It Takes a Village
A Collaborative Assault On The Struggling Reader Dilemma

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Foreword by Judith Howard

It Takes a Village: A Collaborative Assault on the Struggling Reader Dilemma has a wellspring of incredibly useful information for teacher educators, pre-service and in-service teachers alike. It shows quite clearly that preparing effective reading teachers while addressing issues related to (a) readers who struggle (b) parental inclusion, and (c) the inclusion of the wider community can be done quite successfully. This book puts readers in touch with compelling insights into the importance of parental inclusion in the educational efforts of their children. Additionally, it provides a “counter narrative” to the belief by many that parents and in particular, racial and ethnic minority parents, do not participate with their children in academic endeavors. The text also focuses on key aspects of teacher preparation especially as it relates to reading instruction. The author provides a wonderful variety of step-by-step approaches for how to seamlessly transition teacher reading instruction from the lecture hall to the “village” practice sites. The book is well written with the authentic voices of parents, students and pre-service teachers. This book is an excellent contribution to the literature concerning issues related to struggling readers, parental inclusion and community involvement.

Samuel Miller, Associate Dean, University of North Carolina Greensboro.
It Takes a Village
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A Collaborative Assault on the Struggling Reader Dilemma

One School of Education’s Approach to Preparing Effective Reading Teachers while Addressing Issues Related to readers who struggle and parental inclusion

Jean Rattigan-Rohr

Elon University, USA

Foreword by Judith Howard
DEDICATION

This book is dedicated to all the parents, students, preservice teachers, inservice teachers, library personnel and colleagues who have, at one time or the other, been members of our “Village.”

Several members of the “Village” are featured on the cover of this book.

– Photo by Kimberly Walker
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FOREWORD

One afternoon three years ago, while I was serving as interim dean of the School of Education, Jean Rohr walked into my office, eyes shining with excitement and a big smile on her face. When she said, “I have an idea!” I knew it was going to be good. As it turned out, it was even better than I anticipated.

The idea concerned a new approach to a course she teaches, “Strategies & Instruction for Struggling Readers,” a course required of all elementary and middle grades majors in Teacher Education at our institution. Many, if not most, preservice teachers do not understand the difficulty of learning to read. They come from homes where written materials surround them and where parents read to them from an early age. They come to school understanding basic literacy concepts and primed to learn to read. Typically, they have had little experience with children who have persistent reading difficulties, and it is not uncommon for them to blame the families of these children. Teachers may point out that their parents tend not to come in for parent conferences nor respond to notes sent home, and they draw the conclusion that the parents “just don’t care.” Despite these attitudes, the importance of collaborating with families is now widely recognized. Unfortunately, another dispositional stumbling block that preservice teachers often have as they enter the profession is their insecurity about working with families. The insecurity typically stems from simply not knowing how to work with families, but the discomfort leads to avoidance and that only intensifies the difficulties inherent in school-family collaboration.

Returning to Jean Rohr’s idea and the way she framed it to me that afternoon: After reviewing these problems with teaching that course, she said, “I believe I’ve come up with a way to address them.” What she proposed was to pair each of her preservice teachers with a struggling reader and to bring those students to the university once a week to work with the preservice teachers in her class, under her supervision. “And,” she said, (this is where the smile got broader) “the students will bring a parent or other family member with them.” This latter stipulation was non-negotiable. The family member must accompany the child and stay for the duration of the class. The preservice teachers would get ready for each class by preparing individualized lessons for “their” students and, in addition, they would develop a packet of materials for parents to use with their children at home the following week.

The potential of this idea was immediately clear. It addressed the issue of giving preservice teachers the opportunity to get to know students who had difficulty with reading and the experience of working with them using targeted strategies. It provided a way for preservice teachers to get to know families and see how much they do care and the extent to which they willingly go to help their children be successful in school. Perhaps most significantly, it held the promise of giving preservice teachers the confidence to work effectively with both struggling readers and their parents.
The potential of the idea was clear – but would it work? Could the parents arrange transportation? Could they commit to coming to class one evening each week? How would students feel about more “school” each week? Would classroom teachers be willing to work with preservice teachers to develop lessons and materials that support what they are doing in class? Would preservice teachers be able to arrange an evening class? The list goes on.

To make a long, but exciting, story short – it did indeed work, and since that first year, the project has grown beyond even what Jean Rohr imagined. Word of the positive results has spread throughout the community and more parents than can be accommodated now contact Dr. Rohr to request that their children participate in her class. The class site has been moved to the local library, giving students and their families an opportunity to learn about and use library resources. At the end of each semester a local book store opens its doors and sponsors a reception where the parents and their children along with Dr. Rohr’s class meet to purchase books, funded by a grant from a philanthropic organization. Thus, the project has expanded to include the local community as well as the schools. As the title of the project indicates, “It takes a village.”

In this book Jean Rohr tells the story of transforming her literacy course into a “village,” and she provides a remarkable guide for establishing her unique approach in similar courses in other teacher preparation programs. Certainly there is no one more qualified to write this book and guide the reader in this endeavour than she. Her professional accomplishments and her personal commitment combine to give her the experience and expertise to both convince and train educators to build communities of practice. Not only does the book provide a rationale for the collaborative approach she advocates, but the chapters on methodology provide the content knowledge and pedagogy that is essential. Dr. Rohr’s expertise in the area of reading allows her to guide novices through the seemingly arcane components that comprise the process of reading. The examples she provides from her experience of working with preservice teachers allow the academic process to become practical, meaningful, and doable. Her step-by-step guide to assembling the “village” includes everything from sample letters inviting parents to participate to ways preservice teachers can use questioning strategies to improve comprehension. It’s all here – tips, samples, explanations, and cutting-edge methodology. Behind it all Jean Rohr’s passion shines through. You hold an extraordinary book in your hands, and I feel certain you will be convinced, as am I, that it makes a valuable contribution to addressing one of the most pressing problems facing education today.

Judith B. Howard
Professor Emerita of Education
Elon University
ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This book marks a significant place in my ongoing practice and research, which is now in its fifth year at Elon University in North Carolina. The practice and research grew and morphed as I prepared preservice teachers for their work with students who find reading daunting. What began as a reading methods course grew into a research study, which later developed into a funded project that has now been replicated at different sites. The ongoing project is entitled *It Takes a Village: A Collaborative Assault on the Struggling Reader Dilemma*. Hereafter in the text the project will be mentioned as the “Village Project.”

Essentially, the “Village Project” is an intentional and collaborative relationship among several stakeholders - parents, struggling readers, preservice teachers, professors, inservice teachers and the public library. The project accomplishes four major objectives: 1) It encourages reading among children who struggle with reading. 2) It underscores the function Schools of Education must undertake in shaping preservice teachers’ views of children who struggle with reading and views of the parents of such students. 3) It highlights the importance of community and the role universities can play in bridging the gap between institutions of higher learning and local community entities such as the local library. 4) It involves the tutees’ public school teachers as vital stakeholders in the tutoring process. Struggling readers’ classroom teachers are included to ensure instructional congruence between the tutoring and the tutees’ classroom instruction.

The project explores the impact of this unique approach, which is now being replicated in two other Schools of Education - The University of North Carolina at Greensboro, a public institution located in the same state, and Concordia University, a private institution located across the country in Portland, Oregon. The “Village Project” was funded in 2011 by the Oak Foundation, an international philanthropic organization based in Geneva, Switzerland.

Like the study that gave birth to this book, this text is prepared primarily for preservice teachers and teacher educators as it discusses five important features that have surfaced over the years. The features have been particularly beneficial to me, to my colleagues and to the hundreds of preservice teachers at the three sites who have played a central role in the development of the “Village Project.” These five important features of the project include: 1) detailing the importance of the key collaborator, parents; 2) discussing the involvement of the preservice teachers – their reactions, roles, responsibilities and reflections; 3) documenting the methods by which we taught the five components of reading – phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, fluency and comprehension; 4) highlighting selected tutoring exercises corresponding to the five components of reading; and 5) a final word about what has been learned from the entire adventure and thoughts about where we might go from here.

These features would not have been possible without the involvement of several key players I must acknowledge in this text. There are too many preservice teachers to mention by name, but six who stand out must be recognized here.
young people are now inservice teachers providing tremendous reading instruction for the children in their charge. Special thanks to Drew Yee, Madelyn R. Pastrana, Thienguoc Nguyen, Kyle Bounty, Jennifer Sorkin, and Eliza Mathew. I must also thank my colleagues at Concordia University and the University of North Carolina at Greensboro: Lynn Keyes-Michael and Sue Mercier for their continuation of this work with preservice teachers, parents and students struggling in school. Thanks also to my own reading educator and very special mentor, Dr. Gerry Duffy, for his insight, his diligence, and the honest way in which he willingly shares his wealth of experience and knowledge.

Thanks to principals who work tirelessly with the children in our schools, especially Cathy Batts and LaShawn Lee, and to teachers Diana Sandford and Felicia Bowser. There are, of course, the many parents and their children without whom I would not have been able to effectively prepare preservice teachers for the all-important job of teaching in schools, especially to children who struggle with the task of reading. A special thanks to parents who not only brought their children to the tutoring week after week, but who allowed this researcher to have graduate students observe them during the tutoring, observe them tutoring their children at home, and to follow their children into the classrooms. Parents Mr. and Mrs. Randy Garrison, Mr. and Mrs. Hubert Brown, and Mr. and Mrs. Bennie Goins must be singled out for special mention. I also wish to thank these and many more parents for their kind words of encouragement and appreciation, as together, we worked toward the improvement of their children’s reading skills and development.

Special thanks also to Dr. Judith Howard, former interim dean of the School of Education at Elon University, whose encouragement and unwavering support allowed me to take this idea and run with it just as far as and as fast as my stamina would allow. To Keith Dimont, Elon University’s transportation manager, and Elon’s Biobus drivers, Burney Bryant and Sterling “Bo” Carter, who waited patiently for us, stepped right in as a part of the Elon welcoming team for parents and their children, and transported us safely from our campus to the library and back again. I say thanks, gentlemen, for ensuring we were never late for our project.

I wish to thank the staff of the May Memorial Library in Burlington, North Carolina, who provided space, resources, and wonderful hospitality for the many parents, students and preservice teachers who arrived at the library by car loads and buses; particularly the former director, Judy Cobb, and the director of the Children’s Library, Julie Walker. Thanks, ladies, for your patience and generous giving of your time and expertise. Thanks also to friends and colleagues including Dr. Ceola Ross-Baber, former dean of North Carolina Agricultural and Technical University; Dr. Samuel Miller, associate dean of the University of North Carolina at Greensboro; Dr. Ye He, from UNCG; Professor Barbara Taylor from Elon University; and Rosemary Murphy, classroom teacher, for reading the book’s manuscript and giving me the benefit of their insight and expertise in matters of education.
Finally, I want to thank my husband, John, who gave me the idea, the time and the space to document all that has transpired in the “Village” and who has been my single most devoted supporter and cheerleader of the “Village Project.”
This book is about educating teachers to use a “village” concept to help struggling readers. The idea that “It takes a village” has been used by Hillary Clinton in her book, *It Takes a Village: And Other Lessons Children Teach Us*, which was published in 1996. In that book, Clinton discussed her views of the impact persons outside the immediate family can have on children's well-being, and promotes the notion that the American society can, indeed, work to meet the needs of all its children. This notion of employing the “village” concept in the richest country in the world has, for years, been the philosophy of Dr. Marian Wright Edelman, a fierce advocate for children and the founder and CEO of the Children’s Defence Fund - the same organization for which Clinton served as legal counsel. The “village” idea is not new, however, and is believed to be of West African origins. This concept highlights the view of everyone’s role in “looking out for” and “looking after each other,” especially the community’s or the village’s children. It is this belief that has fuelled the development of the “Village Project” for teaching struggling readers. The members or collaborators in our “Village” were: Elon University and its preservice teachers, parents, students who struggled with reading, in-service teachers, reading supervisors, a book store, an international philanthropic organization, and a local library. However, before the “village” was created we needed to take a serious look at our ongoing practice to determine what we needed to discard, what we should keep, and what needed to be fixed.

During this developmental process, we came to realise that when it comes to the desire to make a move to change entrenched systems or to question the efficacy of things that seem to work *just well enough*, but not optimally, it is sometimes easier to offer proverbs or platitudes rather than confront the change that is needed. Many of us have, at one time or another, been discouraged from making bold and ambitious changes in our lives, in our relationships, or in our jobs. Such discouragement can come from ourselves or from well-meaning friends and acquaintances, some of whom, in an effort to calm our disquieted nerves, will encourage us to “leave well enough alone” or who might ask, “Why fix it if it’s not broken?” Such might be the question concerning the “village” concept in teacher preparation. With respect to practicum-type collaboration, our standard operating procedure in teacher education is to associate ourselves with our public school partners and the teachers we believe will be good on-site teacher educators for our preservice teachers. Other potential partners are not usually considered.

After all, teacher preparation programs have been operating for some time without significant attention to issues such as parental inclusion (Rohr, 2010; Rohr & He, 2009); or without providing substantial opportunities for preservice teachers to work with the public library, businesses or organizations. So the question might be...
asked, why should we seek a change to the structure of teacher education programs now? Why should teacher education programs spend time addressing collaborative partnerships at a time when we should be squarely focused on preparing teachers to bolster student achievement and on being innovative in efforts to narrow the persistent achievement gap?

The argument could be made that now, more than ever, is the time to look closely at collaborative partnerships because we can no longer afford not to do so. Leaving parents, for example, out of teacher preparation is problematic for three important reasons: 1) Teachers arrive at the start of their career at a major disadvantage if they do not know how to include parents. 2) Parents can be incredible allies and wonderful assets in the teaching and learning process. This, in turn, can be most effective in bolstering student achievement and closing that ubiquitous achievement gap. 3) Parents have a legal right to know what is happening with their children when they send them off to school (Ferrara & Ferrara, 2005).

Several research studies have found that preservice teachers receive little training regarding parental involvement and interaction in their education programs (Hiatt-Michael, 2001; Rohr & He, 2010; Shartrand et al., 1994). It is not surprising, therefore, that novice teachers often report that they do not know how to effectively incorporate parents into the classrooms once they are hired as teachers. In today’s increasingly diverse classrooms, that task is further complicated when teachers need to interact with or involve students who struggle or with culturally and linguistically diverse parents (Ferrara & Ferrara, 2005).

Many parents for whom English is a second language, parents of students with disabilities, racial/ethnic minority parents, and parents from low-income households routinely have difficulty communicating with the teachers of their children (Goodlad & Lovitt, 1993). The fact is, preservice or novice teachers leave Schools of Education and begin the first day of their practice with the same full responsibility as that of the veteran or more experienced teachers down the hall or in the classrooms right next door. Parents expect their child’s teacher, novice or otherwise, to be totally competent in all aspects of the teaching profession, which includes, to a great extent, knowing how to effectively deal with parents. Nonetheless, because of their lack of involvement with parents during their preparation programs, novice teachers list parental involvement as one of the activities they are least likely to undertake and for which they feel rather unprepared (Compton-Lilly, 2000; Hiatt-Michael, 2001; Rohr & He, 2010).

Another important collaborator we generally leave out of teacher education is the public library. Ignoring the many educational resources in places like public libraries that are often situated in our public school partners’ communities is short-sighted, at best. Public libraries are generally paid for by taxpayers, and most of the services they provide are free of cost to their users. Many libraries provide invaluable free services to the public in general, and school children in particular. These services cater to a wide range of students, from the very young to the college-aged. Parents of very young children, for example, can often take advantage of the many story reading programs libraries often schedule. Though
WHY THE VILLAGE?

seen as great fun activities, these reading programs are aimed at encouraging beginning literacy among young children.

Additionally, students can make use of the library’s reference sections to complete assignments or search for information. Library users can also borrow movies or simply make use of the computers available. In addition to the print books, students can also borrow audio books, DVDs, video tapes, CDs and video games. The public library sometimes has homework help and offers cultural programs, various performances, and other community services with which education programs can partner. Some of the most popular programs offered in public libraries are summer reading programs for children, families, and adults. Schools of Education that offer summer courses, sometimes find themselves searching desperately for practicum placements because schools are out for the summer. Yet, the notion of collaborating with the public library’s summer reading program is often not explored. Education programs that prepare special educators or English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) teachers might consider the public library’s resources for books on tape, Braille materials, young adult literature, other materials for teenagers, or reading materials printed in many different foreign languages.

Businesses and foundations are also not generally included in teacher education. However, driven by fears of an underprepared work force and better educated international students, we are beginning to see more and more business and funding organizations take an interest in the education of America’s youth. The Walton Family Foundation, for example, recently announced a $49.5 million grant aimed at doubling the size of Teach for America over the next three years. That amount of money is reported to have been the single largest private donation to Teach for America in the organization’s more than 20-year history. Teach for America is the recipient of the most grant money directed toward the improvement of teaching and learning, according to researchers from the University of Georgia and Kronley & Associates. Schools of Education, on the other hand, which prepare the greatest number of teachers in public schools, seldom enjoy that level of support from businesses and foundations to improve and expand upon what we do for children.

WHY THE NEED FOR A COLLABORATIVE ASSAULT

In spite of that, we believe a collaborative assault on the struggling reader dilemma is necessary because the task of effectively educating children is just too large, too complex, and too layered to rest on the shoulders of teachers alone. The average age of a young person entering the profession right out of education programs is twenty-two. Which of us at that age remembers having all the answers for the complexities of our own lives, let alone the answers for the complexities of the lives of other people’s children? Nonetheless, as mentioned earlier, novice teachers are expected to have those answers from day one. On the other hand, many experienced teachers have been doing so much, for so long, with so little, they too could certainly use some collaborators in their efforts to be more effective. The fact
is, when it comes to educating children who struggle, business as usual is just not working. The U.S. Center for Education Statistics reports that more than 36 percent of the nation’s fourth graders are unable to read at a basic level. These children often do not catch up to their peers who read more proficiently, even with remediation efforts (Wren, 2003). Additionally, Juel (2003) found that as early as the end of first grade, those children performing below grade level had only a 1 in 10 chance of ever achieving grade-level reading proficiency. Children who experience early and continued reading struggles, those who have little personal beliefs in their own capabilities to learn to read, begin to see themselves as failures (Briney & Satcher 1996; Mills, Pajares, & Herron, 2006). Many often give up on academics and some drop out altogether. So the persistent problem of reading difficulty among children is quite a dilemma because the effects of low literacy are both crippling and far-reaching. People who experience reading problems find that it affects just about every area of their lives. It creates anguish in childhood and doggedly follows them into adulthood.

In adulthood, those with poor reading abilities will continue to encounter many difficulties along the way. They are often quite limited in terms of employment options. In America today, many factory and manufacturing jobs have moved offshore, some to far-flung places such as China, India and the Philippines. The remaining service and high-technology jobs require levels of literacy that struggling readers simply do not possess. Most other jobs require reading skills at least at the high school level (Tamassia et al., 2007; White, Strucker, & Bosworth, 2006). This fact is made more compelling in today’s technologically interconnected world. Just the day-to-day overall demand for literacy skills, from that required for something as mundane as self-checkout at grocery stores, to online banking, is undoubtedly higher than it has ever been. Reading difficulty also plays a significant role in the all-important health issues of struggling adult readers. One can understand the dangers as such readers try and often fail to understand their written health-related information (Kutner, Greenberg, Jin, & Paulsen, 2006; Rudd, Anderson, Oppenheimer, & Charlotte, 2007). Financial issues are also problematic for low-literacy adults as limited understanding of comparative pricing and the ability to access the most honest and advantageous economic opportunities are often not clearly obvious for them (Rohr, 2005).

Not surprisingly, poor literacy is positively correlated with lower earning power (Bynner & Parsons, 2009; Kirsch, Jungeblut, Jenkins, & Kolstad, 1993; Kutner et al., 2007). We also know that most of the children who struggle with reading are enrolled in Title I schools. The U.S. Department of Education’s Title I Report noted that Title I schools that did not make adequate yearly progress have just about doubled between 2005 and 2006 (Davis, 2006). Therefore, now, more than ever, is the time to act. The number of children struggling with reading in our schools can neither be discounted nor ignored, and thus requires a coordinated, intentional response from as many stakeholders in our “villages” as possible. In our “Village Project,” as noted earlier, we see parents as key collaborators in children’s reading efforts. So too are teachers and those of us who prepare them. In an age of budget cuts, teacher layoffs and stretching of resources for public schools, we also
see community partners such as the public library, businesses, and funding organizations as essential collaborators in this assault on the struggling reading dilemma.

Thus, this book is organized in such a way as to give the reader an understanding of the foundation that was set to develop our “Village” and the people in it, the methods used in preservice teachers’ reading instruction, and the processes we undertook. Finally, it offers an opportunity to read about what collaborators have to say, in their own words. As such, this book lays out a blueprint of how this particular “Village Project” unfolded.
CHAPTER 2

THE INCLUSION OF PARENTS

As was mentioned earlier, schools often miss a tremendous opportunity to improve student learning when they leave parents out of the teaching-and-learning equation. Researchers notice that while the parent-teacher relationship should be strong and meaningful, it is instead often detached and distant, or even strained and distrustful (Weinstein, 1996). Thus, depending on the situation, parents in less-than-trusting relationships with their children’s teachers interpret a certain teacher tone and manner, whether correctly or incorrectly, as condescending, patronizing or downright rude (Snow, 2001). In addition, unintentional “faux pas” are created because of cultural ignorance and teacher unpreparedness in communicating with a diverse parent population.

Unfortunately, limited, strained, or ineffective parent-teacher relationships tend to lead to adversarial associations, rather than to partnerships that could be strong and meaningful alliances forged for the benefit of students (Epstein, 2005). Several extensive reviews of the research provide strategies for implementing improved parent-teacher relationships. One from Epstein (1994) recommends two important ways schools might involve families: Create more effective forms of communications with parents, and provide ideas to parents on how to help their children at home.

Based upon her research findings, Epstein (1994) noted that schools would be surprised at the level of help they would receive from parents, if only parents clearly understood what the school required of them. Epstein found that 58 percent of parents reported never having received requests from teachers to help their children at home. Moreover, more than 78 percent of parents said they would definitely try to help with their children’s learning activities if only they were shown or informed about what to do (Epstein, 1986). We know that regardless of parenting style, race, religion, or economic status, parents generally respond optimistically when schools reach out to them in positive ways (Fan & Chen, 2001). It does not require a great stretch of the imagination to see that the vast majority of parents want schools and teachers to treat them as equal partners who are interested in the educational welfare of their children (Epstein, 1994).

Another important reason for schools to involve parents has to do with legislation. The reauthorization of the No Child Left Behind Act in 2007 continues to highlight the need for parental involvement. All teachers in Title I schools should be aware that Title I legislation mandates parental involvement as essential to its initiatives, so much so that Title I initiatives call for stipulations of how parents and schools will work to share responsibilities for improving student achievement (U.S. Department of Education, 1994). As such, teacher preparation programs, preservice teachers, and all who work with children in schools can no
longer afford to dismiss the role of parental involvement. It bears repeating — parental involvement is essential to student learning and “parents have the [legal] right to know” what is happening with their children in schools across the nation (Ferrar & Ferrar, 2005, p. 77). Thus, parents should and can play a significant role as key collaborators in the education of their children and particularly in the assault on reading difficulties faced by far too many of the nation’s children.

We know from several research studies that parents are important actors in their children’s education for a host of reasons (Epstein, 2004). There are two very important realities: 1) parents are their children’s first teachers, and 2) parents are essential to motivating their children. The bottom line is children’s views of school and how they participate in it are impacted to a significant degree by what they come to believe in their homes. Just listen to all the stories our pre-school and kindergarten children tell that generally begin with “My mama says….” or “My daddy tells me…..” Fullan (2001) points out that whether or not the job they do is terrific or terrible, there is no doubt that parents have a vested interest in their children’s future and success.

Fullan (2001), in his analysis of the myriad results of educational research concerning parental involvement in schools, notices one general theme: “The closer the parent is to the education of the child, the greater the impact on child development and educational achievement” (p. 198). Questions about relative impact of parents and the home over the impact and influence of other institutions are nothing new. In fact, back in the 1960s there were a number of studies that examined the impact of the family on child development. It was found at that time that the family influence far surpassed influences from school (Bloom, 1964; Coleman, 1966; Jencks, 1972). In fact, these findings were central to the development of the Head Start program that included significant parental involvement for the young children who were enrolled in those programs (Stallworth & Williams, 1981).

Any classroom teacher will agree that children’s attitudes toward school, their ideas about teachers, and their feelings about the significance of an education begin with parents (Price, Mayfield, McFadden & Marsh, 2001). No self-respecting constructivist teacher educator would exclude Vygotsky’s work (1978) on social development theory from his or her practice. In that work, Vygotsky highlights the fact that what children come to value, believe or accept as culturally important is transmitted from one generation to the next, from parent to child, by the social interaction between the two. We know from experience that these kinds of social interactions can be extremely beneficial in the classroom. Consistent with social cultural research are other studies that indicate positive correlations between the frequency of parents’ involvement with their children’s reading practices and those children’s reading achievement (Anfara & Mertens 2008; Adunyarittigun 1997; Fan 2001).

In addition to academic achievement, there are many research studies which find strong positive correlations between parental involvement and variables such as student attendance and student behaviours (Billman, Geddes, & Hedges, 2005; Epstein, 2001; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Hill & Craft, 2003; Jeynes, 2005; Overstreet, Devine, Bevins & Efreom, 2005).
PARENTS AS THEIR CHILDREN’S FIRST TEACHERS

Countless studies reveal that even before their birth, children are constantly learning from their mothers, not the least of which is the sound of the mothers’ own voices (Kisilevsky & Low, 1998). A report in the *Journal of Psychological Science* noted that while using a nonnutritive-sucking paradigm, researchers were able to demonstrate a newborn’s preference for her mother’s voice over the voice of a different adult female (DeCasper & Fifer, 1980). Additionally, in other studies, fetuses seemed to have been able to discriminate sounds intrauterine. More specifically, “Near-term fetuses can discriminate the reversal of pairs of consonant-vowel sounds, /babi/ to /biba/ to /biba/ to /babi/ (Groome et al., 1999, p 220). This information is quite intriguing especially when we consider the importance of sound discrimination in reading development. Being able to discriminate sounds is central to phonemic awareness, which, according to the National Reading Panel Report, is one of the five essential components of effective reading. It is important in learning to read languages that are based on the alphabetic system (Wagner, Torgesen, & Rashotte, 1994).

**Phonemic awareness** is broadly defined as the awareness that spoken words are made up of separate units of sound and that we are able to blend those sounds together when we try to make words. One can also think about phonemic awareness as the ability to hear and recognize the difference in individual sounds, which, according to Groome et al. (1999), fetuses seem to be able to do. In addition to hearing the sounds one must then be able to produce the individual sounds found in the words. A child who is phonemically aware has the ability to manipulate sounds in various ways. As such, they can:

- Make just one sound (Isolate phoneme)
- Tell the sound (Identify phoneme)
- Put sounds together (Blend phonemes)
- Break sounds apart (Segment phonemes)
- Leave out a sound (Delete phonemes)
- Include a different sound (Add phonemes)
- Change a sound altogether (Substitute phonemes)

Nonetheless, though phonemic awareness would seem to be a natural early developing reading skill especially when we consider the fetus studies, some children find it difficult when they are learning to read. In fact, researchers say they are able to tell quite early in schooling which children will be able to learn to read more easily and which ones will struggle in schools by measuring the children’s phonemic awareness (Share, Jorm, Maclean, & Matthews, 1984). On the other hand, some studies have shown noticeable reductions in the numbers of students struggling in reading when students have had systematic and explicit instruction in phonemic awareness (Bowman & Trieman, 2004; Cambourne, 2002; Torgesen, 2004).
CHAPTER 2

OTHER IMPORTANT EARLY LESSONS

Parents are also the first teachers of their children as children begin to learn about the world into which they are born. Parents impart a great deal to their children as children learn about language, about their culture, about how to interpret the world, and about how they make meaning from their surroundings. We know from Vygotsky’s (1978) work that the cognitive development of an individual is essentially dependent on the social interaction between that individual and “more knowledgeable others (MKO)” within the individual’s sphere. An individual learns through direct experiences he or she has within his or her culture, the contacts he or she has with others from the culture, and the many observations he or she makes within his or her community, family or home. Thus, as Vygotsky would claim, understanding is social in origin (Cole & Wersch, 1994).

This social theory, therefore, emphasizes the significant influence of parental assistance and support on a growing child’s life. Vygotsky termed this influence the “zone of proximal development” (ZPD). This zone refers to the difference or distance in a child’s performance goals when he attempts a task by himself as compared to when he attempts the same task and a parent or more knowledgeable other provides some assistance. So, if one imagines a child’s attempt at tying his or her shoelaces, the child might see some difficulty at first when he or she tries to tie his or her laces on his or her own. The child might even become frustrated and give up on the idea all together. However, with the help of his or her parent who shows him or her how to make “bunny ears” with the laces then wrap one “ear” around the other, make a loop and pull the laces apart, this same child is able to progress along the path of shoelace tying more effectively than if he or she were to continue struggling on his or her own. Such help, or “scaffolding,” is meant to support the child’s efforts until he or she becomes proficient at tying his or her own shoelaces and no longer needs help from mother or father or caregiver for that particular task.

In addition to providing various scaffolding for all types of learning as children grow and develop, parents also teach their children very important aspects of the culture into which the children are born. Vygotsky names this method of teaching a “socio-cultural” approach. Socio-cultural approaches to teaching are based on the concept that everything we do in life unfolds in cultural contexts. Just about everything that a child will need for development; he/she will gain through his/her culture. In that context, parents use many symbols of the culture along with language to teach children how to act, participate within the group, understand the rules by which the culture operates, and learn what is expected, as well as what will not be tolerated by members of the culture (Bodrova & Leong, 1996). These interactions with parents and other more knowledgeable others most surely help children to establish what they think about their world and all that is in it.

It can be argued that the more experiences that a parent provides for a child as he or she grows, the richer his or her world will potentially become. Such richness is vital for learning because of the importance of background knowledge. We know from observing children in classrooms that the more background knowledge they bring to learning environments the better and quicker they are able to grasp instruction (Bobis, Mulligan, Lowrie & Taplin, 2009). This is because a child’s
background knowledge or that which she already knows about a subject will be invaluable as she gains new information. Children who arrive in classrooms with knowledge of, or exposure to, lots of different subjects, or those who regularly engage in conversation with parents or caregivers about a variety of topics, tend to have higher background knowledge when they enter the classroom (Bobis, et al., 2009). Dochy and colleagues’ (1995) explanation of background knowledge is particularly useful because they describe background knowledge as the whole of a person’s knowledge, including explicit and tacit knowledge, as well as metacognitive and conceptual knowledge.

The child who enjoys the experience of having been read to by his parents since birth learns very quickly about the utility of reading. He knows that reading can be pleasurable, is informative and has a certain purpose. At an early age that utility might be to soothe him when he is upset or feeling a little distress, or it might be to lull him to sleep in a delightful way as he snuggles with a parent or with a favourite toy. Whatever the purpose for reading, children experienced in being read to bring some vital information about books to the classroom. They generally come to the learning environment already knowing about the concept of print as they watch parents point to words while being read to. They also know crucial early reading information such as left to right tracking required for reading in English, and they already understand the importance of looking at pictures to help them figure out stories’ content (American Psychological Association, 2006). For all these reasons and more, parents are the vital first teachers for their children.

PARENTS ARE KEY TO MOTIVATING THEIR CHILDREN

In 2003, I was asked by the Department Chair in the School of Education at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro to moderate a panel discussion on the importance of parental involvement and the role Schools of Education must play in ensuring preservice teachers’ preparation for including parents in their practice. The interesting thing about this particular panel discussion is that its development was driven by preservice teachers themselves. Time and time again in their course evaluations different groups of preservice teachers complained quite loudly that they felt unprepared to include parents in their practice, and some noted they were rather intimidated by parents. Eventually, a forum was held to address the preservice teachers’ angst. On the discussion panel were parents, teachers, school administrators, school district personnel, and School of Education faculty. In the audience were over a hundred preservice teachers, first-and-second-year teachers, and lateral entry teachers.

In North Carolina, lateral entry is an alternate route to the teaching profession. Lateral entry allows individuals who are deemed qualified by the state’s Department of Public Instruction to obtain a teaching position and begin teaching as soon as possible. As these individuals begin to teach, they are expected to obtain a professional educator’s license within a given time frame. During their “lateral entry status” individuals are issued a provisional license in an area that corresponds to their academic study (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction).
Despite a heavy representation of school personnel, the parents on the panel were very forthright and spoke of their own frustration in dealing with some of their children’s teachers, as well as their desire to work closely with teachers for the benefit of their children. One theme parents mentioned again and again was that they knew how to motivate their children to learn. One mother, Shirley Funk, went so far as to say, “As teachers you might know about my son for the little time you have him in school, but I know him at home. I know him more than you do. I know what he likes and doesn’t like, I know what he believes about who he is, I know what motivates him, and I know what he cares about and the kinds of things he values and doesn’t value.”

Whether or not she realized it, this mother made an important statement about the significance of parents in student motivation. We know that value, self-concept and incentives are important factors in student motivation, which in itself is a key factor in school success. Put simply, motivation is the process that causes us to do and to keep on doing (Schunk & Pintric, 2008). It is usually the result of someone’s feeling of self-efficacy related to a particular task (Bandura, 1986). According to Bandura (1995), self-efficacy is “the belief in one’s capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required to manage prospective situations” (p. 2). In short, self-efficacy is my belief about my ability to succeed in a given situation. Mrs. Funk was telling the audience that she, more than her son’s teachers, had a keen sense of what her son believed about his ability to succeed in school. Parents’ motivation of their children is so beneficial that West (2000) posits that when parents are involved with their children’s particular academic interests, their involvement tends to have a motivational effect on other academic areas as well. If children are motivated to explore and delve into all the learning opportunities provided by school, it is likely they will begin to experience success as a result of their efforts (Mills, Pajares, & Herron, 2006), thus increasing their sense of self-efficacy.

Henderson and Berla (1994) have found that when parents are involved in their children’s schooling, set realistically high expectations and provide a positive home learning environment for their children, these actions are generally firm indicators of student success. Studies have also posited that parents’ high hopes for their children can further serve as a strong motivator for those children to learn and strive to succeed in school (Mo & Singh, 2008). Other studies on parental inclusion have shown positive correlations between parents’ high expectations to increases in the students’ standardized test scores and higher grade point averages for their children (Catsambis, 1998; Keith & Keith, 1993).

WHAT CHILDREN COME TO BELIEVE ABOUT SCHOOL IS HIGHLY INFLUENCED BY PARENTS

The truth is, as it relates to their children’s education, parents possess more power for positive interventions than schools often credit them and than most parents realize (Goodlad & Lovitt, 1993). This lack of realization is unfortunate because it affects the potential for parents to play a major role in shaping how they and
schools can work more effectively for children. I refer again to Fullan (2001), who, in his message about educational reform, came to the conclusion that the relationship between parents and school is in desperate need of social reconstruction. Fullan (2001) further observed that schools that were successfully on the move were schools that had a solid grasp on the importance of involving parents in the classrooms. As far back as four decades ago, Henry (1966) posited that it was essential for educators to become involved with their students’ parents and the families’ communities. Joyce Epstein, director of the National Network of Partnership Schools and the Center on School, Family, and Community Partnerships at Johns Hopkins University, who does an incredible amount of work with parents, submits that parents respond positively when schools involve them in their children’s learning activities.

It should be noted that the notion about parents as vital stakeholders in the education of children does not exclude anyone. All persons who are parenting children are addressed here. As Goodlad and Lovitt (1993) note, there is a very wide array of parents in our schools. These include affluent parents, highly educated parents, poorly educated parents, single parents, surrogate parents, foster parents, same-sex parents, guardians from the legal system as parents, grandparents in the role of parents, minority parents, parents of students with disabilities, immigrant parents, parents who are frightened or threatened by schools, or parents who often do the frightening or threatening at school.

However, because of the many different kinds of parents in our schools today and the increasing numbers of parents and children from cultural backgrounds different from that of most teachers, parent-school collaboration is undoubtedly more difficult. As such, it is extremely important that all teachers, and particularly those preparing to enter the profession for the first time, should learn to involve this wide array of parents in their practice for the benefit of the students in their classrooms. Therefore, the idea of preparing preservice teachers to be able to effectively involve parents in this “Village Project” seemed not only essential, but entirely advantageous (Weinstein, 1996).