, just as it is for adults. They need to write to express themselves, to record things and to convey information. Strickland (1989) feels that children should be given opportunities each day to express themselves through drawing and writing.

Early writing often is labeled as scribbling and not valued for the important exploration it is. Clay (1987) says that "the principle is
not one of discovery but of somehow impressing the form of the word on the child" (p. 52). Instead of expecting traditional spelling, invented or functional spelling needs to be valued and encouraged in emergent writers. "Invented spelling can lead to a control over writing that frees the child to write the messages he wants to write. Otherwise he may only ever write the stilted messages that are made up of the words he already knows" (Clay, 1987, p. 59).

Parker (1991) tells us that it is important to "recognize that children learn accurate, conventional spelling by making repeated -- and progressively better -- attempts at spelling" (p. 36). Howard (1991) gives us a look at the progression of children's spelling in writing:

Just as children approximate adult speech when learning to talk, so too they need to be able to approximate the adult version when learning to read, write and spell. Their invented spelling will grow closer to and closer to the standard form as they progress through levels which include:

- lines of scribble
- a line of letters which are actually the first letters of each word
- first and last sounds in each word, sometimes with spaces to signal words
- mixture of correctly spelt words and approximated
spelling. (p. 21)

It is important to respond to early writers with encouragement and validation. Many people feel a natural inclination to correct the child's work. However, as Parker (1991) tells us,

Teachers are more likely to respond to such unconventional spellings by writing the conventional form above the child's attempt, rather than crossing out the attempt and requiring the child to rewrite the conventional form of the word a specified number of times. (p. 36)

Clay (1987) encourages helping children hear letters in the words they are writing. If a child can write the first letter of a word, she encourages adults to help that child hear the last letters in words as a step toward further development. She tells us it is "an easier task than to hear the second sound in a word. First and last sounds have silence around them just as first and last letters have spaces around them" (p. 59).

By giving children the opportunity to explore writing we provide a natural learning environment for them. By encouraging their early efforts and by helping them learn to listen for sounds in the words they want to write, we are empowering them as writers. Turbill (1991) leaves us with this important idea. "We want children to take responsibility for, and control of, their own writing" (p. 30). If we accomplish this, we have given them our best.
After reviewing the literature, it was clear that parent volunteers can be a valuable asset to a classroom literacy program. By providing parents with some pre-service information about the school in general, classroom procedures, and the philosophy of the classroom literacy program and how to support the program, parent volunteers will be better prepared and more effective in their supporting role. The use of video for training has been very limited in the area of training parents, but it has proven to be equally effective as a "live" presenter in the situation it was implemented. Therefore this author has developed a video to present information to parents on how they can support a classroom literacy program with a whole language philosophy.
GOALS AND LIMITATIONS

Goals

This project is designed to help classroom volunteers become familiar with the whole language philosophy and how to help implement it in the classroom to promote literacy acquisition of all the students. Parents who come to volunteer their time in the classroom want to be effective in their work and they want to make a positive impact. The best way to ensure this is to share the background philosophy that drives the classroom literacy program and to provide them with some techniques for working with students.

In considering the best way to present the information, the author wanted to be able to show actual situations of volunteers and students working together as well as to show the author demonstrating techniques for working with students. To accomplish this, the author partnered with a parent volunteer with training in video production and editing. The author was responsible for the scripting, directing and acting. The volunteer was responsible for filming and editing.

The video is designed to be used as the major part of a training program for parents who have indicated a desire to participate in the classroom as volunteers. Parents who wish to volunteer will be invited to a training session that will take place the hour before they
are scheduled to help with the class. Training will consist of an opening statement by the author/presenter, followed by a viewing of the video. After that a session to answer any questions and/or to discuss the material presented in the video. From that point, the parent will begin hands-on training as they step into the classroom and begin to work with the students.

Outcomes

At the end of the video training session, the volunteer candidates will:

- have an understanding of the whole language philosophy
- have a concrete starting point for working with students during literacy acquisition from a whole language perspective
- know that reading aloud to children and interacting with them during the reading of a book is a vital experience for children acquiring literacy and that some children do not have this as part of their preschool background
- be aware of the need to encourage the early steps in literacy acquisition
- be less concerned with the difference between the products of writing during the early stages and the products of literate children

Limitations

The design of this project limits its use to classrooms where
the whole language philosophy drives the literacy acquisition program. Classrooms that do not have a whole language literacy program would not be providing the situations presented in this project nor would the elements of the program support the philosophies of the project.

Classrooms where the students are acquiring literacy would be essential for the implementation of this project. Therefore this project would probably not be appropriate for classes beyond grade two, and would most likely be used mainly in Kindergarten and grade one classrooms.

Since the focus of the project is to provide parent volunteers with a knowledge of the whole language philosophy and literacy acquisition, this project would not be useful in training parents to work with students in any of the other disciplines in the curriculum. It would also not be beneficial in preparing parents to operate any machines on campus that are used in the preparation of classroom materials.

Parents who wish to volunteer time, but are unable to work during class hours would not need to be included in the training since their work would consist of drawing, cutting, coloring, sewing projects that can be worked on at home. The video could be viewed by parents interested in their child's literacy acquisition progress and desiring to support that growth in the home.
APPENDIX A

Script for video:
"Parents Supporting Literacy Acquisition"
APPENDIX A

Parents Supporting Literacy Acquisition

This is the script of a video designed to help parent volunteers become more effective supporters of a whole language literacy acquisition program in the classroom. The video serves the purpose of initial training in the whole language approach and implementation in the classroom. Additional training would be given to volunteers as needed during their service in the classroom or during subsequent support sessions.

(Camera has credits rolling, music in the background "Return to Pooh Corner")

(Camera pans an active classroom where students are engaged in a variety of activities, including reading with an adult. Presenter is heard only, as below paragraphs are spoken.)

Volunteering in your child's classroom is an important and rewarding experience. Naturally your child's educational experience will be enriched by your time here, but you will also be benefitting many other children who are a part of your child's classroom.

There are many areas of the curriculum that you can be involved in, but one of the most important at this educational stage is the area of literacy acquisition. This is a time when children are
preparing to become literate, to learn to read what others have written and to write in order to share their ideas with others. Frank Smith, a language and learning researcher and the author of the book Reading Without Nonsense tells us:

(Subtitle displays quote while presenter is heard reading it. Author name and book title are printed at end of quote.)

Children who have learned to comprehend spoken language (not necessarily the language of school, but some language that makes sense in the world they live in) and who can see sufficiently well to distinguish a pin from a paper clip on the table in front of them have already demonstrated sufficient language, visual acuity, and learning ability to learn how to read. They have all learned to communicate by speaking and now they will all learn to communicate through reading and writing.

(Camera centers on presenter.)

Welcome and thank you for joining us. All of you gathered here today represent a valuable asset to our educational system. Without your time and energy there are many beneficial programs that could not be implemented, many delightful activities that would be limited or even eliminated from the classroom, and many children who need that extra bit of help would instead be struggling to succeed in
As literate adults, or advanced members of the literacy club, it is our responsibility to make it possible for the children to acquire literacy. We are here to facilitate their learning and must consider Smith's warning.

(Camera displays quote while presenter is heard reading it. Author name and book title are printed at the end of quote.)

"Learning to read is easy for a child -- or should be, were it not for the fact that it is easy for adults, even well-intentioned ones, to make learning to read difficult"

How do children learn to read? What is the best way to support an early reader? In answering these questions, consider that children have been learning to read for centuries. They were learning to read long before the Dick and Jane books, before formal textbooks with matching workbooks, before ditto worksheets and even before formal schools. As long as there was access to books and a person who was already literate, children could learn to read."

"Let's take a look at one of the easiest, yet most powerful ways to encourage early reading. We will observe an adult and child reading and enjoying a book together."

(Camera moves in on scene of adult and child sharing the story. If
You Give A Mouse A Cookie, together in book area of classroom. They are both holding the book, and the adult is encouraging the child to turn pages. The adult stops to let the child predict a word supported by the picture.

(Camera remains on adult/child pair, but presenter voice is heard only as the paragraph below is spoken.)

"In this example the child and the adult were sharing the task of reading the book. They were both holding the book, following the meaning of the story and essentially sharing the joy of reading. Prediction questions, such as "What will the mouse want next?", give the child the opportunity to be an active participant in the reading of the story as well as the opportunity to see how the pictures can give clues to what the text will say."

"Watch as this next pair share a book together. This time the child is reading a familiar book to the adult."

(Camera draws in on pair reading Animals, a book designed by the author to support a unit of study about animals. The child is reading the familiar, repetitive text book to the adult. They are interacting together on the book. The adult asks the child to find the word tiger in the text. The child is using finger to match text to print.)
Children can take over more of the task of reading when they are working with a familiar book. Good choices for young readers are books with simple, repetitive text and pictures that support the story. The book Animals had the pattern 'I like ...'. Once the child learns the pattern, the pictures provide support for the remainder of the text.

"By using their finger to track the print, children will:

1) notice if they have not read the same number of words as in the story,
2) become familiar with the visual aspects of words that are repeated in the story, and
3) begin to notice the beginning letters of words."

"When children read familiar books with repetitive texts and supportive pictures, they begin to see themselves as successful readers. They are learning to do what we as adults do when we pick up something to read. They are finding meaning from the printed word."
"Gaining meaning from the written word is the goal of reading. Therefore it is important to make learning to read a meaning-full experience. Let's try a little experiment. In a moment, the screen will display some print that you all are familiar with. Write it down. Here we go."

(Camera displays the following text for a brief second.)

JLHYKPOSOMLGZICXUTGRWJDGS

(Camera on presenter.)

"How much did you get recorded? Now let's try that again, this time with a little meaning."

(Camera displays the following item for a brief second.)

AGING WHAT PATTED FLOWERS

(Camera on presenter.)

"A little better perhaps, but still rather difficult. Well, let's try that one more time. This time with lots of meaning."

(Camera displays the following item for a brief second.)
"All of those were made up with letters that you know and the last two were made up of words that you know. Which were you able to read? Which one were you able to remember and write down?"

"Probably the last one. That's the one that made sense. The others were not worth your time or effort. The same experience is true for children. They would rather work with print that makes sense than with print that is isolated from meaning. Let's look at two examples of children practicing the alphabet. Which one is working within a meaningful context?

(Camera shows adult/child working together using flash cards to drill on the alphabet.)

(Camera remains on 1st pair, but only presenter is heard as the}
"The first pair is working with flashcards. The child only has the visual form of the letter as a cue to come up with the name of the letter. There are many similarities in both letter form, particularly in the lower case letters, and with the sound of letter names. Consider 'm' and 'n', 'b' and 'd', 'c' and 'e', etc... This leaves many opportunities for confusion and failure."

"The second pair is reading the alphabet book. The child has the name of the picture to add to the experience. Even if the child was not able to name any of the letters, he would be able to participate in 50% of the experience by reading the name of the picture. This method also provides the child with an anchor for the name of the letter as well as information about how that letter works or "sounds" in a word."

"We have found that it is important to focus on meaning when
we read. We also looked at the support that pictures and repetitive text gives to early readers, as well as the benefits from using a finger to track print. These are some of the strategies that good readers use. We as literate adults need to nurture these strategies in young readers and sometimes even plainly point them out to struggling readers."

"As a child is working on a book, it is important to keep them focused on the meaning of the story. We need to be careful with leading them to focus on the letters of the words. Here are some techniques for encouraging a child to look at the letters of the words without losing the meaning of the story."

(Camera moves in on child and presenter reading a book together.)

A - "O.K. Spencer, read the book 'We Can Eat the Plants' for me. The child is using his finger and stops at a word.

A - "You found a tricky word there. Let's go back and read that part again and when you come to that, get your mouth ready."

Child reads passage again, making beginning sound of word he had previously stopped at.

C - "We can eat the r-roots."

A - "Roots. That makes sense."

C - "We can eat the s-stems. We can eat the leaves. We can eat the flowers."
"By reading the passage again, Spencer is keeping the story together. By keeping the story together he is narrowing the possibilities of what that word could be. Then by getting his mouth ready to say the word as he comes to it, he has narrowed the possibilities even further, often leaving only the word that does belong there."

A - O.K. Spencer, read the book 'On The Go' for me. This looks like a fun book, all the places they're going.

C - "A bus takes me to school. A car takes me to the store."

A - (covers word) "That could be 'store'. What would you expect to see at the beginning of 'store'?"

C - "An 's'."

A - "Let's look and see if there's an 's' there." (uncovers word)

C - "Nope. A car takes me to the m-market."

A - "Oh, 'market'. That makes sense."
C - "A bike takes me to the park."

(Camera remains on adult and child reading, but only presenter is heard.)

Spencer read the word 'store' for 'market'. By asking him what letter would be at the beginning of 'store', he had to apply letter/sound knowledge. By checking back to the word, Spencer focused on the letter that was actually there. After that bit of attention to letters, it was important to have him go back to re-read the passage and get his mouth ready for the new word.

(Child is heard finishing the book.)

C - "A airp. A plane takes me to Grandma's. Grandma. Grandma's Is that 'Grandma's'?"

A - "I don't know, but that looks like Grandpa there? (points to picture)

C - "Grandpa's. But my feet take me to the ice cream store."

A - "Do you like ice cream?"

C - "Mhm." (nods)

A - "I do to. I enjoyed that."
"Learning to communicate through reading and writing go hand in hand. The growth a child makes in one area carries over into growth in the other. Supporting early writing in the classroom involves encouraging and praising the close approximations and early stages of writing. Early writers will not be producing perfectly written drafts. Their first works may closely resemble scribbling, but it is their attempt at writing that we as adults praise."

"Children begin their journey toward becoming literate as they observe adults writing things down and reading them back. They then take paper and writing tool and touch the two together, moving their arm or hand just as they have seen adults do. When they come to us with their "writing" we can either ask them to "read" it to us and praise their efforts, or we can tell them that they have not really written. By praising them, we encourage them to keep writing, to keep trying to communicate their thoughts through printed language."

"I'm sure all of you listened eagerly for the first spoken words
from your children. As they babbled, "Muh muh muh," I'll bet none of you said, "No! Say it correctly. Say 'mother'." Rather you were probably so excited you said something like, "Yes, mama! Mama's here! Mama loves you." By responding this way you not only encouraged your children to talk more, you gave meaning to their babbling and modeled language for them. What a positive impact you had on your child."

"Do you realize that they would not have learned to talk if you had not modeled language for them, praised their early efforts and gave meaning to their early words? The same need is true for encouraging early writers. Consider the early writings you have just seen as the written equivalent of baby talk."

(Camera views classroom of children engaged in journal writing.)

"In the classroom, children will be engaging in a variety of writing activities. One of them is journal writing. Students write in their journals nearly everyday. They are learning the importance of recording their experiences, thoughts and feelings with the written word. Here are some examples of adults supporting early writing in journals. Since each child is at a different stage in their growth, the adult's response to each child's work varies."

(Camera displays scenes of volunteers interacting with students on
Scene 1:

A - "O.K. Cameron, can you read me the story that you have written here?"

C - "I went to C.J.'s school lots."

A - "Wow. And I see that you wrote some letters down. You know that there are letters in words. That's a good job. Do you like to write stories?"

(Camera cuts back to presenter.)

"Cameron is a preschooler and he already knows what writing looks like. He knows that we use letters and squiggly likes on the paper. Mrs. Ward validated his writing and encouraged him by praising him and having him add meaning to his marks that he wrote on the paper."

Scene 2:

A - "C. J. can you read to me what you wrote in your journal?"

C - "I ate drumsticks."

A - "Wow. You like drumsticks?"

C - (nods)

A - "You followed along and pointed to each word and I am going to show you how to write the book spelling for 'ate'. Do you know what
it starts with? What sound it makes at the beginning?"

C - "A"

A - "A, and what is the sound at the end of the word 'ate'? What do you hear at the end?"

C - "T"

A - "T. O.K. Let me show you how to write the book spelling for 'ate'. Now you can write that in your sentence for me."

C - (writes word)

A- "Very Good."

(Camera remains on adult/child pair, but only presenter is heard.)

"C.J. knows that words are separate and he gives each word a tap with his finger as he reads. He had heard and written the initial sound for the word 'ate'. By asking him to listen for the sound at the end of the word 'ate'. Mrs. Ward is helping him to also listen for the end sounds in words that he writes and reads. Listening for the ending sounds in words is an easier 'next step' than to listen for middle sounds in words."

Scene 3:

A - "Sarah, can you read to me what you've written in your journal?"

C - "I played with my dog Pebbles."
A - "Very good! I heard you say the word 'my'. What do you think the word 'my' would start with?

C - "M"

A - "O.K. I'm going to write the book spelling for 'my' over here. Can I borrow your pencil? Thank you. (write the word 'my') Now you write the word 'my' in your sentence and then we'll read it again."

C - (writes 'my' and reads sentence)

A - "Excellent! Good job Sarah."

(Camera remains on adult/child pair, but presenter is heard.)

"Sarah already had the book spelling for the words 'I', 'dog' and 'Pebbles'. She is ready to add the word 'my' to her writing vocabulary. Mrs. Kinslow asked for the beginning sound for the word 'my' because it is easy for Sarah to recognize. Sarah and Mrs. Kinslow could also practice writing the word 'my' so that Sarah will have it in her remembered writing vocabulary any time she needs it."

(Camera returns to presenter.)

"In each example, the parent volunteer asked the student to read what they had written. This validates the child as a writer. After this, they interacted or praised the children for their work. Then they looked for something to advance the child's writing with."
For Cameron this was merely the interaction and praise for his writing attempts. For C.J. this was the encouragement to also listen for the sounds at the end of words. For Sarah, who already had three book spelled words in her story, this was the book spelling for a new, high frequency word, a word that she will need many times as she writes.

"When students are supported and validated in their writing attempts, they grow in confidence as well as in their writing. Strict adherence to the conventions of spelling and punctuation is not what's most important for emergent writers. As children learn more about writing, they come to modify their own work."

(Camera returns to active classroom with adult volunteers working with children.)

"Learning to be a child watcher is important in supporting early reading and writing. I have offered some guidelines to follow and some phrases to get you started. As you work with the children you too will be learning. You will be learning to identify what stage they are working in and how you can support and encourage their work. In fact you may already be doing that to a certain degree already at home with your own child."

"I am excited that you chose to join us here and am looking forward to working with you for the benefit of our children. To
become literate, they need our guidance, our example, and most of all our encouragement. Let's give them our best."

(Camera rolls credits as music plays. - Return to Pooh Corner.)
Bibliography for Appendix A


APPENDIX B

Sample letter to draw volunteers.
Dear Parents,

I am excited to welcome you to our new school year. There are many new things your child will be learning this year. This is a very important age for your child and a very important stage in his/her school career.

You as a parent are welcome to join us in the classroom as a volunteer. There are many areas in which you can help to support our program here at school as well as at home. If you would be interested in helping, please let me know by filling out the bottom half of this letter and return it to school tomorrow with your child.

Sincerely,

(Your name here)

*   *   *   *   *   *   *   *   *   *   *   *   *

Name:_______________________________________________

Child's Name:________________________________________

I would like to help in the classroom. Yes_____ No______

I would like to work on projects at home. Yes_____ No______

Days I would be available to help:________________________

Times I would be available to help:________________________

Special talents I have that would benefit the classroom:________

_____________________________________________________

My phone number:_____________________________________

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APPENDIX C

Sample outline for volunteer training session.
I. Introduction and welcome

II. Overview of the school.
   A. Floor plan of the school, include location of workroom and lounge.
   B. Pertinent school policies and rules
      1. Volunteers sign-in when on campus
      2. Parking

III. Overview of classroom
   A. Floor plan of classroom and location of materials
   B. Structure of school day.
   C. Location of projects volunteers can be working on when class in working together as a whole group.
   D. Class rules and discipline procedures.

IV. Viewing of Early Literacy Support Video

V. Questions and Discussion of video.

VI. Begin working in the classroom.
APPENDIX D

Sample outline of subsequent training/support session
Training/Support Session

These can be conducted as needed, but there should be at least one each school quarter. If new volunteers have indicated an interest in participating, they can be included in this session.

I. Introduction and thank you.

II. Sharing time.

A. Participants are asked to share something positive - presenter

   records on chart pad.

B. Participants are asked to share concerns and problems.

C. Group brainstorm on solutions for problems.

III. Replay portions of the training video if there are any questions or concerns about supporting early literacy.
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