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Parent Involvement in Children's Early Literacy Learning:  
An Exploratory Study

by

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## **ABSTRACT**

This qualitative study explores the experiences of parents who were involved in the literacy learning of their elementary school-aged children. Through a guided interview process three parents were invited to talk about the ways in which they encouraged and supported their children's literacy learning.

Following a review of the literature in emergent literacy, family literacy, parent involvement and parent-school relationships, this study elaborates on the need for educators to build connections with families, and suggests that educators pay closer attention to the ways in which parents support children's literacy development. It suggests that educators need to ask parents, "How can we support the work you are doing with your children?"

This research highlights the critical role that parents play in children's literacy development, and explores the issues that arose in the parent-school relationship. A feature of this study is the inclusion of the experiences of two single fathers.

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One strategy is to approach the families with the respect they merit and deserve....not to assume that, as educators, we can only teach the families about how to do school, but that we can learn valuable lessons by coming to know the families, by taking time to establish social relationships necessary to create personal links between households and classrooms. It is through these social relationships, of necessity reciprocal in nature, that the social capital of both families and teachers is fostered and developed.

Luis C. Moll, (1999). Forward, in What should we expect of family literacy? Experiences of children whose parents participate in an intergenerational literacy project, In J. R. Paratore, G. Melzi, & B. Krol-Sinclair (pp. x-xii). Newark, DE: International Reading Association, Inc.

## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

I originally anticipated that my master's thesis would involve researching, designing, conducting and evaluating a workshop for parents aimed at helping them to become more effective in working with their children on literacy activities at home. At least that is what I intended to put together when I first began my graduate studies during my professional improvement leave. However, as I became more familiar with the family literacy and parent involvement literature, and had my thinking challenged during the readings and discussions in two qualitative methods courses, I came to realize the narrowness of my personal perspective. I came to realize that my prior experiences and my current understandings provided me with one perspective but that the parents with whom I worked would have their own unique perspectives based on their prior experiences and personal understandings. I came to realize that it would be presumptuous of me to design a program to meet their needs, without first allowing them an opportunity to share their perspectives and to voice their needs. Without first asking about their experiences working with their children on literacy activities (Neuman, Hagedorn, Celano & Daly, 1995), I could neither assume that parents needed my help nor could I presume to know what information, if any, would be useful to them (Auerbach, 1989, 1995).

For these reasons I chose to design and implement an exploratory study focussing on parents' experiences and perspectives. I had a sense that by asking questions and listening carefully to the stories of other parents, I might more clearly understand the experiences I had had, both as a teacher working

with parents and as a parent myself. My hope was that through this research I would broaden my understanding of parent perspectives and the connections between home and school that influence children's early literacy development. Through my interactions with parents I hoped to discover mutually-supportive methods for influencing the literacy development of the children whose lives we shared (Macdonald & Dickenson, 1994).

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the activities and perspectives of parents who provided at-home literacy support to their children from preschool through the first years of schooling. I hoped that by speaking directly with parents, I could begin to understand more clearly what it means to be a parent involved in the literacy development of a young child. Also, by listening to parents, I could acknowledge their role as experts in their children's literacy development (Routman, 1997), and I could share the knowledge they had gained from working with their children. Through the process of collecting, analysing and interpreting the data, I would look for similarities and differences in the experiences that the parents shared, as well as be receptive to any dissonance that might occur in the data. It was my hope that with a clear focus and consistent attention to detail, I would be able to conduct and report on a qualitative research project that contributed in some significant way to the ever-increasing volume of literature dealing with issues of parent involvement and children's home literacy learning (Patton, 1990).

In addition to informing my own practice, the research was also

intended to provide information that could be helpful to other teachers and administrators as they work with the families in their school communities. I understood that all families and all communities are unique but I also believed that my research might highlight some common themes which would be applicable to other situations and useful to other educators. I sensed from interactions with student teachers that they had a need for information on the role of parent involvement and the importance of establishing home-school links in order to provide quality learning experiences for all children (Conley, 1996; Elkind, 1997; Michaels, 1996). I hoped that my work might offer some motivation to pre-service and beginning in-service teachers to become more aware of this critical component in education, and might provide a starting point for seminar discussions and related research. In the long run these discussions might stand to impact the professional practice of beginning teachers, perhaps influencing their attitudes regarding the importance of parent involvement and the efforts they would make to establish effective home-school partnerships. This work might also prove helpful to other graduate students and researchers who are interested in pursuing related topics.

In summary, there are numerous references in both the educational literature and the popular press regarding the need for schools and parents to work together in order to provide the best learning opportunities for our children. I hope my work contributes something worthwhile to the field.



### **Guiding Questions**

The following questions served as a framework for this exploratory study and guided me in establishing a basic outline for the topics I wanted to open up for discussion during the interviews. Also, it was with these questions in mind that I carried out the initial review of the data and began the lengthy process of analysis and interpretation.

1. In what ways do parents foster their children's literacy learning at home?
2. In what ways are parents involved with their children's school and schooling?

### **Theoretical Starting Points**

#### **Family Literacy**

Taylor's (1983) three-year ethnographic investigation into the home lives of young successful readers and writers proved to be important to the understanding of literacy development within the context of families, and also was important for its introduction of the term "family literacy." Taylor found no evidence to support the idea that children who are successful in reading and writing are specifically taught to read and write by their parents. "Even when parents did take on a particular task as a way of modelling a literacy skill, the activity was contextualized within the situation" (1983, p. 20). Rather she found that literacy is "deeply embedded in the social processes of family life and is not a list of activities added to the family agenda to teach reading" (1983, pp. 92-93). From her perspective it seemed clear that children's literacy learning occurs within the social context of their family and their

community, as children and adults engage in meaningful interactions related to the routines of their daily lives.

In 1983, Taylor used the term “family literacy” to refer to a multitude of activities, attitudes and interactions which occurred within the homes of families with young readers and writers, and which provided a context for children’s literacy development within the family setting. Since that time, a wide range of policies, practices and programs have come under the umbrella of family literacy, with the result that there is no clear definition of family literacy. Rather than attempting to define the term, The Family Literacy Commission sponsored by the International Reading Association suggested that family literacy encompasses the ways parents, children, and extended family members use literacy at home and in their community, and it highlighted examples of the types of activities and interactions which can be provided purposefully or can occur spontaneously during the day-to-day routines of family life (Morrow, Paratore, & Tracey, 1994).

Family literacy and the related terms of intergenerational literacy and adult literacy have also become commonly used to refer to a wide range of programs offered by agencies and organizations outside of the family to enhance the literacy skills of children, parents or parents and children together.

### **Social-Contextual Framework of Family Literacy**

Auerbach (1989), an often-cited critic of traditional family literacy initiatives, cautioned against a narrow view of family literacy which sees the vast majority of programs aimed “at strengthening ties between the home

and school by transmitting the culture of school literacy through the vehicle of the family" (p. 169). According to this model, information and practices are passed on to parents who, in turn, pass them on to their children. Operating from this perspective, educators and researchers would regard themselves as having the expertise and authority to fix the literacy problems that exist within the home and would suggest interventions that would make the home learning environment more consistent with the classroom (Epstein, 1987). This perspective fails to recognize the inherent strengths of the family and, at the same time, sees "the life demands of the parents as obstacles that take away from literacy development and conflict with the demands of school" (p. 166).

In responding to this narrow and disempowering view of families, Auerbach (1989) argued for a social-contextual perspective that recognized family literacy as "a range of activities and practices that are integrated into the fabric of daily life, with the result that the social context of the family becomes a rich resource that can inform rather than impede learning" (p. 166). Just as many educators have come to recognize the wisdom and benefits of working with children from a strengths rather than deficit perspective, Auerbach urged that educators and researchers adopt a similar view of the inherent strengths of parents and families. Referring to the earlier work of Heath (1983), Auerbach (1995) concluded that "it is the schools that need to change to accommodate family and community literacy practices rather than the homes that need to change to support schooling" (p. 20).

Paratore, Melzi & Krol-Sinclair (1999) supported Auerbach's (1995) findings that parents had the ability to support their children's academic

success and, were in fact, engaged in home literacy interactions that were important to their children's, and sometimes their own, literacy development (p. 109). Family members frequently engaged in a variety of independent and shared literacy interactions strictly for pleasure which were not motivated by a desire to practice reading and writing (Paratore et al., 1999; Taylor & Dorsey-Gaines, 1988).

Auerbach (1989) also reported on the research of Chall and Snow in which they identified a range of indirect factors, such as family outings, interactions with adults, emotional climate of the home, level of financial stress, and parental involvement with school, that were found to have more influence on children's reading and writing than did direct literacy activities such as helping with homework (p. 172).

### **Parent Involvement**

Although parent involvement had been written about for many years (Bloom, 1987), I have found that what was often referred to as parent involvement (i.e., volunteering in the classroom and reading at home with children) was, in actuality, a very small sample of a broad spectrum of attitudes, activities, roles and responsibilities that parents engaged in to support their children's learning. In addition, I found that the research contained reference to different ways in which parent involvement could be categorized, depending upon the particular perspective of the authors. For example, Chavkin and Williams (1985) defined parent involvement as "any of a variety of activities that allowed parents to participate in the educational process at home or in school" (p. 2). Others, such as Henderson, Marburger,

and Ooms (as cited in Weiss & Edwards, 1992) categorized parent involvement according to the roles taken on by parents in their relationships with schools. They referred to “parents as partners, parents as collaborators and problem solvers, parents as audience, parents as supporters and parents as advisors and/or codecision-makers” (p. 218).

Epstein, one of the most well-known authors in the field of parent involvement, categorized parent involvement activities according to the ways in which parents worked with the school to support children’s learning. The five original categories, “providing for basic health needs, communicating with school, volunteering and attending school events, helping with learning at home, and participating in school decision-making” were later expanded to include “collaborating with the community” (1995, p. 704-705).

Although there were differences in these categorizations, there were also similarities, with the common thread being a focus on parents’ roles in educating children. Consider parents who were involved in working with their children at home and volunteering in the classroom, two categories suggested by Epstein. Depending upon the relationships they had with the school, they could either be partners, collaborators or audience, according to Henderson et al. (op. cit.). Thus, in this manuscript I have chosen to utilize the terminology that seemed most representative of the parents’ activities and relationships rather than restricting my discussion to the terminologies suggested by one particular categorization.

The work of Paratore et al. (1999) guided my early thinking about the research and helped me to formulate the wording for my guiding questions.

In the course of analyzing their data, these authors found the themes of “literacy at home” and “family’s attention to school” reoccurring and demanding their consideration. Literacy at home is a term associated with the common types of family literacy involvement, such as parents and other relatives reading with children, taking them on trips to the library, writing letters and spending time talking. Family’s attention to school refers to the implicit and explicit ways in which families demonstrate the importance of school by communicating with teachers, attending school functions, or monitoring homework. The authors concluded that there is no one way that parents support their children’s literacy learning. Rather, families find their own ways to become involved with the school and with their children’s learning (Paratore et al., 1999).

Although the research suggested the possibility of a wide range of parent involvement opportunities, Weiss & Edwards (1992) stressed the need to link parent involvement with the educational aims of the school. They suggested it was no longer sufficient to maintain a traditional attitude towards parent volunteers, expecting only that parents be audience and supporters of decisions made by the school. They recommended that educators guide parents to become involved in ways that had an impact on the educational programs of the school. Although they stressed a need for schools to expand the opportunities for parent involvement, they also cautioned that schools should not create programs without first giving careful consideration to the nature of the activities. It would seem that in terms of parent involvement activities, quality is as important as quantity. Programs and activities should be carefully selected which clearly demonstrate that

parent involvement is a critical factor in meeting the goals of the school (pp. 217-218).

### **Effect of Parent Involvement on Students' Learning**

Much research has been carried out over the past thirty years on the effects of parent involvement on student achievement. Lyons, Robbins & Smith (1982) and Davies (1991), as well as Kellaghan, Sloan, Alvarez & Bloom (1993), referred not only to improved classroom performance, but a change in student attitudes, conduct and attendance as a result of sustained home support by parents and other caregivers. In addition, it was found that when parent involvement began at an early age, the academic gains were significant (Christenson, Rounds & Franklin, 1992). Other researchers stressed that, in addition to the impact that parent participation had on children's learning, parents and schools also reaped rewards as a result of meaningful involvement and effective relationships (Silverstein, Springer & Russo 1992). For example, parents who regularly provide at-home literacy support become informed about and sensitive to their children's particular abilities and needs. Capitalizing on this knowledge, parents then provide the extra at-home support and review that their children need to be successful. Also, parents can share this critical information with the schools, so that teachers have a better understanding of the children's capabilities and can provide alternate strategies and learning experiences that offer maximum advantage for the children's understanding.

The research indicates that by having opportunities for meaningful participation in the school and by being invited to engage in conversations

about their children's learning, parents demonstrate a more positive attitude towards teachers and school programs, become active supporters of the school's instructional program, and often become involved as resources to enhance learning in the school (Weiss & Edwards, 1992; Dettmer, Dyck & Thurston, 1992). Through a process of building relationships and working with the school in significant ways, many parents also experience improved self-confidence and pride in the role they have played towards their children's development (Lyons, Robbins & Smith, 1982). Elkind (1997) summarized the benefits of establishing parent-school partnerships as a major resource for supporting the developmental needs of children, the professional needs of teachers and child-rearing needs of parents (p. 42).

Thus, it would seem that through the process of effective parent involvement programs, parents became more aware of the factors that influenced children's learning, began to work with educators to support and enhance learning, and became actively involved in program decision-making. These changed behaviours reflected underlying changes in parent attitudes which were relayed to their children as expectations for appropriate behaviour and improved academic achievement.

## **Methodological Framework**

### **Qualitative Research**

I chose to conduct a qualitative study, believing it to be the best way to capture the particular experiences of the selected participants around the topics of parent involvement, early literacy at home and parent-school relationships (Kvale, 1996; McNeill, 1998; Patton, 1990). Although I realized



that a great deal of data could be collected from a reasonably large number of parents using a standardized questionnaire or survey instrument, I knew I was not so much interested in how many parents provided a particular type of literacy support as I was in becoming more aware of the particular situations of a few parents. Also, I recalled responding to surveys and questionnaires in the past and feeling frustrated when I had to choose one of the options provided, knowing that it did not accurately represent the response and explanation I would have given. Thus, I decided to replace quantity of respondents with in-depth, quality responses from a few participants. According to Patton (1990) qualitative inquiry allows for “thick description, in-depth inquiry and direct quotations which capture the experiences and perspectives of unique individuals” (p. 40); all of which were consistent with the purpose of my exploratory study.

The major process used for data collection was a semi-structured interview of a small number of participants who responded positively to my request for parent volunteers. A secondary source for data collection was my first-hand observations and recollections of the conversations I had had with these parents as we had worked together over the year to discuss their children’s development.

### **Context for the Study**

At the time that my research proposal was being finalized, I received an appointment as an administrator and a grade three teacher at a large public school. I knew that I would be interacting with the parents of the children in my homeroom, and it seemed logical that my study would be designed

utilizing some of these parents and capitalizing on the relationships we had established throughout the year. In addition, I could use the findings to inform my future practice with the participants as well as with other parents within the school community.

### **The School Community**

The school was located in a working class neighbourhood in the northeast quadrant of a large city in Western Canada and served families from its immediate neighbourhood, as well as two growing suburban communities at the edge of the city limits. Approximately half of the children were bussed to school from the two outlying neighbourhoods and from the far corner of the immediate neighbourhood. A supervised lunch program was provided for the bussed children. In addition, some parents chose to send their children to the school because of its proximity to the after-school child care facilities located nearby.

At the time of the research project, the school housed approximately 480 students, ranging from kindergarten to grade six. More than one-quarter of the children who come to the school represented cultural heritages other than Caucasian, with many of them being from second generation Canadian families. In recent years, there had been a significant increase in the transiency rates within the school community as a result of changes in family structure, employment and availability of affordable housing. Each year an increasing number of parents seemed to struggle with providing basic necessities for their families, requiring additional resources from community and social support agencies.

### **The Class**

In order to accommodate my teaching and administrative roles, I shared responsibility for my class with another teacher. For most of the year there were twenty-seven students in this grade three class, split almost fifty-fifty by gender. Ten students were of Chinese, Vietnamese, Pakistani and East Indian heritages, and two of these were second generation Canadians. Many of these children received regular support from the English as a Second Language staff and one was a non-English speaking recent immigrant. Interpreter support was provided for the families during Parent Teacher Conferences. In addition, three students were on modified programs as a result of moderate emotional and behavioural difficulties and one student was on a modified program as a result of significant learning difficulties.

There were also a variety of family structures represented within the class, five students from single parent families, three students from blended families and the remainder from two-parent intact families. The size of the families ranged from two (one parent and one child) to nine (two parents, six children and one grandparent). Although five children had recently moved to communities served by our school, over half of the children had been at the school since grade one.

Using benchmarks established for the 1999 Provincial Achievement Tests (Alberta Learning, 1999), sixty-eight percent of the students achieved at or above the acceptable standard in Language Arts, with less than six percent meeting the standard of excellence. Also, sixty-one percent achieved at or above the acceptable provincial standard in Mathematics, with slightly more than eleven percent achieving the standard of excellence. An acceptable

standard is established by Alberta Learning on the basis of the difficulty of each achievement test, and usually represents one-half of the possible marks. Standards of excellence are established in a similar way, with the expectation that approximately fifteen percent of the students throughout the province will achieve at or above this level. On the basis of the 1999 test results, children at my school achieved on a par with children from other working class communities within the city, and, as a group, ranked within the bottom thirty percent for public schools within the district.

### **Organization of the Thesis**

Rather than adhering to the traditional thesis structure, I have chosen to weave together the participants' stories and the related research into thematic chapters on the major topics that presented themselves within the data. Chapter Two: Research Methodology provides a summary of the research project from conceptualization to presentation of findings. Chapter Three: Early Literacy Experiences at Home utilizes data from the inquiry to answer the question, "In what ways do parents foster their children's literacy learning at home?" The chapter reports on home literacy events that were provided by the parents during the children's preschool and first school years, with specific attention being given to early reading and writing experiences. A section on the ways in which parents provide homework support closes out the chapter. Chapter Four: Parent Involvement with the School examines the involvement that each of the parents reported having with the school and the nature of the home-school relationships that were established, in effect answering question two, "In what ways are parents involved with their

children's school and schooling?" The chapter illustrates the way in which parent-school interactions can become either roadblocks or bridges to understanding and effective partnerships. Chapter Five: Afterthoughts and Implications provides a summary of the major findings from the research, together with the limitations of this exploratory study and its implications for future research.

## CHAPTER TWO: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

### Coming to the Topic

During my sabbatical year, I became engaged in a process of reading-, writing-, talking-, and listening-to-learn (Gordon, Paul & Sheridan, 1998) as I endeavoured to increase my knowledge base in the areas of early literacy, parent involvement, home-school partnerships, qualitative methodology and research interviewing (Field notes, 1997-1998). My investigations led me to an in-depth look at the impact of children's attitudes on reading and learning to read, and a renewed interest in the significant role that parents play in their children's literacy learning.

As a parent of three children who had become readers, each in their own way and time, and as an educator who had worked closely with parents whose children were learning to read or were already reading, I had some understanding of the family influences which might promote or interfere with children's emerging literacy. However, through coursework, class discussions and professorial probings, I recognized that while my understandings were valuable, they were also limited to my own experiences and restricted by my particular perspective (Patton, 1990; Seidman, 1991). I recognized the need to listen to the stories of other parents about their involvement in children's literacy learning.

I learned from the stories of other mothers, who represented various socioeconomic, family and cultural backgrounds, and who were involved in providing support for their young children's literacy learning (Akroyd, 1995; Handel, 1995; Neuman, Hagedorn, Celano & Daly, 1995; Purcell-Gates, L'Allier & Smith, 1995; and Unwin, 1995). As a parent myself, and from my

discussions with friends and family members, I realized that issues of home-school relationships often emerged during discussions of school and children's learning. Further, my responsibilities as an administrator and a resource teacher had provided opportunities to learn about the interview process and I undertook an interview as part of a course assignment. These experiences helped me to gain an understanding of the roles and responsibilities of a research interviewer (Kvale, 1996; Patton, 1990; Stewart & Cash, 1991).

Thus, the three related topics of at-home literacy learning, parent involvement and parent-school relations became the basis for my research and the framework by which to structure my project. I had developed a clear purpose and was ready to make informed choices as to the details of the research project. Patton (1990) refers to this process of "developing a strategic framework" as a critical step in ensuring that all of the various tasks and phases of the research project will remain consistent with the purpose of the study (p. 36).

### **Relating Design to Purpose**

#### **Interviewing as a Source for Data Collection**

The purpose of a qualitative research interview is to come to know the lived experiences and perceptions of another human being, through a conversation about a theme which is of mutual interest to both interviewer and interviewee (Kvale 1996, p. 27). Stewart and Cash (1991) refer to this comingling of ideas and experiences as "dyadic, relational communication" (p. 3), while Kvale (1996) refers to it as "intersubjective interaction" (p. 66).

Participants, as well as researchers, are often highly motivated to participate in an information-gathering interview (Patton, 1990), and are excited about the opportunity to share their views while receiving the undivided attention of the researcher (Kvale, 1996, p. 36). It is important to remember that in the context of research interviewing, the interviewer becomes the instrument for data collection. Kvale's (1996) phrase, "the craft of interviewing," reminded me that conducting a research interview is not a procedure to be undertaken lightly. Rather, it relies heavily on the researcher's expertise, not only in terms of the subject matter of the inquiry, but also on a solid understanding of the principles of effective communication and social relationships, and a sound knowledge of research methodology (p. 108).

As the purpose of my study was to listen to and learn from the experiences of parents, I wanted to provide them with an environment in which they could bring forth their personal perspectives and issues, and for this reason, I chose individual research interviews as the format for collecting the data. The assumptions on which I had based some of my earlier work with parents, as well as the assumptions for this project were consistent with those outlined by Patton (1990) in that I believed that the perspectives of others were meaningful, knowable, and able to be made explicit.

In addition, qualitative research interviews seemed a suitable methodology for drawing forth the experiences and emotions of the parents, as this method of data collection had been found to be an effective and widely accepted research method (Stewart & Cash, 1991, p. 5). Information gathered from the parents would be considered in concert with my own experiences



and those of the parents' perspectives I had encountered in the literature. By listening to and reflecting upon the perspectives of others, I hoped to gain a broader and deeper understanding of what it is that parents do to promote the literacy learning of their young children in their pre-school years and throughout their early years of schooling.

### **Interview Format**

Once I had made the decision to conduct research interviews with a number of parents, it was necessary to choose the participants and the type of interview format that would be followed. In a standardized interview instrument, questions are constructed and committed to paper, using exact wording and order of presentation. During each interview, researchers adhere strictly to the predetermined format and wording, with this consistency of presentation becoming a measure of reliability (Patton, 1990, p. 289). For my conversations with parents, I chose a more loosely-structured interview format, one which Patton (1990) refers to as the "interview guide format" (p. 289) and Kvale (1996) refers to as the "semi-structured interview" format (p.28). There is some discussion in the literature as to whether the semi-structured research interview is, in fact, an interview (O'Neill, 1998; Steward & Cash, 1991) or a particular form of conversation (Kvale, 1996; Oakley, 1981). For the purposes of this paper I have chosen to rely mainly on the term interview but have also used the term conversation, when it fits semantically within a particular unit of text.

### **Generating Topics and Questions**

As I engaged in a dialogue with the numerous texts available in the areas of at-home literacy learning, parent involvement and home-school relationships, a number of key issues emerged and were shaped into open-ended questions and topics. There was sufficient evidence in the literature to support the notion that all families provide both direct and indirect support for their children's home and school literacy learning. I was curious to discover how the participants modelled and promoted children's learning at home, as well as other ways in which parents support children's learning by attending to school (Paratore, Melzi & Krol-Sinclair, 1999). My semi-structured interview questions were created to provoke parents to reflect upon the direct and indirect literacy activities that occurred within their family situation, as well as the attention that they gave to their children's school and schooling.

I anticipated that each parent would be engaged in at least one ninety-minute interview, with the possibility of a follow-up interview. Although I had chosen a semi-structured format for my interview procedure, I followed the advice of Patton (1990) and others who recommended the use of an interview guide to ensure key topics were not missed and time was used effectively (p. 283). A copy of the semi-structured interview guide is included as Appendix A.

### **Selecting the Participants**

#### **Familiarity with Community**

The initial phase in the participant selection process was becoming

familiar with the school community. Throughout the fall and into the winter months, I worked diligently to build connections with the staff and students, as I gained knowledge about the idiosyncrasies of this school, its organization and its operations. At the same time, I capitalized on every available opportunity to interact with parents and to initiate friendly, relaxed relationships with them.

Parent-Teacher Conferences in September provided the first opportunity to meet all of the parents, and a museum field trip later in the fall created a relaxed, non-school environment in which to interact with parent volunteers. A wide range of teacher-initiated and parent-initiated interactions occurred throughout the term, as I worked with families to help their children be successful at school. These interactions took place in a variety of ways; informal face-to-face social exchanges, traditional parent-teacher and school resource group meetings, personal notes and written messages in the daily student agenda, and telephone conversations.

By spring of that year, I felt ready to proceed with the research. I had become quite familiar with a few parents and was very interested in learning more from them.

### **Filling the Spots**

My decision regarding first round choices for research participants was based on the quality of the relationships I had established with particular parents (more interactive, more frequent and positive) and the uniqueness of their family situation (not only mothers and not only two-parent families). Patton (1990) refers to this manner of participant selection as “purposeful

sampling" (p. 184). which, to my mind, fit with my intention to conduct an exploratory inquiry. Thus, I allowed myself latitude in choosing parents while, at the same time, recognizing that this selection would limit the diversity of the data.

Initially, letters were sent to the parents of two girls and two boys. In the case of two parent families, letters were addressed to both parents. The single fathers of two boys agreed to participate but none of the parents of the girls were able to participate at that time. In order to keep the study from focussing exclusively on parents of boys, second round letters were sent only to parents of female students. Although three more "unable to participate" responses were obtained, one mother indicated her willingness to participate.

### **Restricting Participation**

It became apparent after I had secured the participation of these three parents, that it would be difficult to find two more parents from within my class. My original proposal stated that I would be interviewing five parents, with the intent of using information from three or four of them. The intent was to have extra parents involved at this stage to allow some flexibility in case one or another of them moved or decided to withdraw from the project.

At this point I was trying to maintain a reasonable balance between parents of boys and girls, as well as between single and married parents. There were no girls of single parents in the class at the time, and almost all of the other girls were from families with very limited English. Although these parents could have provided important data to the study, I was aware that most of them worked long hours outside of the home, and many did not

usually participate in special programs and activities offered at school. I was confident that, even if invited, they would not agree to participate. Also, I had worked with interpreters in the past, and knew that language was not the only issue that impacted interactions between non-Caucasian parents and myself. Cultural differences regarding what can and should be asked and shared would have made it more difficult and, perhaps less fruitful, to choose parents with limited English skills (Patton, 1990; Kvale, 1996), although I suspected that their stories would have been very enlightening. The parents of the three remaining female students were eliminated on the basis of family situation or the significant learning and behavioural issues of their children.

I was left to consider different ways to proceed. One option was to ask parents of other boys. Although this might have made for a very interesting study, in consultation with my advisor I chose not to limit the inquiry in this manner. As stated in the title, this was to be an exploratory study and I did not want to delimit my research by making it overly gender specific. As I rethought my original proposal, I began to question my decision to invite five parents to participate, and then later be faced with the situation of telling one or two of them that I had decided not to use their data. The more I thought about this, the more ironic and disrespectful it seemed. First, I would profess my interest in listening to and learning from parents and, then, I would choose not to use the information they provided.

I was encouraged by Kvale (1996) who contends that decisions regarding the number of participants must be made by the researcher in light of the purpose of the inquiry, what will be useful and credible, and what can be accomplished, given the time and resources available. This supported my

decision to proceed with the study using only three participants and I was reassured that my choice was a defensible one when I read Patton (1990) and came across the following. He contends that there are “no rules for sample size in qualitative inquiry” (p. 184) and that “the validity, meaningfulness, and insights generated from qualitative inquiry have more to do with the information-richness of the cases selected and the observational and analytical capabilities of the researcher than with sample size” (p.185).

I decided to proceed on the understanding that if the data were not sufficient to create a quality research study, then I would invite another parent to be involved once the new school year began. Although this was not the most ideal scenario, in consultation with my advisor, I felt it was the best alternative at the time.

### **The Participants**

#### **Mrs. Becker and her Family**

Mr. and Mrs. Becker are the parents of three children: Isabel, the youngest and only girl who turned nine just before my conversation with her mother, and her two brothers, Ted, aged sixteen and Adam, aged thirteen. Both parents completed their grade twelve diplomas and both are currently employed outside of the home. Mrs. Becker works part time, about twenty-eight to thirty hours a week, as a supervisor in a large toy store not far from the family home. Mr. Becker, a skilled craftsman, works between fifty and sixty hours a week in the family business he operates with his father in a small rural community outside of the city. Although he must be away for long hours each day, Mr. Becker has organized his work schedule so that he

usually is home by supper time. Although both parents also work on the weekend, they try "really hard not to have them [the children] going to babysitters." Instead "we split the days." Mrs. Becker stated, "I work Sunday. He works Saturday" (Interview, 02/06/99).

In addition to arranging their work schedules so that someone is home with Isabel, the Beckers also have Ted and Adam help out by supervising Isabel. In many families, grandparents play a major role in nurturing and supporting their grandchildren's development and Isabel is fortunate to have both sets of grandparents close by and actively involved in her life. Isabel "likes to go to her grandparents" and usually spends time with them during school holidays (Interview, 02/06/99).

Mrs. Becker recalled that "Isabel was slower to speak. She didn't speak at two like everybody else. It was a longer process" (02/06/99). She also commented that Isabel had difficulty "repeating a whole bunch of things" and also required "speech therapy" for articulation correction (Interview, 02/06/99). Mrs. Becker suggested that these developmental delays were the reason that Isabel had difficulty with spelling and reading.

Mrs. Becker admitted that because Isabel was the youngest, she still "babies her more and that's hard to get past" but also because she was the youngest, Isabel has learned to amuse herself and is often "content to be on her own. She's not a kid that needs somebody else. Isabel's quite fine to be on her own in her own little world in her room or in a corner of the living room" (Interview, 02/06/99). She also commented that Isabel likes to play with tiny things, like dolls and animal figures" and also enjoys trying "to teach the dog tricks" (Interview, 02/06/99).

In class I found Isabel to be a very charming young girl, with a great deal of enthusiasm for learning and a desire to be socially connected with her friends. She was an eager participant in all activities, whether written or oral, and often shared special artifacts from home that extended our classroom lessons. Although she was slightly below grade level in reading and writing skills at the beginning of grade three, she seemed to love to read and always had a good selection of reading materials in her desk.

### **Mr. Davis and his Family**

Mr. Davis is a single father who has been divorced for about five years. He is the father of two boys: Thomas, age twelve, and Christopher, who had just turned nine. After completing his grade twelve diploma, Mr. Davis secured a position with a national transportation company and now works as a coordinator in a position that he describes as being similar to an air traffic controller. He works eighty-four hours every two weeks, alternating between day and night shifts.

After the divorce Mr. Davis relied on his sister and his parents as supplementary caregivers for his sons. His sister moved in with the family for a while but now cares for Christopher and Thomas part-time in her own home, when Mr. Davis is on the night shift. Mr. Davis' mother, a former resource teacher, and Mr. Davis, Sr. also had a very close relationship with their grandsons, and have provided Mr. Davis with valuable guidance and support for raising Christopher and Thomas.

Mr. Davis described his son Christopher as a "very kindhearted boy who was quite emotional" and required "a great deal of encouragement"



(Interview, 17/05/99). Mr. Davis was proud of the growth that Christopher had made in grade three. He stated, "Chris has really come a long way this year. His marks were a bit low in the beginning but he's really picked himself up" (Interview, 17/05/99).

At school I found Christopher to be quiet, polite, kind and shy. It seemed to take him a long time in the fall to feel comfortable and he often required extra support while working. At the beginning of the year Christopher was able to recognize and decode words at the beginning grade three level but he did not always perform well on reading comprehension tasks. It seemed that he was not always engaged with the text (Rosenblatt, 1994) and as a result was not transacting with the text in any meaningful way. Christopher was also a very reluctant writer, and took a long time and a great deal of encouragement to become involved in writing projects.

### **Mr. Sullivan and his Family**

Mr. Sullivan was a single father who had been on his own since his only son, Colin, was a baby. Mr. Sullivan completed grade twelve and worked as the manager of a local printing company, a business in which he had been employed since his early teens. He reported that he worked an average of fifty hours a week, and that he relied upon his brother and sister-in-law to help with the supervision of Colin.

As was true for the other children in the study, Colin had a very close relationship with his paternal grandparents who lived nearby. In fact, Mr. Sullivan's "mother lived with the family for almost three years" (Interview, 14/05/99) and was one of Colin's early primary caregivers. It was not

surprising that even though Colin's grandmother no longer lived with the Sullivan family, Colin liked to telephone her "two or three times a day" and was always excited when anticipating "Grandma days" (Interview, 14/05/99).

Mr. Sullivan was very proud of Colin and the fact that he was so well liked by the adults he had met. Mr. Sullivan reported that Colin had been "adopted" by many people through his grandmother's work, his father's business and the family's church, attesting to Colin's appealing personality and his engaging communication skills. Mr. Sullivan stated, "He is fun. He isn't just a little kid. He can talk intelligently to them [adults]" (Interview, 14/05/99). As a result, Colin has received a great deal of positive attention from the adults in his life and has benefitted, both socially and cognitively, from the interactions he has had with them. In addition to the powerful bond which connected Colin, his father and his grandmother, it seems that other adults, acting as an informal extended family, have also impacted Colin's development.

In school I found Colin to be one little fired-up ball of enthusiasm and energy. Physically short and slight for his nine years, Colin had been on medication for Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD) since the spring of 1998, which had helped considerably in controlling his behaviour and energy levels during class time. Colin was always excited about learning and was capable of intense concentration for long periods of time. However, at times, he also had great difficulty remaining calm, quiet and focussed. Colin was one of my most challenging students that year but at the same time, he was also the most likable and charming.

Colin was already reading at grade level when he started grade three,

and I very soon discovered that his love of books could be utilized to minimize his disruptive behaviours and to redirect his energies. His creative writing projects were usually inspired by his personal experiences, and what they lacked in descriptive detail they made up for in novelty and spirit. I also soon realized that Colin loved to draw and his creations were detailed, action-packed and humorous.

### **Arranging the Interviews**

I chose not to make the initial contact to parents by telephone in order to be sensitive to their family and work situations. Instead, I sent a letter outlining the study and the required time commitment. This allowed parents a chance to consider the invitation at their convenience, and to formulate any questions they might have. I gave parents the option of contacting me, or providing a suitable time when I could contact them, and I found that this advance notice of a "call from the school" helped to maintain a positive tone and proved most effective for the parents and myself.

Once a positive response was received, I confirmed with the parent by telephone and scheduled a convenient interview time. A copy of the Consent Form was sent home for the parent to read and sign. In addition, I stressed the issue of confidentiality, reassuring them that their names and other identifying information would not be used in the final thesis. Although parents were asked to suggest a pseudonym for use in the manuscript, no one chose to do so. In the end I assigned aliases to each parent and child.

The initial interview with each parent was held in the privacy of a large, pleasantly-decorated conference room adjacent to the main office of the

school. Although the room was not perfectly quiet, the occasional sounds of students moving in the hall did not present a noticeable distraction. A follow-up conversation with Mr. Sullivan took place in a busy cafeteria near his office. Although this location did not disrupt our conversation, it made me appreciate why experienced researchers suggest an interview location which is quiet and away from noise and confusion (Garrett, 1982; Stewart & Cash, 1991).

Recording equipment was checked and readied well before the interview time, a "Meeting in Progress - Do Not Disturb" sign was hung on the door and staff were reminded that I would be unavailable for the duration of the interview. Instead of sitting across from each other at the conference table, I arranged our chairs at right angles at the corner of the table, which was less formal and according to Stewart & Cash (1991) creates a feeling of equality between participant and researcher. This physical arrangement also meant that our conversations could be conducted in a normal voice and easily picked up by the audio-recorder.

### **Conducting the Interviews**

As we settled into our seats around the recording equipment, I engaged each parent in a few minutes of casual conversation. I wanted to put the parents at ease and establish an atmosphere of trust so they would feel safe to talk freely about their experiences (Kvale, 1996, p. 125). Yet, I was also conscious of being on school time and bound by the time limit I had negotiated with the parents (Lareau, 1989), and I moved on to the interview without much delay.

After reviewing the Consent Form, the purpose of the project and interview format, I stressed again the issue of confidentiality and the restrictions placed on my use of the data. I reviewed the rationale for recording the session, and provided details regarding the storage and later destruction of tapes. I also thanked each parent for agreeing to meet with me and giving me the opportunity to learn from their experiences.

I began each interview with a standard set of questions regarding family structure, parents' education and current employment. Although I had gained some of this information by working with the families during the year, I began with these factual questions as a transition from our initial friendly socializing to the more serious and perhaps controversial topics of literary learning, parent involvement and home-school partnerships. These background questions are included as Appendix B - Parent and Family Background Questions. After the initial background questions, each conversation settled into its own rhythm and I had a sense that the parents and I were understanding each other (Lareau, 1989). During each of the interviews I made a point of validating the parent's involvement in their children's learning (Edwards, 1995), and I sensed that the parents felt respected and felt no reluctance to speak openly. It was evident that they trusted me with their stories and that the topics were engaging and meaningful to them.

I found the task of research interviewer to be an exhilarating and demanding one. Throughout the interviews I had to remain focussed on the participant, their ideas and emotions. I had to maintain a smooth flow of conversation by attending to the pacing of responses and questions (Garrett, 1982). I relied on the interview guide to ensure that the major questions were

raised with each participant and that the interview stayed within the specified time limit. Also, I relied on active listening, as well as empathetic and intuitive skills to decide when and how to probe for more information and when to introduce a different topic (Kvale, 1996; Patton, 1990). As well, I found that I was confronted with ethical issues that had to be decided quickly and with no disruption in the dialogue (Kvale, 1996; O'Neill, 1998). On occasion I decided not to pursue a particular comment for fear that my probing of a sensitive issue would appear intrusive rather than inquisitive (Patton, 1990).

### **Transcribing and Verifying the Data**

Having previously worked as a recording secretary, I was confident about my transcription skills and looked forward to the opportunity to relisten to the interviews. The original transcripts were typed as closely to verbatim as possible, trying to represent on paper the words and intent of the conversations. However, I was reminded that no matter how exactly they were typed, transcripts are still an artificial construction of spoken language to printed text (Kvale, 1996, p. 163) and, as such, could not adequately relate the conversation in its entirety.

I forwarded a copy of the completed transcript to each parent, as well as to my advisor. Parents were invited to respond to the transcripts and were provided an opportunity to amend and extend the data as they felt appropriate. No feedback was received at this point.

## **Analyzing the Data**

### **Inductive Analysis**

The analysis process began during the interview and continued as I listened and relistened to the conversations while transcribing the data. At the same time that parents were going over their copies of the transcripts, I became engaged in reading and rereading the recorded data. I paid attention to responses that corresponded to my original questions, and also noted other issues and information brought forth by the parents. Data collection sheets were created and used to organize and highlight information from each participant. Where I recognized gaps, I made notes about follow-up questions and the need for clarification (Lareau, 1989).

### **Case Study Analysis**

The case study approach to qualitative analysis provides a specific way of collecting, organizing and analyzing information about a particular individual or group of individuals (Patton, 1990, p. 384). I drafted a short individual case study for each parent, so that I could make sense of their unique experiences. A copy of the case study was also sent to the parent, and again they were invited to respond to my interpretation and representation of their stories.

Once I began the second case study, it became very difficult to stay focussed on only one family at a time and I found myself comparing the responses from the different parents. This cross-case analysis helped me to recognize the ways in which the parents' experiences were similar or different and in what ways their experiences had influenced the learning support they

provided to their children (Patton, 1990).

Data from the individual cases, as well as from the cross-case comparisons, were organized around topics that I had raised during the interviews, as well as themes that emerged from the parents' stories. I paid particular attention to the exceptionalities as well as the similarities, trying to make sense of how these particulars related to a greater whole (O'Neill, 1998).

### **Interpreting and Presenting Data**

There are specific challenges inherent in any type of research methodology, and qualitative inquiry is no exception. Perhaps because there is a great deal of latitude allowed in qualitative inquiry, it becomes more important for the researcher to monitor and report on the analytical procedures and processes employed (Patton, 1990, p. 372). As I contemplated and worked through the drafts of the manuscript, I tried to make sense of what it was the parents had told me, inferring from their stories what their experiences had meant at the time they occurred, as well as how the experiences had influenced later attitudes and behaviours. Recognizing that human behaviour is motivated by many different experiences and emotions which are woven together over time (Garrett, 1982), and realizing that the parents had provided only a short glimpse into their lives, I accepted that any inferences I made would be based on limited data. However, I also knew that my interpretations were grounded in my own similar experiences as a parent and the experiences of other parents reported in the literature.

When considering how best to weave the participants' voices into the final manuscript, I made the decision to "smooth out the raw data of the



transcripts” in order to create a more coherent and meaningful text (O’Neill, 1998). I analyzed and selected meaningful portions of text, trying them out in different places within the manuscript until I was satisfied that my choices had created a faithful representation of the parents and their experiences (Seidman, 1991). As well, I worked to find a satisfactory balance between description and interpretation (Patton, 1990) so that the finished manuscript was seen to be a valid interpretation of the data and proof of my interpretative skills (Bakhtin, cited in O’Neill, 1998).

### **Confronting Biases**

Much has been written about the need for researchers to recognize their personal biases and to acknowledge the impact of their biases throughout the different stages of the research project (Kvale, 1996; Patton, 1990; Stewart & Cash, 1991). I was caught off guard by such a bias. Upon reflecting about the affirmations I had given to each parent, I recognized that I had acknowledged the demands of Mr. Davis’ and Mr. Sullivan’s household and family responsibilities, but that I had not done the same for Mrs. Becker. What’s more, it was not a matter of forgetting to relay this affirmation to her. I realized I had not recognized her contributions as being as significant as those of the fathers. I was guilty of expecting more and rewarding less women’s contributions to their families and their households. I should have known better.

### **Summary**

In this chapter I have summarized the processes that I worked through in order to create a completed thesis out of a simple idea of listening to parents. I believe that the details of the process provide a realistic account of my coming to know qualitative methodology, albeit as a beginning researcher.

### CHAPTER THREE: EARLY LITERACY EXPERIENCES AT HOME

The importance of early at-home literacy experiences in the development of a child's positive attitude towards reading and learning to read has been well-documented over the past twenty years. In a synthesis of emergent literacy research, Gunn, Simmons & Kameenui state that, "Children begin school with diverse experiences and understandings of print: what it is, how it works, and why it is used" (1995, p. 5) and as can be attested to by any primary school teacher, the impact of these different experiences is often a significant factor in determining children's later literacy acquisition. While it seems, at times, fairly convenient for some educators to blame or credit socio-economic status as a critical factor in determining the types of literacy-related behaviours that occur within the home and predict children's successful transition to formal literacy instruction, this relationship has not been found to be as predictable as expected. In fact, a large number of studies reviewed by van Kleeck (1990) actually highlighted a variety of other family factors as being more significant than socio-economic status: "academic guidance, attitude toward education, parental aspirations for the child, conversations and reading materials in the home, and cultural activities" (p. 29).

My current research was not aimed at finding out what level of understanding the students had about print when they entered school, nor was it specifically aimed at relating the early literacy experiences of children to their literacy achievement levels. Rather, my aim in this part of the exploratory study, was to learn what types of early literacy experiences the parents were involved in with their children and how the parents viewed

their involvement in their children's literacy acquisition. I was also curious to learn if social class might prove to be a distinguishing factor in parents' involvement and attitudes about their children's learning (Lareau, 1991).

The data that emerged from my conversations with the parents suggested the major themes of early reading experiences and early writing experiences, and I further organized the information by categorizing it according to when (e.g., prior to school entrance) the literacy interactions occurred, and the role that the parent played in encouraging and modelling the literacy behaviours. Also presented in the chapter is data that relates to parent-initiated experiences that encouraged their children's speaking, listening and viewing skill development, as well as a section on special activities and family outings which provide opportunities for children to engage in reading-, talking-, listening- and viewing-to-learn activities (Gordon, Sheridan & Paul, 1998). The final section of the chapter offers information gathered from the parents with regard to the specific ways they help their children with homework.

By separating reading, writing, listening, speaking and viewing into separate subsections of this chapter, I am not implying that they are separate literacy processes. However, grouping data from the interviews around these different headings serves to organize the information according to the major literacies being used at the time.

### **Early Reading Experiences**

While there are many different social interactions that occur within a family's daily routines and have the potential of influencing children's

formal literacy learning, the most widely known and most frequently researched is storybook reading (Bus, Ijzendoorn & Pellegrini, 1995; Sulzby & Teale, 1987). Even as far back as 1908, Huey suggested that parents' reading aloud to and with their children was the most significant factor influencing students' later learning (Morrow, 1995). In addition, Baker, Serpell, and Sonnenschein (1995) stated that "children who have frequent positive experiences with print are more likely to acquire print related knowledge that is conducive to literacy learning in early school grades" (p. 237). Not only do children require a variety of reading materials that motivate them to read, they also need adults who encourage their growth as readers and learners (Graves & Wendorf, 1995).

I have used the term "storybook" throughout the manuscript as a comprehensive term that refers to the different genre of books that parents and children engaged in. Although I reported some specific fiction titles, other book reading events involved non-fiction texts. I would ask that the reader keep this broader notion of storybook in mind, and not assume that parents and children engaged exclusively in fictional materials.

### **During the Preschool Years**

There are many different reasons why parents choose to make storybook reading a part of their families' regular routines. Many parents read storybooks with their young children, without fully understanding the benefits that can result from these literacy interactions. They may not be aware that some researchers have found that storybook reading is an important way in which parents can prepare their children for school (Baker

et al., 1995). Rather, because they have fond memories of being read to as a child, they choose to provide similar experiences for their own children. Other parents, who were not read to as children, sometimes make a conscious decision to read to and with their children on a regular basis, in an attempt to prevent their children from reliving their own negative early reading experiences (Taylor, 1983).

Perhaps it was not as important to know the reasons why parents read to their children as it was to recognize the important role that these literacy interactions provide for young children. Gunn, Kameenui, & Simmons, (1995) pointed out,

It is through exposure to written language (e.g., storybook reading and daily living routines) that many children develop an awareness of print, letter naming, and phonemic awareness. Additionally, through exposure to oral language, preschool children develop listening comprehension, vocabulary, and language facility. (pp. 5-6)

I was not surprised to find that the three parents interviewed all had storybook reading experiences to share. After all, each of them had responded to my invitation to talk about parent involvement in children's literacy development and shared book reading is a literacy activity that many parents are familiar with. Storybook reading has become a frequent subject in television announcements, videos and other public media, as well as in academic circles, and I would have been surprised if the parents had not been reading to their children. While all parents engaged in book-reading events with their children during the pre-school years, each of the families established their own routines (Paratore et al., 1995).

Mr. Sullivan, developed a habit of reading with his only child, Colin, each evening.

I didn't think he should get into reading or anything specifically. It just became one of those things where at night to calm him down, I'd sit in the rocker and show him pictures in the book. He just seemed to like it, so we did that every night. It's good to have a quieter time before they go to bed. If you get them all excited they won't want to go to sleep. So that was the quiet time, just sitting and rocking and reading, and then he'd fall asleep very easily. (Interview, 14/05/99)

From his description of these literacy events, it was easy to understand why Mr. Sullivan, a single father of a very active young boy, would rely on a nightly ritual of storybook reading and why Colin would also look forward to the emotional bonding that was such an important part of this father and son time together. When they were reading together, there could be no interruptions. Even telephone calls from Grandma, a highlight of Colin's day, had to wait. Mr. Sullivan was firm on this routine. "The answering machine picks up the calls during book reading time. If I have to pay total attention to him, he's got to pay total attention to me" (Interview, 14/05/99).

Mr. Sullivan was not the only parent whose stories about shared book reading spoke more about family togetherness than they did to teaching children about books and story language. Storybook reading within the home is often characterized by physical closeness, emotional connectedness, and reading enjoyment (Morrow, 1995). The Becker family had also enjoyed a nightly ritual of storybook reading, which began years ago.

Ever since Ted who is the oldest one was two and a half, we started reading him a story every night. I used to read with him when he was really little and then when we had Adam, Norm (Mr. Becker) started reading because we were trying not to get Ted jealous of Adam. (Interview, 02/06/99)

Further changes were also necessary when Isabel, the youngest, came on the scene. Changes have also been made to allow for more space and for

children's preferences. Mrs. Becker stated, "When it was just Ted, it (storybook reading) was in his bed but then when Adam was there and got older, it went from Ted's bed into our bed because they all didn't fit in his bed" (Interview, 02/06/99). She went on to explain that now that the boys are older, it is often just Isabel who reads with her father, "We have electric blankets, so Isabel always turns her dad's side on and then she gets in the bed and he lays down and they read" (Interview, 02/06/99).

Although the storybook reading ritual had been modified over the years, it seemed that it was still a very special and valued part of the family's daily routines. "Basically, Norm [the husband] reads with them every night and it's the fact that he's done it for so long" (Interview, 02/06/99). Again, it seemed not so much that reading together was intended to make the children become readers but rather a way for the children to reconnect with their father at the end of the day. Because storybook reading was a treasured part of their family time, it seemed that the Becker children were never too old to join in this family literacy activity. Mrs. Becker stated, "Adam is going to be fourteen, and even now, there's lots of times that he'll come and dive bomb onto the bed and listen to the story" (Interview, 02/06/99).

It seemed that despite the fact that Norm works long hours, or maybe because of it, the storybook reading ritual had become a very significant part of the relationship he maintained with his children. As Mrs. Becker related, "If Norm wasn't home, I could read them the story but it wouldn't count". The children would "catch their dad the next day" and expect him to "read us two stories now" (Interview, 02/06/99). Perhaps because Ted and Adam have fond memories of family storybook reading, they wanted to recreate these



special times for their younger sister. "Every once in a while Isabel's brothers will read her a story. Not as much as they used to but they'll still read to her" (Interview, 02/06/99).

It seemed that storybook reading in both the Sullivan and Becker homes had become a well-established and highly-valued family time and that the motivation to engage in story reading came from both the parents and the children (Tracey, 1995). Story time provided a chance for family members to get away from other responsibilities for a short time and to enter into the world of storybook characters. As for many other families, both parents and children look forward to these times of physical closeness and emotional bonding, while at the same time delighting in the reading and discussing of story details (Baker et al., 1995). As Mr. Sullivan shared warmly, "Colin's been easy. He's easily entertained, so it didn't matter what the story was about, as long as it's a story" and "as long as we were doing something together" (Interview, 14/05/99). And Mrs. Becker would seem to agree that it is not so much the story but rather "It's everybody crowding into the bed" (Interview, 02/06/99). In the past few years, attention has been given to the role that affective factors have in the reading and learning to read process (Gordon, Sheridan & Paul, 1998; Mathewson, 1994; McKenna, 1994; Rosenblatt, 1994). It was clear from the comments of Mrs. Becker and Mr. Sullivan that they understood the emotional bonding that occurred during these daily family events. Yet, I wonder if they would also recognize the significance that these experiences have on their children's literacy development.

Although Mr. Davis did not share many details about storybook reading with his sons at an early age, he remembered that both he and his

wife had “read to them at night” (Interview, 17/05/99). His memories of the “fun” times he had when he was young, when “either mom or my two older sisters would read to me” (Interview, 17/05/99) seemed to have influenced his beliefs in providing similar experiences for Christopher and Thomas. “I think it is a natural thing that you just do with your kids” (Interview, 17/05/99). He also recalled “buying the children books for the preschool ages, when they were really young, pull-out books and pop-up books,” although he admitted that they “didn’t have a lot of books for the boys” at that time (Interview, 17/05/99). Perhaps this was why Mr. Davis could easily recall the names of books he had frequently read to Christopher and Thomas. He chuckled as he named Rattle Rattle Train and Donald and Daffy Duck (Interview, 17/05/99).

There was no evidence to indicate that the parents engaged in storybook reading for the explicit purpose of teaching their children about books and reading. However, by establishing a regular routine of storybook reading, parents were implicitly reflecting their beliefs that books and reading were important (Baker et al., 1995).

Mr. Sullivan described the changes that occurred in the storybook interactions with Colin over time, and although his comments did not elaborate on the role he played in supporting these changes, it was reasonable to assume that, like other parents highlighted in the research, he “directed attention to particular features in a book, asked questions, provided labels, and gave feedback by repeating or extending (his son’s) remarks (Ninio & Bruner, cited in Gunn, Simmons & Kameenui, 1995, p. 28).

We had the ritual of sitting in the rocking chair and he just loved that and he just listened really intently. He loved the detail in books. He saw a lot in the pictures, I think. He really liked the pictures and

liked looking at pictures. Probably by a year and a half, he really, really, really, loved books. I would read to him ever night, probably three books. (Interview, 14/05/99)

He recalled that Colin talked at an early age, and would “point out small little details in the pictures” that his father had not even noticed. Colin would also “progress the story” by imagining what other things could have happened. “He loved all stories and he’d picture himself in the stories” that they were reading together (Interview, 14/05/99). Colin’s fascination with picture books and his desire to emotionally reconnect with his father at the end of each day created an ideal opportunity for father and son to share in storybook reading experiences. And it seemed that as a result of these naturally occurring family literacy events that Colin learned to read. Mr. Sullivan remembered quite clearly the progression of early literacy skills that Colin demonstrated as he moved from picture reading to reading of words.

Then he started seeing small words, the relation with the word and the letters. He picked up on that very young. He started learning words very early, recognizing words, ‘cause he’d know the story. As I’d read it, he’d recite the story by memory. Probably by three and a half to four he recognized a lot of words. ‘Cause in Kindergarten he was actually reading. (Interview, 14/05/99)

It seemed that Colin’s learning to read emerged almost naturally as a result of his own enthusiastic personality and the very special storybook events he enjoyed with his father. His attention to and curiosity about even the smallest picture book details led him to an interest in the non-picture marks on the page, which in turn led him to recognize and read small words.

Mr. Sullivan’s description of Colin’s learning to read suggested that he understood the relationship between the storybook reading events and Colin’s reading development. However, I could find no data from the

interviews to indicate that he understood the importance of his role in this relationship. Nowhere did Mr. Sullivan give himself credit for being a critical influence on Colin's early reading abilities, yet it was clear to me that it was much more than his son's love of pictures and books that contributed to Colin's early reading achievement. By providing regular storybook reading experiences, Mr. Sullivan seemed to have set up the ideal conditions for Colin to move from an interest in books to formal reading. He created relaxed, child-centred book reading experiences, wherein he modelled a positive attitude towards books and reading, and provided the emotional and print support necessary for Colin's smooth transition from non-reader to reader. It seemed that without any specialized knowledge regarding children's literacy development Mr. Sullivan had created the conditions for learning that some researchers associate with an effective emergent literacy program. Mr. Sullivan had accepted Colin as a "socially competent partner," allowed him to "experiment without undue duress" and created regular opportunities for him to practice his "unconventional, yet emerging skills" (Yaden, Rowe, and MacGillivray, 2000, p. 443).

### **During the First Years of School**

From my discussions with Mr. Davis, it seemed that he recognized the important role that parents play in helping children make a smooth transition from listening to storybooks to reading them on their own. He recalled some types of parental support he provided when his sons started school and were learning to read. It seemed that he realized that storybook reading was not just sounding out the words on the page, and he

remembered adding “some actions” as he read the stories (Interview, 17/05/99). Also, he stated that when he had finished reading a particular story, he would “ask them questions” about what had been read and make “comments on stuff that had happened in the books” (Interview, 17/05/99). Mr. Davis recalled other ways in which he later helped Christopher and Thomas to become more independent readers. He recognized that they had a preference for books like the Goosebumps series but he also encouraged them to buy “books through the school book club because they’re a lot better books” (Interview 17/05/99). Also he recalled that when Christopher and Thomas were reading longer books, he would “let them read a page, then myself read a page” (Interview, 17/05/99). And when he noticed that his sons were encountering more difficult ideas and vocabulary, Mr. Davis intervened to prevent them from becoming frustrated (Lancy, 1994). As Mr. Davis stated, “When you don’t know if they understand things, you explain it a little better” (Interview, 17/05/99).

As suggested by the studies reviewed by Mason and Allen (as cited in Gunn, Simmons, & Kameenui, 1995) it is the “quality and quantity of interactions, not just the presence of reading materials and a story time routine” that is critical for shaping early reading development (p. 30). This process of creating links between what the children already know and what they are helped to understand is referred to as scaffolding (Hiebert, 1988) and is an important role which many parents seem to instinctively take on during storybook reading interactions with their children.

According to Sulzby & Teale,

The scaffold routines of storybook reading create predictable formats that help children learn how to participate in and gradually take more responsibility for storybook reading activities. These routines,

as well as the language and social interactions that surround the text, appear to explain what makes storybook reading such a powerful influence in literacy development. (1991, p. 743)

Vgotsky's (cited in Edwards, 1995) "zone of proximal development" theory also supports the importance of children interacting with and being supported by adults as they acquire literacy behaviours. During storybook reading events, parents model questioning strategies and thought processes, which guide the children as they gradually take more responsibility for the reading process and eventually become independent readers. For this reason it is easy to understand why, in most cases, "parents who were read to as a children know how to read to their own children" (Snow & Goldfield, cited in Gadsden, 1995, p. 290). They most likely had scaffolding strategies modelled for them when they were children, and understand how important scaffolding can be for their children's learning and positive attitude towards reading.

By engaging their children in storybook reading events during the preschool years and through the elementary grades, parents play a crucial role in helping their children develop a positive attitude towards books and reading (Thomas, Fazio & Siefelmeyer, 1999, only one of many). The authors suggest that parents who become sensitive to their children's interests and learning preferences can create home reading environments and events that are positive and supportive for children as they encounter more challenging text and ideas. Parents also make important observations about their children's reading habits and preferred reading materials (Carreiro, 1989). Parents can then use this information to motivate and enhance future home reading events. Mr. Sullivan, for example, had observed that, "Colin is

reading more now and he's enjoying it more" (Interview, 10/08/99). Also, he had noticed that even though Colin was reading well for a child his age and had the ability to read a variety of books, he still "didn't like chapter books because there's not enough pictures" (Interview, 14/05/99). In addition, he stated that Colin still preferred "happy books like Berenstain Bears and Robert Munsch" and had "never got into the Goose Bumps" series like many other children his age (Interview, 14/05/99).

Mrs. Becker indicated that she was also aware of some of Isabel's reading preferences. Although Mrs. Becker did not consider Isabel to be "a newspaper kind of person," she had noticed that Isabel will look "at the comics." and will also "stand over your shoulder and if a picture catches her eye, like there's a dog on it or something to do with animals, she'll stop and kind of look at it" (Interview, 02/06/99). Mrs. Becker also noted that Isabel "liked to read the t.v. guide" and "will pick up a magazine and read it, if there's something about a foal" in it (Interview, 02/06/99). However, Mrs. Becker had also noticed that earlier on Isabel "seemed to like (reading) more than her brothers, and enjoyed it more than she does now" (Interview, 02/06/99).

In an attempt to capitalize upon Isabel's obvious interests and to rekindle her earlier interest in reading, Mrs. Becker reported that she shopped for books that would hopefully suit Isabel's interest and reading skills. She purchased "Mary Kate and Ashley" books, "a new series by Disney" and other small books (Interview, 02/06/99). Isabel "picked out books at the bookstore and ordered others from the school book club" (Interview, 02/06/99). However, Mrs. Becker did not seem to be convinced that providing all these

reading materials had actually benefitted Isabel. "She's always wanting all these books but I also know she's not going to read them all. We start off with great hopes but I know she's going to go through the first two pages and she's not going to read it" (Interview, 02/06/99). Mrs. Becker added, "Isabel loves it when you read to her but as soon as you try to get her to be there (in the print) with you, it's not so much fun anymore. I really think she thinks it's work" (Interview, 02/06/99).

It would seem from Mrs. Becker's comments that, at least some of the time, reading with Isabel was not too pleasurable for her or meaningful for Isabel. Mrs. Becker had noticed that "sometimes she doesn't even stop at the punctuation. She just keeps going" because "I don't think she's retaining the information as much as she can if she wants to" (Interview, 02/06/99). Interestingly enough, Mrs. Becker's later comment suggested that without realizing the importance of what she had said, she understood why Isabel did not always seem to be interested in what she was reading. After all, Mrs. Becker admitted, "I know she can (retain information) because if something really thrills her, like if it's got a horse or a dog, she'll get it. But if it's something that she's not really interested in, she just reads the words" (Interview, 02/06/99). Isabel might simply not have been interested in what she was reading at that time, or, perhaps Isabel had little motivation to become involved in the story and had not engaged in the details enough to understand and retain the information (Rosenblatt, 1994). This seemed to be true, at least some of the time, because Mrs. Becker stated that when she asks Isabel to talk about what the sentence said, "Isabel will go back and move her finger along the words, and then she'll start to tell me what it says"



(Interview, 02/06/99).

From the data it would seem that Mrs. Becker has always been an avid and ardent reader. "I've always liked it. I never had a problem reading" and it was clear from her comments that she becomes involved, both aesthetically and efferently, in the stories she reads (Gordon, Sheridan & Paul, 1998; Rosenblatt, 1994). She commented, "I've always liked reading. When I read I can see because [the authors] explain the scenery and they explain what the room smells like when you walk in, or what the people are wearing, and I can picture the person" (Interview, 02/06/99). She compared Isabel's reading to her own. "I think she reads just to read the words but she's not getting anything out of it. She can tell you the words but there's no feeling in what she's reading" (Interview, 02/06/99).

As a result of her many enjoyable experiences with books, it seemed that Mrs. Becker had learned the role of affect in the reading process and tried to encourage Isabel to also become an aesthetic reader. I wondered if Mrs. Becker expected to notice some dramatic proof that Isabel was becoming such a reader, or, if she was judging Isabel's reading abilities based on her own intense relationship with books. It was interesting that even after saying that Isabel "will flip through a magazine" and "will read things she is interested in," Mrs. Becker also stated that Isabel's "not much into just picking up something and reading" (Interview, 02/06/99). I believe Mrs. Becker had missed some of the subtle changes in Isabel's reading development, and failed to recognize that there were definite signs that Isabel was, in fact, a reader. After all, Mrs. Becker remembered Isabel asking to "stay up an extra fifteen minutes to read" and on occasion, she found "books under Isabel's pillow"

(Interview, 02/06/99).

It appeared that Mrs. Becker had a great deal more information about reading and learning to read than she gave herself credit for. During this part of our interview, I sensed she was looking for and needing some reassurance about Isabel's literacy development, and I found myself assuring her "that's okay" or "that's fine" or "lots of kids are different" (Interview, 02/06/99) when she raised concerns about Isabel's reading skills and interests. She seemed to need reassurance that Isabel was not so different from other young readers, and that independent reading skills can develop at different rates and in many different ways.

Mrs. Becker mentioned a storybook reading issue that had arisen. It centred around Isabel's reliance on what Mrs. Becker referred to as "baby books" (Interview, 02/06/99). Mrs. Becker stated, "That's why we're trying to phase out the books that she knows well. I figure that it's probably too easy to read the same book over" because she "already knows what's going to happen" (Interview, 02/06/99). And because Isabel still preferred these more familiar books, Mrs. Becker has decided, "I'm sure it's her easy way out" (Interview, 02/06/99). In an effort to force Isabel to read more challenging text, Mrs. Becker had actually "gotten rid of some of Isabel's baby books" (Interview, 02/06/99). It would seem that Mrs. Becker lacked the knowledge that Isabel could benefit by rereading familiar texts (i.e., increased comprehension, awareness of story structure and improved word recognition). Apparently she told Isabel, "We're going to give these to your cousin because you're getting too big for them" (Interview, 02/06/99). The idea of children being "too big" for a particular book or a book being "too

babyish" for a particular child indicated that Mrs. Becker did not appreciate the pleasure that anyone can derive from reading and rereading such classics as The Tale of Peter Rabbit (1987), Whose Mouse are You? (1970) and Goodnight Moon (1947), nor the importance of reading for pleasure in sustaining children's interest in reading.

The data from this section of Mrs. Becker's interview seemed to suggest that a particular challenge arises for some parents, who are themselves avid readers and want so much for their children to enjoy reading in a similar way. From her comments, it seemed that it was difficult, and at times upsetting, for Mrs. Becker to realize that her children did not appreciate reading the same as she did. "I really like words and it annoys me that really none of my kids do. I'll read the cereal boxes, whatever there is to read, and Isabel's just not that way" (Interview, 02/06/99). It seemed that despite evidence to the contrary, Mrs. Becker had difficulty recognizing that Isabel was a reader. On the one hand, Mrs. Becker reported behaviours that demonstrated Isabel's interest in reading and curiosity about particular print materials. On the other, she seemed to want this curiosity and interest to be at a much deeper level, even though Isabel had just turned nine years of age.

In some ways it may have been easier for Mr. Sullivan to move through the stages of early reading development with his son because reading was not something that had come easily for him. Mr. Sullivan admitted, "When I see Colin, I see a lot of me. I didn't even start reading novels until later on in high school. In elementary, I rarely read at home 'cause I was always out and about" (Interview, 10/08/99). Unlike Mrs. Becker, Mr. Sullivan did not seem to have preconceived notions of what a reader is and

how a reader behaves. Rather, he seemed able to accept Colin's current reading skills for what they were and seemed to have a better sense of what support Colin might need to be successful. In fact, although Mr. Sullivan commented on Colin's preference for familiar books, his comment did not give any indication that this caused him any concern.

Mr. Sullivan shared one very important observation regarding Colin's changing attention to literacy and that was his recent interest in the meaning of words. In the past, Colin "hasn't really asked what words mean," because he seemed to have "a good grasp on figuring out what words mean by whatever surrounded the sentence" (Interview, 14/05/99). However, recently Colin had become more interested in the actual meaning of words. He explained,

This morning he asked me, 'What does organization mean?' The context in which he had heard it was a company's organization. He didn't put organization and a company together. Organization for him is putting things together, organizing things. Then I told him what an organization can be, as a company. Words like that, that have double meanings, he wants to know all the ways they can mean. (Interview, 14/05/99).

This event seemed to excite Mr. Sullivan, as he recognized the change as a demonstration of Colin's continuing cognitive and literacy development.

In many families, rituals of shared storybook reading change as the children become older. As there are differences in the routines established by different families, there are also differences why storybook reading events tend to occur less frequently. As children become more fluent, independent readers, many parents feel it is less important, and even unnecessary, to continue to engage in storybook reading events with them. In fact, much of the reading done by older, proficient readers is silent and does not require the

direct, immediate involvement of an adult (Tracey, 1995). Both Mr. Davis and Mr. Sullivan admitted that they do not read as much with their boys as they did when they were younger. Mr. Davis no longer read with his sons each night but held firm expectations and had established homework routines that ensured that Christopher and Thomas would read on their own each day. These routines are discussed later in the section on Helping with Homework. Mr. Davis also admitted that "once the boys learned to read on their own, I stopped reading to them," which to Mr. Davis "made a lot of sense" (Interview, 17/05/99). However, he also recognized that there were times that the boys needed more reading support, especially if "they had a really long chapter " (Interview, 17/05/99). Then to help them out, he would "jump in and take a couple of pages" (Interview, 17/05/99).

Mr. Sullivan decided not to read to Colin because he thought that Colin "learns better if he reads himself" (Interview, 14/05/99). He also credited Colin's involvement in soccer and his preference for outside play as other factors that influenced the amount of time available for storybook reading, and time was an issue worth considering when reading with Colin. As Mr. Sullivan explained, "He never just reads one page and goes to the next. It's always interaction after every page. Even if it's a small book, it is going to take a half-hour to forty minutes" (Interview, 14/05/99). The importance of the dialogue that takes place around storybook reading in influencing early reading development is discussed by Morrow (1990). "Because storybook reading is a social activity, children encounter an interpretation of the author's words, which is subsequently shaped by the interpretation and social interaction of the child and the adult reader" (p. 543).

In addition, there were other family and household demands which impacted the amount of time that parents had in the evenings for reading with their children. As children became more independent and passed into higher grades, there were also expectations that they would spend time at home practicing for weekly spelling and math facts tests, as well as completing written assignments and studying for unit tests in the different content areas. This greatly reduced the time that parents and children had available to engage in storybook reading. Pleasurable as storybook reading is, once children get through first and second grade, many parents have reported spending less time engaged in storybook reading activities with their children (Tracey, 1995).

### **Parents' Modelling of Reading Behaviours**

When asked if they themselves spend time reading for pleasure at home, both Mr. Davis and Mr. Sullivan, the single fathers, shared that it was difficult to find time or energy to do as much reading as they would like to. Mr. Sullivan admitted that he only "reads when camping. It's quiet or I can't read" (Interview, 10/08/99). He laughed as he admitted, "I'm far too active to sit there. I even have a hard time when I do read now. I get tired and I'm ready for a nap" (Interview, 10/08/99). He also confessed having little time for reading during the normal work week. "Well, I would like to read but I don't have time. By the time my kid's in bed, I sort of become a couch potato" (Interview, 14/05/99).

Mr. Davis expressed a similar sentiment concerning a lack of time. He reasoned that he did not read "as much as I'd like to. Time wise. 'Cause I'm

very busy all the time" (Interview, 17/05/99). However, he "still orders National Geographics" and reads "those when I get the chance" (Interview, 17/05/99). In contrast, both Mr. and Mrs. Becker, "enjoy reading books, magazines and newspapers" (Interview, 17/05/99) which seemed to indicate that there is regular adult modelling of reading for pleasure in the Becker home. Mrs. Becker admitted, however, "I don't read that much now" (Interview, 02/06/99) because she knew that she would become engrossed in the story and ignore other family responsibilities .

It seemed evident from the data that the adults in all three families enjoyed reading for their own entertainment, even though they might not always find the time or the necessary reading conditions. Mrs. Becker was the only one of the parents who commented specifically about the functional use literacy as part of her daily routines, i.e., "reading newspapers, magazines, and cereal boxes" (Interview, 02/06/99). It seems that similar to the findings of Paratore et al., the parents in this study found a variety of ways and situations in which to model a positive attitude towards printed text and reading for their children (Paratore et al., 1999).

### **Early Writing Experiences**

#### **During the Preschool Years**

Other early experiences have been found to play a critical role in a child's later academic success. Early at-home writing experiences are related to oral language and reading development and are also important in creating a foundation for later at-school writing success (Gordon, Sheridan & Paul, 1998). Although storybook reading has received much more attention in the

research, parents also help their children make connections with print by providing writing materials, by modelling the functions and forms of writing in their daily routines, and by encouraging their children to engage in meaningful writing events (MacGillivray; Rowe, cited in Yaden, Rowe & MacGillivray, 2000). Many prewriting and writing events normally occur within the daily routines of a family. Parents can be instrumental in guiding their young children's writing development by encouraging random squiggles on a page and simple drawings of family members; by demonstrating how to form letters and helping them to recognize and print their names, and by labelling objects in the home and writing short notes (Sulzby & Teale, 1991).

Mr. Sullivan recalled easily and in surprising detail Colin's early drawing projects but also stated at one point that "Colin wasn't into writing at an early age" (Interview, 14/05/99). While those who are familiar with current theories of emergent writing would readily recognize the contradiction of Mr. Sullivan's statements, most parents would not. Many parents believe that drawing and writing are two separate literacy processes rather than two complementary methods of expressing ideas in writing (Taylor, 1983). The relationship between drawing and writing (Sulzby and Teale, 1991), as well as the relationships among other components of the language and visual arts (Flood & Lapp, 1997/1998) are important connections that educators can help parents understand.

It was perhaps not surprising, given Colin's love of storybook pictures and their details, that he began drawing at an early age.

He'd just draw, draw, draw. And for the longest time, I would say probably two years, every drawing was the same, with the same scene. And he'd write on there too. I remember that. He would



always write above the characters. There were only two characters, daddy and me, on all the pictures and it always had the house and the van and the church. So two buildings, the van and me and daddy. That was forever. (Interview, 14/05/99)

Given Colin's strong emotional bonds with his father, it is not surprising that his early pictures were representations of the important people and objects in his young life.

Mrs. Becker recalled that even before Isabel could "really write, she'd kind of scribble and tell us what it said" (Interview, 02/06/99), evidence that Isabel was beginning to "create her own identity through literacy" (Solsken, cited in Yaden et al., 2000, p. 439).

Neither Mrs. Becker nor Mr. Sullivan mentioned any specific writing materials that were available in the home. However, like other young children who have writing materials available in the home, Colin became interested in learning how to write his own name (Bloodgood, 1999). Mr. Sullivan stated,

He was adamant about writing his name. I don't know where it came from 'cause he just knew. Before ECS he was able to write his full name. That just came out of the blue. He didn't care about any other words. (Interview, 14/05/99)

In citing the work of Clay and Cunningham, Bloodgood (1999) states, "since the word children encounter most meaningfully in print is their name, it is often the word they first attempt" (p. 4). Knowing how to write one's own name also provides "a tool for developing greater understanding of other literacy concepts, including alphabet, sound-letter matches, and the concept of word" (p. 7). Mr. Sullivan also recalled noticing that Colin explored "all different kinds of letter shapes" as he practiced writing his name.

While some opportunities provided for children implicitly reflect the parents' values of literacy, other experiences are explicit demonstrations of the importance given to reading and writing (Baker, Serpell, & Sonnenschein, 1995). Parents often undertake instructional behaviours as part of their at-home routines, perhaps in an attempt to prepare their children for school. In addition to the many self-selected, pre-writing drawing and labelling experiences that Colin enthusiastically engaged in, Mr. Sullivan attempted to provide more formal, beginning writing experiences for Colin. "I do remember trying to teach him the alphabet, and he didn't show any interest in it at all until ECS when he had to do it. And he didn't like it actually. He did not want to write" (Interview, 14/05/99).

Mr. Davis remembered that there were "coloring books and pencil crayons and crayons" in the house, as well as "big felts and chalk for the sidewalk" (Interview, 17/05/99). Although he did not recall the details of any early drawing or writing events that Christopher was involved in, like Mr. Sullivan, he did recall his son learning to print his own name. "Chris wouldn't do Christopher. He'd do Chris 'cause it was easiest. And he still does it now. He knows how to write Christopher but I rarely see him do it" (Interview, 17/05/99). According to Bloodgood (1999), this preference for simpler versions of name production is not unusual. I did not think to inquire who or what was behind Christopher's learning to write his name, but from the other stories shared by Mr. Sullivan and Mr. Davis, I suspected that Colin's drawings, name writing and other early writing explorations arose from a need to express himself and make connections with the world (Bloodgood, 1999), while Christopher's early writing may have been initiated

by Mr. Davis.

Having had both Colin and Christopher in my class for a year, I knew there were marked differences in their interest and confidence in writing. Colin was an enthusiastic writer who almost daily created detailed, often humorous, short stories, journal entries, personal notes and labelled drawings which he often presented as gifts to classroom friends and teachers. His many projects were a reflection of his bubbly and curious nature and his desire to socially connect with others. Christopher, on the other hand, was a reluctant writer at school. He never chose writing as a spare time activity and produced very little during structured writing times. Christopher required frequent encouragement and feedback about his ideas, as well as reminders to refocus on writing. When he did produce something, the piece would be simply expressed and almost emotionally flat. The exception to Christopher's low productivity in writing was the chapter summary he completed at home each day as a follow-up to reading. Ideas were expressed simply and each summary had been thoroughly edited for spelling and punctuation by his father and corrected by Christopher before being turned into me.

Isabel's early writing experiences seemed to have been influenced by literacy events that were part of her home environment and by her desire to be like her older brothers. Mrs. Becker recalled,

She always wanted to jump ahead. She wanted to learn the alphabet. She copied what her brothers were doing. That was a lot of it. They're sitting there doing their homework, so she gets up there, and she would say she had homework to do. (Interview, 02/06/99)

I knew from working with Isabel in grade three that she was a very sociable young girl, and I wondered if wanting to do homework with her brothers

partly arose from her desire to be socially connected with members of the family and to be like her older brothers. According to Bloodgood (1999), older siblings as well as parents can become “socializing agents for younger children’s written language learning” (p. 5) as they model literate behaviours within the normal routines of family life.

### **During the First Years of School**

Once children enter school and begin to receive formal literacy instruction, parents may notice a change in their children’s attitude towards writing and their writing skills. Mr. Sullivan noted such a change in Colin. He commented, , “once Colin learned a lot of words, he was always writing little notes to me, or little signs for his door, ‘Keep Out’. Not stories, just notes or practicing words” (Interview, 14/05/99). While Colin continued to be enthusiastic about writing activities at home, this positive attitude towards writing was not always evident at school. His father recalled, “all the trouble with writing last year. He’d just get so frustrated, the stuff he would write would get big scratches in it. He’d get so mad ‘cause he knew it wasn’t right” (Interview, 14/05/99). It seemed that at school, “writing was more of a chore than reading. It was not fun” (Interview, 14/05/99), perhaps because Colin was overly-concerned on having his work perfectly completed. Mrs. Becker also noticed that Isabel seemed to become less interested in writing, as she spent more time in school. “Before she’d just write a story just to write one. Now, unless it’s something she has to do, she does not want to write a story” (Interview, 02/06/99). Perhaps Isabel found the writing activities at school too structured and less meaningful than the writing she enjoyed doing at home,

or perhaps she just felt less like writing at home once she was writing more in school.

It appeared from the data that as each of the children's writing interests and skills developed, they began to incorporate writing into their daily routines. They used writing to express their feelings, to solve problems, to organize their lives and as a way of entertaining themselves. Mr. Sullivan remarked, "Colin does like writing now. But it took a long time before he really started liking to write. Probably about a year ago he really got into it when he started knowing a lot of words" (Interview, 14/05/99). Although Mr. Sullivan again did not give himself credit for it, I would suspect that he was instrumental in helping Colin change his attitude towards writing. From his comments, it seemed he helped Colin to develop an understanding of the functionality of writing, and taught him to have fun with language.

The data showed that Colin was big on list writing. His father remarked, "Even when we go camping, Colin writes out his little list to make sure we have everything" (Interview 14/05/99). He also reported that before they leave to go camping "we'll play a little game to see if Colin has remembered everything" (Interview, 14/05/99). The data also showed that Colin became more enthusiastic about writing when he "received a letter from a friend of the family in Toronto" and was very excited about writing "a one page little letter to her" (Interview, 14/05/99). It seemed that once Colin experienced the socially meaningful and personally useful aspects of print, he was much more motivated to engage in writing activities. And because the data showed that Mr. Sullivan often tried to make learning fun for Colin, I suspected that Mr. Sullivan played a major role in fostering Colin's attitude

towards writing and his writing development.

Mr. Davis related a story that demonstrated that Christopher and Thomas were also aware of the functional aspects of writing and enjoyed spending time involved in writing activities. "I was sick this weekend but they did crafts. They drew me a picture, 'Get Well, Dad!' and put it up on the fridge for me" (Interview, 17/05/99). And from the data, it appeared that Christopher and Thomas also used print to make personal connections with their relatives. Mr. Davis stated, "They've got a lot of the spirograph and stamp art stuff, so they'll make their own birthday cards and anniversary cards for aunts and uncles and grandma and grandparents" (Interview, 17/05/99). The data showed that Isabel also used literacy within her home routines. She understood that writing had purpose and that it could be used to convey emotions and to communicate ideas. Mrs. Becker stated, "She writes notes to us. 'Can Jinx [the dog] sleep in my room tonight?' or, 'Can I have a cookie?'" (Interview, 02/06/99). Mrs. Becker also recalled that Isabel would write notes "to put in her dad's lunch or she'd give him a note to take to her grandma" and like the Davis children "always wanted to write the birthday cards and draw pictures on them" (Interview, 02/06/99). The work of Ruddell & Ruddell (1994), and the many researchers whose work they referenced support the observations shared by the parents. As the children learned more about the functions and forms of written language, they became motivated to use the writing skills they were developing for personal enjoyment and for meeting their social needs.

### **Parents' Modelling of Writing Behaviours**

Neither Mr. Davis nor Mr. Sullivan engaged in work-related writing projects at home. However, there seemed to have been many occasions during which Isabel and her brothers had observed first hand the importance of written expression in their parents' lives. It would seem from her comments that Mrs. Becker had been instrumental in helping Isabel to understand the function of written language. She reported, "If I'm going to work, and won't be home when the kids get there, I'll often write them a note saying 'Hi!' and I think she's picked it up from that" (Interview, 02/06/99). Although Mrs. Becker at one time "wrote articles for a wrestling magazine" (Interview, 02/06/99) and often did this work at home, it had been Mr. Becker who spent time talking to Isabel about his work projects. Mrs. Becker related, "Norm brought home blueprints" (Interview, 02/06/99) and talked to Isabel about the symbols on the paper. He would explain to Isabel, "This drawing is eventually going to be a jewellery store" and then he would show her "where the doors were and which little marks meant a door" (Interview, 02/06/99).

### **Other Early Literacy Experiences**

#### **Speaking and Listening**

Although I had originally thought there was little data in support of speaking and listening, I remembered how integral these literacies were to the more-commonly reported literacies of reading and writing, and I was reminded how the different literacies were woven together within the parents' experiences. While parents provide many ways for their children's literacy learning to occur naturally within the home, many parents do not

appear to appreciate how some of their daily routines and interactions impact their children's literacy development, i.e., the importance of speaking, listening and viewing (Flood & Lapp, 1997/1998; Gordon, Sheridan & Paul, 1998; Bean, Bean & Bean, 1999). Although this project did not specifically focus on speaking and listening, there was strong evidence that parents valued social interaction and engaged their children in speaking and listening events, again as part of their normal family routines.

Snow, Barnes, Chandler, Goodman & Hemphill (cited in Yates et al., 2000) found that "talk during mealtimes, particularly about things 'not immediately present' related positively to other literacy-related language skills" (p. 438). During conversations with family members, children are exposed to more adult vocabulary and more advanced concepts in a variety of topics. Not only do they gain important information about the world in which they live, they develop abstract thinking skills which are critical for success in school. There was evidence in the data that Mr. Davis had a sense of the impact that time spent talking to Christopher and Thomas had on their conceptual and literacy development. According to Mr. Davis he found ways to incorporate talk time into the family's daily household routines. He stated, "We talk about the day when we're doing the dishes. We talk about the day at the supper table. We talk about everything and anything that was involved in their day" (Interview, 17/05/99). Mr. Davis also reported that at other times, when the family was camping or out for a walk, he would tell Christopher and Thomas "stories about when I was young and the things we used to do when we were kids, as compared to what kids are doing nowadays" (Interview, 17/05/99). In addition to being an enjoyable way to spend time



together, these stories created opportunities for Christopher and Thomas to gain a sense of family history, as well as to expand their understanding of the world in which they live.

Mr. Sullivan not only encouraged Colin's oral language development but seemed proud of the maturity of Colin's communication skills. It was clear from his comments that Mr. Sullivan recognized the importance of effective communication skills and that he valued social interaction. He raised the issue of family values and his concern that "a big problem in families is that kids spend so much time in front of the T.V." (Interview, 14/05/99). He went on to state, "Sure mom and dad are there with the kids but they're not interacting with them. They're just there but so is the chair" (Interaction, 14/05/99), a strong indication that in his view, interaction with others was a highly-valued activity. Further examples demonstrating these beliefs were highlighted in comments Mr. Sullivan made regarding Colin's positive social relationships as well as the aspirations he had for Colin's future happiness. He spoke proudly of the many people who have been "charmed" by Colin because "he has neat ideas. He isn't just a little kid. He can talk intelligently" (Transcript, 14/05/99) and remarked that Colin "has always liked church because of the interaction with the other kids" (Interview, 14/05/99). And when we wondered together about Colin as an adult, Mr. Sullivan commented, "I just want him to be anything that involves being with people, not someone who sits in front of a computer and has no personality" (Interview, 14/05/99).

Both Mr. Sullivan and Mrs. Becker provided data that suggested that there are other times that Colin and Isabel enjoy interacting and learning

with and from others. Both parents commented that their child enjoyed helping. Mrs. Becker stated, "Isabel likes to be helpful, even at home. There are so many things she wants to help with" (Interview, 02/06/99). In a similar way, Mr. Sullivan recognized that Colin "is mister helper with grandma now. He helps her with anything as long as he's feeling wanted or useful" (Interview, 14/05/99). It would seem that Colin also liked to help his father. Mr. Sullivan explained, "At home we make cakes or muffins for cupcake day. We'll make cookies more than anything and Colin's got to beat the eggs and he's got to measure the flour" (Interview, 14/05/99). Although Mr. Sullivan and Mrs. Becker did not comment on why they thought their children enjoyed helping with these activities, the data suggested to me that Isabel and Colin were motivated by their very social personalities and their desire to spend time with someone they cared for. In addition, I suspected that these experiences also provided cherished times during which the children engaged in talking- and viewing- to learn activities (Gordon et al., 1998).

### **Viewing**

Given the hours that many families spend in front of their televisions, I was surprised that none of the parents talked about the importance of viewing as a tool for learning. Neither did they comment on the many excellent television and video shows that have the potential for stimulating family discussion and building general knowledge. My surprise came, no doubt, from our family's television viewing habits and the manner in which the shows we enjoyed together provided hours of entertainment, provoked lively discussions, and created opportunities for increasing our knowledge of

the people, places and events within our world.

Mr. Sullivan did not appear to recognize the positive potential that television viewing could have for learning. In fact, he was adamant that television had little positive benefit. He admitted, "I'm sort of old fashioned, where I just wish that television was not even invented. 'Cause since television came out in the 70's, family values and family bonds just disappeared" (Interview, 14/05/99). Perhaps because of the influence of his father and also because of his own active and social personality, television viewing had never become a favourite past time for Colin. Mr. Sullivan recalled that,

T. V. was actually a punishment to Colin, right up until grade two. Sometimes I'd come home from work and there'd be those days where it was a rough day, and you don't have a lot of energy to give to your child. And I'd say, 'Well, Okay. Let's sit down and watch the T.V.' (Interview, 14/05/99)

But, the data showed that television viewing was not really an option for Mr. Sullivan because Colin, "wanted to play. He wanted to read. He wanted to go out" (Interview, 14/05/99). In fact, Mr. Sullivan recalled that Colin would cry if his father suggested watching a movie or television which seemed to confirm Colin's very strong preference for social interaction, especially with his father. Mr. Sullivan also noticed that "if it's nice out, then Colin would still rather be on his bike than watching T. V." (Interview, 14/05/99).

Mrs. Becker framed her comments regarding television and video viewing within a context of finding a program appropriate for the entire family to watch together.

Like it's hard because you've got Ted as the oldest. You've got Isabel as the youngest and what he likes is not what I want her to watch. And what I want her to watch is not what he's going to watch.

(Interview, 02/06/99)

According to Mr. Davis, television did not rate as a major interest of his sons. "They've got about an hour a night, unless it's the weekend, and it's more or less Nintendo" (17/05/99). As is the case for many families, electronic games have become a strong attraction for Christopher and Thomas. However, it appeared that Mr. Davis accepted responsibility for limiting his sons' game playing and television watching. He stated, "If Christopher and Thomas have got everything done [homework] and they're good with everything [household chores], and they don't want to go outside, I'll let them play an hour of Nintendo and they look forward to that" (Interview, 17/05/99).

It appeared that these parents really did not see the potential for learning which could result from watching television and videos. Perhaps their reluctance to credit television as a worthwhile family literacy activity was related to the negative attention television had received from the media over the past twenty years (Graves, 1976).

However, it would seem that at least for one parent, computer technology was recognized as a worthwhile tool for literacy learning that could play an important role in his sons' later learning. According to the data, when Mr. Davis' mother expressed an interest in buying savings bonds for Christopher and Thomas, Mr. Davis suggested that she "give them a computer instead" because that would "really help them out a lot with their school" (Interview, 17/05/99).

Reading and writing can no longer hold a monopoly on the research and publishing interests of educators involved in the area of literacy and literacy learning. There is a rapidly growing body of knowledge in a wide

range of literacy areas that also are demanding our attention, i.e., information literacy, (Brock, 1994) and visual literacy (Floor & Lapp, 1997/1998).

### **Library Visits**

Engaging children in storybook reading and book talks is one of the ways that parents demonstrate their belief in the value of literacy and literate behaviours. Involving children in trips to the “print rich environment” of a public library is another way (Baker, Serpell, & Sonnenschein, 1995, p. 238). Libraries are excellent sources of literacy materials for all families but can be particularly helpful for parents whose finances are limited. For a minimal annual fee, families can utilize the library as their main source of home reading, listening, and viewing materials. Although the research indicates that “library use is a very strong predictor of a child’s motivation to read” (Baker et al., 1995, p. 247), it was interesting to learn that none of the three families were using the public library at the time of the research. I knew that the children had access to books, magazines, videos and other literacy materials through their homes, the school library and classroom book clubs, as well as retail outlets in the community; however, based on my own family’s frequent use of the library, I predicted that at least one of the families would be a public library user.

Mr. Davis recalled, “Well, the boys had library cards when they were younger and we went to the library” but since the family had moved to an outlying community, they were “now too far from anything” (Interview, 17/05/99). Mrs. Becker shared a different reason for no longer using the library. Although it would seem that Mrs. Becker had used the library in the

past, she no longer does so. As she laughingly confessed, "We're really bad at returning library books" (Interview, 02/06/99). suggesting that she would rather buy books than pay overdue fines to the library. Mr. Sullivan also admitted that he had never taken Colin to the library, although he conceded, "I should 'cause I know the downtown library is big and is really nice. It's something I've wanted to do and I know Colin would love it" (Interview, 14/05/99). However, it seemed that when given the choice, Colin had opted for other interesting venues, such as the "zoo, the science centre, or the local museum" (Interview, 14/05/99).

Although these families were not taking advantage of the wide collection of literacy resources found in the public library, they each took other measures to ensure that their children had a variety of interesting materials to read. As mentioned earlier, Mrs. Becker reported going to great lengths to look for books that she thought would be of interest to Isabel. I also knew from having Isabel in my class that there were many times throughout the year, that she purchased new books through the school book club. Mr. Davis, also appreciated the opportunity to order reading materials for Christopher and Thomas through the school book clubs and mentioned how "important the school library had been" for his sons over the years (Interview, 17/05/99). Although Colin did not often order books from the school book club, Mr. Sullivan reported that he had "many books of his own at home" (Interview, 14/05/99). and I knew from working with Colin that he was a very enthusiastic user of the school library.

As reported by Paratore et al. (1999) families find their own ways of incorporating literacy into their daily lives. Neither Mrs. Becker, Mr. Davis

nor Mr. Sullivan used the public library as a source for literacy materials. However, each found other more convenient ways to ensure that their children had a selection of literacy materials available.

### **Family Outings**

Not only do family outings provide a time for parents and children to have fun together, they create opportunities for viewing, talking about, reading about and writing about the various venues and the information available there. As Mr. Sullivan suggested, going on family outings provided a purpose for Colin's at-school writing. Colin enjoyed having "good stuff to put in his journal the next week at school," especially if he and his father had done "something exceptional" (Interview, 14/05/99). Mr. Sullivan also commented that when he and Colin had gone on a special outing on the weekend, Colin would "be upset" if there was not time for "journal writing on Monday" (Interview, 14/05/99). From the data it appeared that Colin and his father spent many exciting times together, perhaps even more so than the other two families. Mr. Sullivan stated,

We're always out, going on trips and having fun. We're big campers. We camp all year round, winter time as well. Summertime it's always go-cart racing or just driving. Colin can sit in a vehicle for hours. He just loves to drive. We'll go to Banff, and walk around there and he loves going to malls. He doesn't have to get anything. It's just the fact of being in the mall. (Interview, 14/05/99)

It seemed that over the years the Becker family had also spent a great deal of time visiting popular tourist spots around the city. "Up until last year we had a zoo membership all the time. It was a cheap thing to do all year round. And we got passes for the amusement park and we like visiting the

historic village and walking in the park" (Interview, 02/06/99).

The parents noticed that as the children learned to read, the trips to special places became a source of information and the children became involved in reading-to-learn activities (Gordon, Sheridan & Paul, 1998). Mrs. Becker stated that at the zoo Isabel "would read the signs and she'd tell what the animal's name was and then she'd try to pronounce the Latin name" (Interview, 02/06/99). These experiences also provided opportunities for family members to share and extend their knowledge by talking and listening to each other. Mrs. Becker recalled that on one trip, she and Isabel had a discussion "about the difference between a monkey and an ape" and that Isabel used the information she read on the display panel to contribute to the discussion (Interview, 02/06/99).

During their outings Mr. Sullivan noticed a change in Colin's viewing behaviours which seemed related to an increased awareness of environmental print and an ability to read-to-learn.

I think Colin's actually enjoyed going to those places more, knowing how to read. 'Cause now when he sees a display, he reads about the display. Before he would just look at it briefly and continue on to the next display. Now he'll spend more time. (Interview, 14/05/99)

Mr. Sullivan recognized this change in Colin's reading as an indication that "he's learning more about what they're actually showing him" and that it seems that "He's getting a lot more information and appreciating things more now that he can read" (Interview, 14/05/99). Mr. Sullivan also recalled that Colin "asks how everything works" when he spends time at his father's office. "He knows a lot of the machines and he even works on a couple of (copy) machines" (Interview, 14/05/99). By providing these experiences for



Colin and by willingly engaging in discussions about his work and the machines that do the work, Mr. Sullivan played a critical role in his son's learning. In addition to spending time together, father and son engaged in talking-to-learn, viewing-to-learn and listening-to-learn activities (Gordon et al., 1998). Mr. Sullivan shared an anecdote about the types of activities that Colin engaged in when he is left to amuse himself.

When we go camping, he could amuse himself with the most menial thing. Like literally a pop bottle can amuse him. He'd put water in it and watch it roll differently, or kick it around like all kids do, or just throw rocks at it. (Interview, 14/05/99)

Mr. Sullivan commented that he "chuckled 'cause Colin's literally just playing with a pop bottle and having a grand ole' time" (Interview, 14/05/99), which seemed to imply that he did not recognize that there was a connection between these fun activities and Colin's learning. In addition to being entertainment for Colin, his pop bottle activities were providing him with an opportunity to explore his physical world and to learn-by-viewing (Gordon et al., 1998).

As for the special times that Mr. Davis enjoyed with Christopher and Thomas, he commented that they were "mostly sports activities and walking and talking" as well as "camping and dirt biking" (Interview, 17/05/99). Although he did not elaborate on the specific experiences the family had during these outings, it would appear that Mr. Davis had an understanding of the significance that these events could have for Christopher and Thomas' later learning. He stated simply but eloquently,

They are disciplines on things you do. How you should do things and how you don't do things. I think learning anything and the disciplines of it and the rules that go with things. Like how you are supposed to do something like shifting a dirt bike and using your

clutch and your brake. All that relates to how you write a story, how you read and complete your school work or how you do your math. You have to do it in steps. (Interview, 17/05/99)

The evidence showed that the parents in this exploratory study involved their children in a variety of family activities and outings which provided excellent opportunities for the children to engage in viewing-, listening-, and talking-to-learn activities (Gordon et al., 1998). However, it is not clear whether the parents actually recognized the influence these experiences had on their children's general knowledge development. And, with the exception of Mr. Davis, it is not clear to what extent the parents understood the relationship between these special outings and their children's literacy learning.

In the first part of this chapter I reported on some of the early literacy interactions and events which occurred within the home and community environments of the three families. During the children's preschool years these reading, writing, speaking, listening and viewing experiences were initiated by the various family members as a way to entertain themselves, enjoy each others' company and visit some popular recreational and tourist sites. However, once children entered school, some of the at-home literacy activities that they engaged in were in direct response to suggestions from the classroom teacher. While some of these experiences were reported in the sections on During the First Years of School, parents reported other experiences that related specifically to the ways in which they helped their children with school-assigned homework. In the final section of this chapter I report on homework support provided to the children by the three parents.

### **Helping with Homework**

According to Olympia, Jenson, Clark & Sheridan (1992), homework is “academic work assigned in school designed to extend the practice of academic skills into other environments during non-school hours” (p. 310). There is some debate about whether there is a conclusive link between student achievement and homework. However, following an extensive review of the literature, Walberg, Bole & Waxman (1980) concluded that research studies that were well-designed and carefully-conducted generally showed a positive correlation between homework and academic achievement (also supported by Clark, 1993). Research also showed that homework can be very beneficial not only to children but also to parents and the school. Homework can provide opportunities for children to reinforce and master basic skills, to extend and apply knowledge and to relate ideas they learned in school to novel situations outside of the school environment (Olympia et al., 1992). Homework can also be very beneficial for the parents as it provides opportunities to observe first-hand what it is the children are learning at school and to become more informed about their children’s abilities and levels of understanding. In addition, homework assignments “provide teachers with a frequent check on children’s progress” (Redding, 2000, p. 15).

From almost the first day of formal schooling, parents are encouraged by teachers to help their children become successful learners by working with them each day at home. Initially, this recommended at-home support focuses on the parents engaging in storybook reading activities with their children, first by reading to them and later as the children’s own reading skills develop, by reading with them (Gunn, Simmons & Kameenui, 1995). By the time

children are part way through grade one, many classroom teachers will have also begun requesting other types of at-home learning support from the parents. Examples of this type of “practice” homework (Olympia et al., 1992) are printing, spelling, counting and number facts review. By the time children are in grade three, reading, writing and mathematics homework is assigned on a regular basis with most classes also having weekly spelling and basic facts tests. From time to time teachers will also assign “extension” projects related to school learning activities (Olympia et al., 1992), such as building a musical instrument by applying the concepts of sound learned at school. Special projects such as this are often completed entirely at home, with the expectation that children will receive the appropriate support from their parents or others in the home.

Many parents recognize the importance of supporting their children’s learning by helping them with homework and regardless of other family, household and work demands, find ways of providing this necessary supervision and support on a regular basis. When parents believe that homework is important, they will not only demonstrate this belief by providing support but will also find ways to fit homework routines into their daily schedules (Paratore et al., 1999).

Although the parents in this project were from different family situations with different work schedules and different household routines, each of them was involved in helping their children with homework on a regular basis. From my interpretation of their stories it would seem Mr. Davis spoke for all three parents when he shared his reasons for helping Thomas and Christopher with their homework. “I think it’s a good thing to be

involved in your kids' school. The elementary years are the most important for forming your child's study habits, attitude towards school, general attitude towards rules and how things go" (Interview, 17/05/99). He remarked further, "Grade three is a good age to start really teaching them and get them going on stuff. Especially because it's getting to be more and more days that they're coming home with lots of homework" (Interview, 17/5/99).

What follows is a description of some of the homework routines these parents have established, the types of support they provided and the challenges that they have faced, at times, when trying to meet their own and the teachers' expectations for supporting their children's homework completion. First, though, I present evidence to demonstrate the parents' positive attitude towards helping their children with homework.

### **Modelling a Positive Attitude**

A positive attitude towards school and children's learning would seem to be a necessary prerequisite for parents who help their children with homework. It was evident from the data that the parents valued homework and were willing to assist their children in developing a similar attitude. Although Mrs. Becker's did not explicitly comment on her interest in helping Isabel with homework, her stories of frustration over "not knowing how to help" (Interview, 02/06/99) implied that she was interested in helping Isabel to be successful.

Mr. Davis modelled a positive attitude towards homework by helping Christopher and Thomas develop consistent homework routines and by providing them with a variety of skills and strategies that they could rely on

as they became more independent learners. Mr. Davis admitted that he had had a sense that as Thomas went through the higher grades he would be “getting a lot of work coming home” (Interview, 17/05/99) and, as a result, “tried to warn him [Thomas] about it.” He talked to Thomas about the need for “good study habits” and the need for “sitting down and thinking about how you’re going to do everything” (Interview, 17/05/99). In this way it seems that Mr. Davis helped Thomas to understand that even if there is a lot of work to do, a positive attitude will be the first step in making the work load manageable. This was a philosophy that came through in many of Mr. Davis’ comments and seemed to help him accomplish his many responsibilities, including providing daily homework support for his sons.

From the data it seemed that Mr. Davis assumed the role of learning facilitator and coach as he worked with Christopher and Thomas. He stated, “I’m there for any questions they might have,” and later when “they become more independent, I’m there for guidance” (Interview, 17/05/99). From his comments I suspected that Mr. Davis felt very proud of the effect his expectations and efforts have had on influencing Christopher’s and Thomas’ independent homework habits. It seems Mr. Davis also felt that if he helped Christopher and Thomas become independent learners, his efforts would pay off later on. “I think if they do it [regular homework] in the younger years and learn in the younger years, their study capabilities will be a lot better for later elementary, junior high and high school” (Interview, 17/05/99). “After all,” he confided, “you don’t want to still be helping your kids when they’re in junior high” (Interview, 17/05/99). The common sense and wisdom of Mr Davis’ words are echoed in the research of Friesen (cited in Olympia et al.,

1992), "Parents feel that homework helps their children develop a sense of responsibility, self-discipline, and prepares them for future study (p. 309).

Unlike some parents who find that helping with homework is just another item to be added to their long list of household and personal chores, it would seem that Mr. Sullivan enjoys the time he spends working on homework with Colin. I was surprised when he stated, "I actually wish there would be more homework," not because he felt Colin required extra practice but "because Colin likes anything that me and him are working on together. If there's not homework, we're playing cards, Go Fish, Crazy Eights. As long as we're physically doing something together" (Interview, 14/05/99). Working with Colin on homework also helped Mr. Sullivan stay in touch with what was being taught at school. He commented, "I like working with him on homework. I want to see what he's doing and how he's growing" (Interview, 14/05/99).

It seemed that Mr. Sullivan assumed responsibility for being a supporter and facilitator of Colin's learning. He reported that he expected Colin to do "as much of the homework as he can on his own" but was right there for him when he needed extra instruction and encouragement (Interview, 14/05/99). Mr. Sullivan's physical presence during homework time seemed to satisfy Colin's need "to do something" with his father (Interview, 14/05/99) and provided the learning support Colin needed to remain confident and positive about homework activities. From his comments it also seemed that Mr. Sullivan enjoyed his involvement in Colin's homework. He stated, "It hasn't been challenging yet. It's been an easy flow. I guess it will be more challenging later when he has to write essays" but

then he added, "I'm looking forward to that" (Interview 14/05/99).

It is not only through modelling a positive attitude towards homework and learning that parents help their children develop effective home learning habits. Consistent routines are also important.

### **Establishing Routines**

One way that parents model a positive attitude towards learning is by establishing consistent homework routines within the context of their particular family situation. Although Mrs. Becker did not personally feel that children "should have to come home and do homework right away," (Interview, 02/06/99) her children seem to have worked out their own preferred routine. Mrs. Becker explained, "Lots of times when Isabel comes home, she'll do her homework right away. That's what the boys have always done" (Interview, 02/06/99) and because Isabel has always seen them do this, "she comes home, plops her books out on the kitchen table and starts" (Interview, 02/06/99).

Mr. Davis reported that he had established consistent routines to help Christopher and Thomas to be successful at completing their homework. He did not let his sons "do homework at the end of the night after supper. I find they're too tired and wound" (Interview, 17/05/99). Rather than letting "the kids play after school," Mr. Davis expected Christopher and Thomas to "get right after it after school and then go and have the evening outside" (Interview, 17/05/99). He admitted, however, "I don't know what they think of that but I'd rather have them do it after school when it's fresh" (Interview, 02/06/99). He explained their routine; "Now that Thomas is twelve, he has a



key and they come home, let themselves in and sit down and get right after their homework. By the time I get home, they're three-quarters done or done" (Interview, 17/05/99).

While he recognized that not all parents do help their children with homework assignments, Mr. Davis felt strongly that he should provide this support. "I think it's better if you have the time for helping" (Interview, 17/05/99) but because his shift work had made it impossible for him always to be there, he had made other arrangements to ensure that Christopher and Thomas received the support they required. "For now, their aunt or grandparents are there to help them" (Interview, 17/05/99). However, it would seem that for the most part Christopher and Thomas worked fairly independently and required little supervision. As Mr. Davis commented, "they know I need the help, so the boys have taken a lot of responsibility now for themselves" (Interview, 17/05/99).

Even though Christopher and Thomas worked independently on their homework, Mr. Davis reported that he had established a routine that made it possible for him to stay involved. "When I get off work (in the morning), I pick up the kids and we go home. They get ready and have breakfast and then we'll just sit and go through their homework and make sure everything's okay before school" (Interview, 17/05/99). This daily checking over of his sons' homework kept him informed about what they were learning at school and allowed Mr. Davis the opportunity to follow up on the quality of the work they had completed.

It would seem that Mr. Davis had strict expectations regarding his sons' homework routines and that he believed that consistent routines and clear

expectations were important for helping his sons to develop positive attitudes toward homework. It was also clear that Mr. Davis felt pleased that the routines and expectations he had established had proven beneficial for Christopher and Thomas. He stated, "They're getting really good at it. It was hard in the beginning. It seemed like an overwhelming amount of work for them but now they are just breezing through it" (Interview, 17/05/99).

It seemed that in the Sullivan home, working together on homework was a regular routine and a ritual of parent involvement that not only strengthened the bond between father and son, but also provided extra practice and new strategies for Colin. At the time of the study, Mr. Sullivan stated that "Colin waits for me to get home before doing his homework" (14/05/99). From his comments it would seem that Mr. Sullivan assumed responsibility for ensuring that homework time is relaxed and positive. He stated, "I play games with his homework" and "I even show him easier ways of figuring it out and that's caught on" (Interview, 14/05/99). I sensed Mr. Sullivan's pride in being able to anticipate what Colin needs to be successful with his homework, when he admitted, "I never know what I'm going to say until it happens but it always seems to work" (Interview, 14/05/99). It would seem that from working with his son one-to-one, Mr. Sullivan had become sensitive to Colin's learning style and abilities. In turn, this awareness helped Mr. Sullivan tailor the homework support he provided to Colin's particular learning needs.

However, a consistent routine is not the only factor that influences children's attitudes towards homework completion.

### **Providing Support and Strategies**

While some children are able to complete most of their homework independently, others seem to require emotional and instructional support from the adults and older children in the home.

From the data it seems that, at times, Mrs. Becker relied on her experiences as a writer for a magazine to help her children with their homework. When they had writing assignments to work on at home, she coached them not to “have everything in one paragraph” (Interview, 02/06/99) and helped them organize their ideas by relating story structure “to other things that they know” (Interview, 02/06/99). According to Mrs. Becker she recommended that the children “just think of it [story writing] as a movie. You’ve got your beginning. You’ve got your middle and you’ve got your ending ” (Interview, 02/06/99).

Mrs. Becker also reported that because she understood the importance of having a purpose for writing, she has encouraged this awareness in Isabel by asking questions that help her to consider the need for preplanning. For example, she would ask, “Do you want it to be a happy story or do you want it to be a sad story? Do you want it to be a fun story?” (Interview, 02/06/99). In addition, Mrs. Becker admitted that she did not believe in just giving her children answers to their homework questions. “I try to make them realize how it should go before I tell them how I would do it” (Interview, 02/06/99). It seems that Mrs. Becker realized the importance of having the children transact with the text of their assignments (Rosenblatt, 1994) in order to create their own understanding of the content.

Mrs. Becker also recognized that at times, other members of the family

seemed better able to provide homework support for Isabel. She specifically mentioned Isabel's brother, who "does not get frustrated" with Isabel (Interview, 02/06/99). "He'll tell her a whole different way to do it and she'll understand his way" (Interview, 02/06/99). This seems to have helped Mrs. Becker realize "everyone has their own little ways of doing something" (Interview, 02/06/99). I sensed a bit of frustration on Mrs. Becker's part that her way is not always helpful for Isabel but also a sense of relief that there was someone else in the family who could support Isabel with her homework.

From his comments it would seem that Mr. Davis helped his sons learn how to manage their homework and organize their time so that everything that was assigned got completed. Mr. Davis provided an example of how he helped Christopher and Thomas to finish their homework and still maintain a positive attitude. "If they have a bad day and if they don't want to do it all, or if they're sick," Mr. Davis helped them to "do a little bit and do the rest tomorrow" (Interview, 17/05/99).

In addition to helping his sons manage their homework assignments, Mr. Davis seemed to understand that because Christopher and Thomas were in different grades and had different learning needs, he also needed to provide different strategies and support for them. As he stated, "You give different ways of doing it, and see what works best for them, 'cause I don't think it's the same for every child" (Interview, 17/05/99). He described his role in supporting Christopher as he became more proficient at writing a short summary of the chapters he read every day. Mr. Davis described,

He [Christopher] sits down after he reads his chapter. He remembers what he's read and he just puts it on paper. And you know there are spelling mistakes and punctuation mistakes but he's in grade three, so I do help him go through it afterward and correct it. I show him

where he should have a period and new capital. Showing him that stuff, he can now pick it up more on his own" (Interview, 17/05/99)

Because Mr. Davis recognized that Christopher lacked confidence, he made certain to provide extra encouragement. "Self-esteem with Chris is a big thing. Every time he does a good job, It's Great! Fantastic! Nice job! I write a nice comment" (Interview, 17/05/99). Mr. Davis expressed his pride in Christopher's progress during his grade three year, and I sensed too a pride in himself for the role he played in Christopher's achievement. "Christopher's doing really well at it now. I just read what he writes after he reads, and it's just 'Wow! That's really good!'" (Interview, 17/05/99).

In addition to tailoring homework support to his sons' abilities and the particular assignments, it seemed that Mr. Davis also understood the need for patience when helping Christopher and Thomas with their homework. Mr. Davis described some different study strategies that he had helped Thomas to use. Mr. Davis explained, "If he had four pages to study, we tried reading it over nightly. Reading it over. Reading it over" (Interview, 17/05/99). However when those test results came home, Thomas' mark was "only in the fifties" (Interview, 17/05/99). Another time there was a test, Mr. Davis had Thomas use a "write it down" strategy (Interview, 17/05/99) but again this method of review did not seem to help Thomas raise his marks. By trial-and-error, Mr. Davis eventually discovered that shorter periods of study time, chunking the material and writing out answers to specific questions was the method that worked best for Thomas "He did a couple of pages a night. He'd only spend ten or fifteen minutes on it but would write out a question and then write out an answer. The next night doing another two pages. The night after that starting over again" (Interview, 17/05/99).

Although the data did not suggest that Mr. Davis understood why this combination of strategies was more successful, it probably worked for a variety of reasons. First, it demanded that Thomas be more actively engaged in the content being studied (Gordon, Sheridan & Paul, 1998; P. Grassick, 1983). By reviewing the ideas on more than one occasion, it increased the likelihood that information would be transferred from short term to long term memory. And, it provided Thomas with practice in retrieving and applying information (P. Grassick, 1983). While he might not have understood why these strategies were more successful for Thomas, Mr. Davis recognized the impact of the study strategies he had provided. He commented that Thomas' marks had gone up to "the seventies and eighties" (Interview, 17/05/99).

Mr. Sullivan's comments suggested that like the other parents, he understood what Colin needed to be successful and provided strategies that worked for him. When helping Colin with homework, Mr. Sullivan admitted, "I won't just give him the answer. He has to work a little bit to get it. So I try to think of ways for him to think instead of just getting the answer." (Interview, 14/05/99). And, perhaps because he recognized how easily Colin could become frustrated, Mr. Sullivan found a way to help Colin make a smooth transition from unstructured summer holidays to structured school days. Mr. Sullivan reported that he structured review and practice time for Colin during the summer holidays.

I buy these exercise books and three weeks before school starts, he'll do one hour a day. Then two weeks before school, two hours a day, an hour in the morning and an hour in the afternoon. Then a week before school, he'll do three hours in the morning and then his afternoons are free. (Interview, 14/05/99)

From the data it would seem that when parents are involved in helping their children with homework on a regular basis, it is not only the children that benefit. Regular involvement in homework activities provide parents with important information about their children's unique abilities and needs. This knowledge enables the parents to provide homework support that is specifically tailored to meet these needs and this support, in turn, helps the children to achieve at a higher level. The children's increased confidence and skill development can subsequently impact their achievement at school, especially when parents have an opportunity to share insights about their children with the teachers and when teachers are open to receiving this insightful information.

### **Challenges Faced by Parents**

Many parents provide their children with support to complete daily drills and practice, as well as special assignments and make-at-home projects. However, there are many reasons why helping with homework may not go smoothly for the children or their parents. It would seem that regardless of whether parents want to help their children with homework, issues can arise that interfere with the process.

Mrs. Becker talked about a homework issue that sometimes arose concerning the quality of Isabel's work. As a result of the routines that the Becker children have established for doing homework, Isabel "usually will have her homework done" (Interview, 02/06/99) when her mother gets home from work. Then, it would seem, that Isabel will get "a little ticked" if Mrs. Becker checked her work over and wanted her to correct something.

Mrs. Becker stated, "Isabel figures she has already done it" (Interview, 02/06/99) which, of course, she had but not to her mother's standards. I knew from personal experience how frustrating it could be when I wanted my children to do their best work, while the children felt that what they had done was good enough. I appreciated Mrs. Becker's honesty when she admitted, "Maybe I get frustrated, 'cause I figure I've done three kids. Or, I don't know, maybe she just doesn't get the way I'm trying to teach her" (Interview, 02/06/99). Mrs. Becker's frustration might have also arisen from her uncertainty as to teachers' expectations for the different assignments; was the teacher expecting that the work would be a rough draft or a final product?

Mr. Davis provided the most specific details of the challenges he had faced in trying to provide consistent home support for Christopher and Thomas. He felt that expectations for parent involvement had changed since he was a student. "The role of a parent now is obviously more involvement with their kids' school work. That's what I see anyway" (Interview, 17/05/99). Mr. Davis stated that at first, the amount of homework this year had been "a bit overwhelming" for the boys (Interview, 17/05/99). Given the dedication that Mr. Davis seemed to have for fulfilling his responsibilities, his later comments demonstrated that it was not only Christopher and Thomas who, at times, found the work load overwhelming.

It's a lot of work. Sometimes it's a bit much. There's too much homework. Mondays and Tuesdays are pretty much the worst, 'cause everything comes home. You get a new spelling list. You get math facts that I do daily with Christopher and reading, I do daily. He's now into times tables, so we do a times table chart every day. If he has regular math come home with it, he's doing about two to two-and-a-half hours max on Monday and Tuesday. (Interview, 17/05/99)



He admitted that this made it “difficult to keep on top of everything” (Interview, 17/05/99) but he found ways to help Christopher and Thomas adjust to increased amounts of homework. Mr. Davis reported that he started Christopher and Thomas out “doing a little bit” and admitted that the “speed was really slow in the beginning” (Interview, 17/05/99). He also admitted that there were times that “it seemed like the kids hated doing it” because he heard that they “grumbled to their aunt about me pushing them” (Interview, 17/05/99). From the data it seemed evident that in spite of having to “put up with a little bit of bitching” (Interview, 17/05/99), Mr. Davis accepted responsibility for helping his sons with their homework because as he stated, “your kids are worth it” (Interview, 17/05/99).

Mr. Davis also found that, given that his sons had homework in different subjects, that it was necessary “to sit down and make sure you’re not giving one area too much and another area not. You have to show your kids that everything is important and try to get everything done” (Interview, 17/05/99). Rather than allowing his sons to become overwhelmed by the amount of homework they had, from the data it would seem that Mr. Davis helped Christopher and Thomas develop the organization and study skills necessary for them to be successful.

Mr Davis admitted that in spite of all of his efforts to ensure that Christopher and Thomas’ homework was up-to-date, at times events occurred beyond his control. Such an event sometimes occurred when Christopher and Thomas visited their mother for a weekend. “She had no idea what they had to do. So Sunday night, I’d be sitting here staring at all this homework with the kids. And that’s not fair to them and it’s not fair to me”

(Interview, 17/05/99). Despite these occasional setbacks, the data showed that Mr. Davis recognized that his involvement in helping his sons with homework had paid off. He commented, "Right now they are just breezing through. They don't have a problem with stuff and they just get right at it" (Interview, 17/05/99).

There are many different ways that parents provide homework support for their children and model a positive attitude toward learning within the home. Parents help children reap the benefits of homework by establishing daily homework routines, by ensuring that they have a suitable place to work, by teaching them how to organize their time, and by providing the necessary learning strategies and support. Parents and, in some cases, other family members accept responsibility for helping young children with homework, with benefits to the children, the family and the school.

### **Summary**

In this chapter, I have reported on many early literacy experiences that the parents provided for their children, before they began school and during their first couple years of formal schooling. The data indicated that, as suggested by Paratore, Melzi and Krol-Sinclair (1999), parents are not only interested in being involved, they find their own ways to be involved in their children's literacy learning. As families and family situations are unique, so are the ways that literacy is promoted within the home and the community. Helping with homework is a particular type of involvement that offers regular opportunities for communication between the home and school but can also lead to conflicts between parents and children and parents and

teachers (Olympia et al., 1992).

The following chapter considers the experiences of parents as they became more directly involved in their children's school, and the nature of the relationships that developed as a result of their involvement.

## **CHAPTER FOUR: PARENT INVOLVEMENT WITH THE SCHOOL**

In the previous chapter I reported on the ways that the parents were involved in supporting their children's literacy learning at home. The second major focus for my research was to discover the ways in which parents were involved directly with their children's school. As an administrator, I was especially interested in becoming more informed about the types of involvement that the parents had had with the school, as well as the nature of the relationships that had been established with their children's teachers. I hoped that by listening to and learning from the perspectives of the parents, I would gain valuable insights which would inform my future relationships with parents in the school community.

In order to contextualize the involvement of the three parents interviewed for this research project, I have provided a general overview of the types of parent involvement which were typical of the parents of my students.

### **Typical Parent Involvement**

Parents of the students in my class exhibited their interest in and encouragement of their children's education by their implicit and explicit behaviours and their positive attitude toward learning (Christenson et al., 1992). Activities such as conversations with teachers, volunteering in the classroom, communicating through notes and journals, and helping with homework have been shown to be some of the ways that parents demonstrate their attention to school and become involved in their children's learning (Epstein, 1987, 1989 & 1995; Paratore et al., 1999).

Most children in my class arrived at school on time, adequately-nourished and well-rested, and most were dressed in appropriate clothing that was clean and in good condition. Although there was a sense that some families were under considerable financial stress, for the most part, parents fulfilled their responsibilities for paying the required school fees and bussing costs, either directly or through a waiver application system. Most parents sent their children to school with healthy lunches and recess snacks, although there were a few occasions when children were provided with food from the school nutrition program.

Students in the class used a student agenda book to record daily homework assignments and to keep parents informed of important dates and homework assignments. At the beginning of the year parents were asked to initial these books on a daily basis to indicate their awareness of important messages and the teachers' expectations for homework. Many of the parents read and initialled the book each day and some of them used the book as a two-way communication tool between home and school. Some parents also encouraged their children to bring curriculum-related objects to school for sharing with the class.

The telephone was also used as an effective and important tool for maintaining contact between home and school. Many parents felt comfortable contacting the school with questions and concerns, and teachers often initiated telephone conversations with parents regarding issues of student learning, behaviour and work completion.

Attendance at parent-teacher conferences varied from one reporting period to the next, with about sixty percent of the parents attending all three

scheduled conferences. Some parents required reassurance that their attendance was important and others required special scheduling to suit their availability. With a determined effort, using telephone contact and personal notes, I met formally with all parents at least once during the year. Some parents participated in additional teacher-initiated and parent-initiated meetings, as well as telephone conversations and School Resource Group conferences, to discuss their children's particular learning and behavioural needs.

The number of parents who participated as volunteers within the class was minimal. Three parents volunteered on an occasional basis but, for the most part, parents worked, lacked transportation, had limited English, or had other responsibilities that kept them from coming to help out at school. In fairness to the parents, I admit that I did not make a concerted effort to involve parents on a regular basis within the class. Instead, I encouraged them to become involved in special activities and to help supervise children during off-campus field trips. One mother from the class participated on a regular basis in the monthly school council meetings, and another mother helped with the monthly cupcake days. A number of parents, both fathers and mothers, rescheduled work and household responsibilities in order to participate in the three field trips that year.

There were two notable exceptions to the relatively low rate of parent involvement in my classroom that year. There was an overwhelming response for the three evening parent-child workshops which focussed on games that could be used at home to reinforce literacy and numeracy learning. Some staff members had warned that only three people had

attended a similar activity in the past, and I was very pleased that attendance at these workshops was dramatically different. Over ninety parents, grandparents, and children of all ages clearly demonstrated that families did care, were interested in finding out ways to support their children's learning at home, and were open to participating with the school in activities aimed at improving achievement (Wolfendale, 1992). Teachers demonstrated easy-to-learn and simple-to-replicate learning games, after which time was allowed for learning and enjoying the games. The parent-operated school carnival was another huge hit. The walls of the building almost burst as eight hundred children and adults laughed and visited together as they were challenged by the different carnival events.

I was pleased to notice that parents chose to become involved in these family-oriented, school-sponsored events. I understood that positive home-school relationships developed slowly over time, and I recognized the importance of these informal learning and social activities as venues for inviting parents to be involved in the school, and as venues for establishing friendly communications between families and school staff (Christenson et al., 1992). Parents, teachers and children benefitted from participating in these relaxed and non-threatening events, and seemed to enjoy having an opportunity to get to know each other. It was evident from the degree to which parents supported these events, that they appreciated the festive atmosphere and the chance to interact socially with the school staff. It was clear from the families' participation that events such as carnivals, family dances, and parent-child workshops could become the foundation for building a shared sense of school community and productive home-school

partnerships.

### **Involvement of the Participants**

As I analysed the data from the interviews, I recognized that there were substantial differences in the relationships that each of the parents had had with the school during their children's initial years of formal education, and that these differences could be, at least partially, responsible for the degree of involvement that each of them had had with the school during the year of this study. The data from the parents' stories concerning their involvement with the school, suggested that there were supplementary issues that demanded consideration. In order to understand more clearly the nature of the relationships that the parents had with the school, it seemed important to consider: What were the parents expecting from their involvement with the school? and What actually occurred?

Although the research suggested a number of ways that parents could be directly or indirectly involved in children's learning at school (Carreiro, 1989; Epstein, 1987, 1989, 1995; Paratore et al., 1999), the data for this part of my research dealt only with the direct involvement that parents had had with the school. Admittedly, there was more to the parent-school relationships than what the parents chose to share during the interviews, and I recognized that these relationships had not remained static over the years. However, it was evident that the data pertaining to parent-teacher interactions and home-school relationships were important to the parents because they were interwoven with the stories they shared about parent involvement. Thus, I believed they were also valid for inclusion in this thesis.



Prior to discussing the relationships that Mrs. Becker, Mr. Sullivan and Mr. Davis reported having with different educators over the years, it seems appropriate to highlight the types of barriers that can divert, undermine or prevent the establishment and maintenance of effective home-school partnerships.

### **Barriers to Parent Involvement**

If, as the research indicated, parent involvement impacted not only the children but the parents and the school, why had I noticed such hesitancy and avoidance on the part of teachers, administrators and parents to work more closely with one another? According to the literature, attitude was one important reason. Epstein (1986), in her research into parents' reactions to teacher practices of parent involvement, found that parents felt more favorable towards teachers whose practices demonstrated their belief that parents can make a difference in children's education. Not only did the parents feel more positive towards the particular teacher, they transferred these feelings of positive regard to the school and learning in general. It was not surprising that she also found that those teachers who believed in the multi-faceted benefits of home-school partnerships created more opportunities for meaningful parent involvement.

However, not all teachers consider parent involvement to be part of their professional responsibilities. Many teachers are already overtaxed by the never-ending changes in curriculum, the influx in the numbers of children requiring special learning and behavioural support, and the government, system and parent demands for accountability (Elkind, 1997). In retaliation

and self-defence, some teachers have become unwilling and, most likely, unable to take on more professional roles. In addition, it is important to remember that the majority of educators are also parents and, thus, have other family as well as community demands on their time (Ballen & Moles, 1994).

As well, in the past, many teachers tended to think and behave in ways that positioned themselves as the experts in the educational process. Information sharing was usually one-way, from school to home, and decisions about students' learning and programs were often made unilaterally by the school. Discontinuities in students' learning that resulted from discrepancies between home and school conditions caused teachers to regard families as being deficient rather than different (Kellaghan et al., 1993). In addition, when student learning and behaviour problems occurred, parents were often regarded as the source of the problem and blamed for their failure to provide an appropriate home learning environment (Harrison, 1995). Further, this failure to provide was presumed to be indicative of a failure to care for their children's learning or success in school. And because teachers believed that parents did not care, they did little to invite their participation. As a result, options for parent involvement with the school were limited (Davis, 1991).

Davies (1991) stressed the need to move beyond this deficit view of families to recognize the richness of diversity found within the context of different families, and the significant contributions that all parents can make to their children's learning (p. 378). In addition, Christenson et al., (1992) reported on a paper presented by Dauber and Epstein which considered the

influence of school and teacher characteristics on parent involvement. Their conclusions were significant.

The strongest and most consistent predictor of parent involvement at school and at home are the specific school programs and teacher practices that encourage and guide parents' involvement. Regardless of parent education, family size, student ability or school level, parents are more likely to become partners in their children's education if they perceive that the schools have strong practices to involve parents at school, at home on homework, and at home on reading activities. (p. 37)

It would seem that the attitudes and actions of the school are more important than other factors in determining whether parents are involved and the degree of their involvement. Also, it would seem that parents rely on the leadership of the school to guide them in providing home and school support.

However, Weiss & Edwards (1992) found that schools often failed to establish programs and routines that allowed for and encouraged meaningful parent involvement. For instance, education programs offer teachers little training in working with parents (Ballen & Moles, 1994). Lacking a clear understanding of how to engage parents as partners, teachers expect parents to become educational resources for their children's academic and social development without recognizing that parents may lack the attitude, understanding and skills to become involved (Carreiro, 1989; Dufour & Eaker, 1998). Teachers and administrators may also be reluctant to increase the opportunities for parent involvement because they fear the loss of control and decision-making power that may result. Other educators may encourage parent involvement in their school but restrict their involvement to activities such as fundraising and other non-decision-making roles. As

experts in the business of education, educators may also feel that they know best what is needed for their school community.

Davies (1991) suggested that administrators may be unaware of the research in the area of parent involvement, uninformed about the need to educate parents to take an active role in student learning, unskilled in meeting this additional role demand, and unable to initiate and support the development of meaningful parent-school partnerships within their school community.

Parents have also demonstrated a reluctance to become involved in the school. Although the research demonstrates that, almost without fail, parents were interested in becoming more involved, there are some parents who may never perceive schools as friendly, accepting places (Ballen & Moles, 1994). Even when educators make an extraordinary attempt to invite participation, there may be some parents who are unwilling or unable to become involved. Perhaps this is because parents who have had little involvement with the school may feel confused about the normal school procedures and intimidated by the school staff

Elkind (1997) highlighted some changes in family conditions over the past decades which have made it difficult for all parents to be involved with their children's educational development. For example, he notes that there has been an increase in the number of mothers in the workforce, an increase in the number of single-parent families, and a blurring of the boundary and responsibilities of home and school (pp. 36-37). In addition, some parents are reluctant to participate because they did not experience a great deal of success in their own schooling, and find it difficult to overcome these negative

experiences (Ballen & Moles, 1994). Dettmer et al. (1996) identified a comprehensive list of reasons why parents may not be actively involved with their children's schools and learning. Included in the list were personal and family health issues, socioeconomic hardships and a variety of attitudinal and perceptual factors (pp. 288-290).

Ineffective communication is another barrier to effective parent-school relationships. In order to ensure that efforts to establish home-school connections are not defeated by either intentional or unintentional miscommunications, there is a need for educators to become knowledgeable about and proficient in using effective communication strategies (Dettmer et al., 1992; Epstein, 1995; Idol, 1992). It is important for educators to understand their own biases and beliefs, and to choose their words carefully so that their interactions do not inadvertently cause a negative or defensive response from parents. It is also important that teachers be accepting of parents' perspectives, their requests for information and their raising of concerns. Educators need to build relationships slowly and communicate with sensitivity and empathy. By using effective communication strategies and by welcoming and valuing parent input, teachers assist parents in overcoming their reluctance to be involved. Parents begin to develop confidence in their abilities to be valued partners in their children's education and are more willing to be involved with the school.

Mr. Davis recognized the critical role that communication plays in building home-school partnerships. He stated, "Lack of communication in any place is the biggest problem. With [our company] that's our biggest problem and I don't think it's different for any other business or with teachers

and parents. It's lack of communication." (17/05/99)

Discerning educators believe that all children can learn. It is equally realistic to assume that all parents can learn and, as is the case for children, if given the appropriate support and guidance, they will become effective partners in the educational process (Elkind, 1997). Informed educators also recognize that the children with whom they work have different needs. Similarly, parents have specific and different reasons for engaging in their children's literacy learning (Gadsden, 1995). The evidence from the parents seems to support this notion.

### **Parent-School Relationships**

#### **The Becker-School Relationship**

When Mrs. Becker agreed to be involved in the research, I was pleasantly surprised because I had only had a few brief interactions with her throughout the year. Mrs. Becker, together with Mr. Becker, had participated in two formal parent-teacher conferences. They had also brought Isabel to one of the parent-child workshops. In addition, both parents and Isabel attended the spring carnival, and Mrs. Becker took advantage of her part-time work schedule to be available as a supervisor on an all-day field trip.

Mr. or Mrs. Becker regularly signed Isabel's student agenda and also used it to communicate information about Isabel's medical appointments and absences. Throughout the year I noticed that Isabel was the one student who frequently brought special family treasures that related to our units of study. I sensed that although Mrs. Becker was not one of the most visibly involved mothers in the class, Isabel's attitude and contributions in the class

demonstrated that her parents valued school and supported her learning.

During my interview with Mrs. Becker I was surprised to learn of the extent to which she had been directly involved with the school in the past and the different levels of involvement (Epstein, 1991) she had assumed. Mrs. Becker commented that "when the boys were little, the teachers called on you to help them in the classroom" and "I would try to arrange babysitting so I could go to the school every month" (Interview, 02/06/99). It seemed that this changed when she started her part-time job. She added, "It's hard now because I do work during the week" (Interview, 02/06/99).

It seemed that Mrs. Becker had been a regular classroom volunteer, and that she was also involved in a decision-making capacity in the "school's parent-teacher association" as well as serving on the "advisory committee for the kindergarten program" (Interview 02/06/99). Although the data did not give any details about her reactions to her involvement in these positions, Mrs. Becker did mention the frustrations she experienced as a classroom volunteer.

It seemed from the data that one of the reasons that Mrs. Becker was interested in being involved as a classroom volunteer was to "learn how to help her own children or to help other kids in the classroom" (Interview, 02/06/99). She reported that during her own grade twelve year, she had "enjoyed working as a teacher's assistant" to help young children "do spelling and go over multiplication tables" (Interview, 02/06/99) and perhaps she was looking for a similar experience. Mrs. Becker's frustrations seemed to have resulted from a discrepancy between what she hoped to accomplish by being involved as a classroom volunteer and what actually happened.

Although Mrs. Becker seemed to have looked forward to being involved, it also seemed that she was given tasks which were not as personally fulfilling as she had expected them to be. "I only helped the teacher do things that she didn't have time to do" which she acknowledged "was a valid point as well" (Interview, 02/06/99). While she seemed to recognize that the teachers required help with tasks such as "cutting and pasting," it was clear that she did not appreciate having to "*always* cut and paste" (Interview, 02/06/99). She recalled, "When the children were in centres, and they made their "A" pictures, I'd have to paste thirty apple pictures in thirty books" (Interview, 02/06/99). And, she added, "I don't want to cut out anything else. I've cut enough" (Interview, 02/06/99).

It would seem that if Mrs. Becker had been given some choice or variety in the tasks she was given, her memories of classroom involvement would be much more positive. From her reports, it seemed that Mrs. Becker was frustrated by the menial tasks she was given and by the teacher's apparent lack of understanding that parents might be looking for more meaningful ways to be involved (Comer & Haynes, 1991). Mrs. Becker admitted that she had hoped to learn from the teachers and I would suspect that she would also have appreciated being recognized for the skills and knowledge she could contribute to the school.

Mrs. Becker also reported having other interactions with some of her children's teachers, and it seemed that these interactions also left her feeling frustrated, and, I would suspect, invalidated. Mrs. Becker stated, "Well, I guess the one thing that I just really disagreed with was how the kids were taught to read and write" (Interview, 02/06/99). She reported that when Ted and Adam



were in the primary grades, their teachers were using strategies consistent with a sight word reading approach which meant that children were not specifically taught the phonetic relationship between letters and sounds. According to Mrs. Becker, if a child was not able to recognize a word by sight, parents were instructed by the teachers to “just tell him the word and go on to the next” (Interview, 02/06/99).

However, this sight word reading method did not seem to Mrs. Becker to be very effective in helping her sons learn to read. At first, when she was reading with Ted and he became stuck on a word, Mrs. Becker complied with the teacher’s instructions and “told him what the word was” (Interview, 02/06/99). However, as she spent more time reading with Ted, Mrs. Becker reported noticing that Ted “never had to think about” the words he encountered. This made Mrs. Becker doubt the value of this strategy for Ted’s reading needs but also felt “there was not much that I could do about it” (Interview, 02/06/99). Mrs. Becker admitted to again being frustrated, when Adam was in grade one because she noticed a similar thing happening. Mrs. Becker commented, “I found that both of the boys would stop reading, if it got difficult, and they’d expect you to jump in. They wouldn’t know how to sound the words out” (Interview, 02/06/99). She described her feelings of frustration, “That just kind of annoyed me ‘cause I thought it’s almost like they weren’t even trying to learn” (Interview, 02/06/99).

Mrs. Becker stated that at one point she talked to the teacher about her concerns but that she was told, “No. Just tell him the word and go on to the next one” (Interview 02/06/99). Regardless of what she observed from working closely with her sons and the knowledge she had gained from her

own reading experiences, according to Mrs. Becker, she was expected to comply with the strategies recommended by the teacher.

Later when Isabel had some difficulty with reading, the data showed that Mrs. Becker shared her frustrations with a teacher friend and was told, "phonics is the only way to go" (Interview, 02/06/99). According to Mrs. Becker this frustrated her even more and made her feel like she should "get a phonics program somewhere" (Interview, 02/06/99) in order to help Isabel. However, in the end she did not do this, as her friend suggested that "teaching Isabel one way at home when she's being taught a different way at school" would probably cause more problems (Interview, 02/06/99). Mrs. Becker admitted that, in spite of the advice of her friend and the direction taken by Isabel's teachers, she "helped Isabel sound out words" (Interview, 02/06/99), and she seemed pleased that this appeared to help Isabel. Mrs. Becker also relied on her own intuition and knowledge of the reading process and encouraged Isabel "to think what the word might say" (Interview, 02/06/99). Mrs. Becker reported, "Now if you leave her, Isabel can usually figure out what the word is on her own," while Ted "would not have figured out the word, unless you told him" (Interview, 02/06/99).

Mrs. Becker had similar frustrating interactions with the teacher when Ted was having difficulty with spelling in his written work. Having been employed as a writer, Mrs. Becker found it difficult to agree with the popular practice at the time of accepting invented rather than conventional spelling from beginning writers. According to the data, Mrs. Becker tried to encourage her son to "try to spell the words right" but his response was that "the teacher says it doesn't matter" (Interview, 02/06/99). Mrs. Becker reported that when

she raised her concern with the teacher and asked for suggestions to help Ted, she was told, "We're only interested in getting their stories down. We want their thought processes on paper. We're not going to worry about the spelling" (Interview, 02/06/99). Although Mrs. Becker did not agree with the teachers' views, she admitted that she "did not raise the issue again," probably because her first attempt had not been successful and she was reluctant to appear ill-informed.

Based on her own knowledge of the writing process, Mrs. Becker believed that spelling was important and it seemed that once the children got into higher grades, the teachers agreed with her. Mrs. Becker stated, "Then all of a sudden, grade three and four, when the teachers were worried about spelling, Ted hadn't a clue how to spell" (Interview, 02/06/99). Having experienced a similar situation with my son, I could appreciate Mrs. Becker's frustrations and the position parents feel they are placed in when their ideas about how to support their children's learning are not congruent with the popular teaching methods and the teacher's expert opinion.

Throughout our interview Mrs. Becker referred to her love of reading and her experience as a professional writer. While it was clear that she understood the reading and writing processes, she also spoke of her inability "to teach Isabel or help her with things" (Interview, (02/06/99). At first I was confused by Mrs. Becker's apparent inability to recognize how to apply her literacy knowledge and skills to support Isabel's literacy development. I assumed that as a reader Mrs. Becker would understand how to read to her children and what interactions to engage them in so they could link story details to their lives. However, Edwards (1995) found this to be a common

mis-assumption. Also, I wondered if, despite knowing what to do, Mrs. Becker lacked confidence in doing it because her knowledge had been invalidated during her prior discussions with the teachers. From the evidence it would seem that Mrs. Becker's involvement with the school arose partly from a desire to learn more about her children's learning as well as from an interest in becoming more informed about schools and learning in general. Her participation in my research demonstrated that she maintained a strong interest in being involved with the school, and I would suspect she was still hopeful of contributing to Isabel's development by working in a partnership with the teachers.

### **The Sullivan-School Relationship**

I had contacted Mr. Sullivan fairly early in the school year when I felt the need to telephone him at work to discuss Colin's classroom progress and behaviour. I was surprised at how receptive Mr. Sullivan was to my call, despite the fact that I expressed my concern with Colin's classroom behaviour and my frustration with not knowing how best to deal with Colin. Mr. Sullivan received my comments openly and readily agreed to a meeting the next day. During that initial contact and our many interactions throughout the school year, I came to appreciate Mr. Sullivan's devotion to Colin and his willingness to work with the teachers to help Colin be more successful at school. Mr. Sullivan always accepted telephone calls from the school, regardless of the nature of the call; he met with teachers before and after school to discuss concerns and to brainstorm solutions; and he advised the school of any changes in Colin's routines.

Although Mr. Sullivan did not always initial Colin's student agenda, this was partly due to the fact that Colin did not always manage to take his book home. Mr. Sullivan, Colin and his grandmother participated in two of the parent-child workshops, and Mr. Sullivan also volunteered to talk to the class about his career in the printing business. I was impressed with his ability to relate to the class of grade three children, and the fact that he had thought of ways for maintaining their attention. In addition, Mr. Sullivan supervised a group of children during an all-day field trip, and on another occasion arranged to join the class for lunch when we were on a field trip near his office. It was evident that Mr Sullivan was very interested in being involved in Colin's school, although it was not always possible for him to help out.

Throughout the year, Mr. Sullivan and I developed a remarkable level of trust as we worked together to plan successful school experiences for Colin. Thus, Mr. Sullivan was the first parent that I considered for participation in my research. I was hopeful that he would volunteer, and deeply touched by his immediate and heartfelt response. "I'd be honored to be involved in your development as you have been instrumental in my son's" (Field Notes, 11/05/99).

Mr. Sullivan's calm and open attitude and his willingness to work with Colin's teachers were critical factors in the development of a mutually-supportive parent-school relationship. As Comer and Haynes (1991) concluded,

Meaningful parent participation is essential for effective schooling. We premise our view on the notion that families and schools constitute important sources of influence on the psycho-educational development of children and that the best results are achieved when these two institutions work together. (p. 278)

I was surprised to learn during the two interviews that he had not always had this same type of relationship with the school. It seemed that during Colin's grade one year interactions between the school and Mr. Sullivan were school-initiated reports of Colin's behavioural and attention difficulties and, as evidenced in the data, communications were strained. Mr. Sullivan stated that "nobody ever called re his [Colin's] status" but then also added, "when it was something really severe, I would get a call" (Interview, 10/08/99). Mr. Sullivan went on to say, "Always negative calls, no positive calls. No positive reinforcement that first year. I was only contacted about negative happenings" (Interview, 10/08/99). It would seem that what Mr. Sullivan was really expressing was his need for some positive feedback as a balance for the reports of problems Colin was having at school.

During that critical first year of Colin's formal schooling, Mr. Sullivan interacted with different school personnel and recalled the reactions he had had to some of the conversations. "Dealing with the one teacher occasionally, I wasn't overly impressed. The same as she'd always call my house first and reach my sister-in-law or brother. And always harsh feelings. Not very personal" (Interview, 10/08/99). He also related, "Every time I would get a call, I'm good with voices, and I would hear the teacher's voice. I would immediately get on the defensive mode 'cause I knew she was going to tell me bad news" (Interview, 10/08/99).

Mr. Sullivan's connection with the school was not only through his interactions with Colin's classroom teacher. Although the data did not provide the context for the interaction, it indicated that the principal had also had a telephone conversation with Mr. Sullivan. He recalled, "The principal

once said that we should get together and we should talk about this. And I said, 'Tell me when and I'll be there' but it never happened" (Interview, 10/08/99).

From his comments it would seem that Mr. Sullivan was looking to the school for guidance and support for working with Colin and was willing to capitalize on the teacher's expertise. "I kept telling them, keep me in touch with what's going on. I can maybe use some strategies. But nothing transpired" (Interview, 10/08/99). He later added, "I thought they'd have some answers for me. They're dealing with kids all the time. That they could give me some suggestions, then I could put them to use" (Interview, 10/08/99). The data showed that Mr. Sullivan believed in the importance of working closely with the school and the benefits this would have for Colin. There was evidence to confirm that when help was provided, Mr. Sullivan was very appreciative. He commented that the resource teacher "was very helpful. She gave me tips and phone calls, and she gave me little pamphlets to read" (Interview, 10/08/99).

The issue of drug therapy for the treatment of attentional problems is an extremely contentious one at the best of times. From the data it appeared that the issue of Colin's behavioural difficulties and his possible need for drug therapy were the common topics that linked Mr. Sullivan and the school. Mr. Sullivan admitted,

The resource teacher sent home some literature, and was questioning whether Colin had ADD. They kept pushing that. 'You should see a doctor' and all they seemed to ask for was to get this kid on drugs so that they could handle him. Very negative that whole year. They should have physically met with me. I was always available. (Interview, 10/08/99)

When I mistakenly suggested that perhaps it was the way Colin's problems at school were presented that made Mr. Sullivan reluctant to become involved, he was adamant.

Actually, it was the other way around for grade one. I was trying to encourage meeting and there was no response from the school. The meetings never happened till after grade one. Well, I wasn't very impressed with the school after that first year at all. (Interview, 10/08/99)

While there was some inconsistency in the data concerning when meetings were held, there was no question about the feelings that Mr. Sullivan had as a result of these dealings with the school. He recalled one meeting that occurred in grade one, "That wasn't a very personable meeting. What I got was, 'What are YOU going to do about it?' I asked for suggestions and that's when I got literature about ADD" (Interview, 10/08/99). From his comments I inferred that Mr. Sullivan felt the school held him responsible for Colin's difficulties as well as for finding a solution.

Perhaps Mr. Sullivan's request for suggestions was the opening that the school was looking for in order to raise the issue of attention deficit disorder. Mr. Sullivan recalled, "I instantly had a negative feeling about ritalin because of how it was presented to me" (Interview, 10/08/99). And it also seemed that because he was having difficulty accepting the diagnosis and Colin's need for drug therapy, comments that were meant to put Mr. Sullivan at ease, created more barriers within the parent-school relationship (Swap, 1992).

Also, I remember distinctly, I think it was the principal said, 'It'll be okay. We have a lot of kids here on ritalin.' That blew my mind. It really blew my mind. (Interview, 10/08/99)

It appeared that the principal's comment made Mr. Sullivan feel that his reluctance to accept the school's recommendation was not warranted and that



his concerns were not validated. It would also seem that the "lots of kids on ritalin" comment gave Mr. Sullivan the false impression that the school's preferred way of dealing with hyperactive children was to have their parents put them on medication.

Mr. Sullivan acknowledged that Colin did better in grade two because he and the school worked together. He did not provide many details about the interactions he had with the teacher that year but he stated, "We did a lot. I interacted quite a bit" (Interview, 14/05/99). Based on the interventions that were arranged for Colin during grade two, I would suspect that interactions between Mr. Sullivan and the school were much more collaborative and solution-oriented than in the previous year. I was interested to learn that it was during the spring of grade two when Colin was formally diagnosed with ADD, was started on ritalin therapy, and participated in a six-week behavioural intervention program. It would seem that relations between Mr. Sullivan and the grade two teacher were more positive, and that Mr. Sullivan felt valued as a partner in his son's education.

I found it interesting that during the interviews Mr. Sullivan did not mention that he recognized any connection between Colin's early school problems and his subsequent diagnosis and medication for attention difficulties. Instead Mr. Sullivan seemed to think the adjustment problems were caused by the inappropriateness of the reading materials and the higher staff to student ratio of the grade one class.

Colin went to ECS in a day care. They were very attentive to him and that was his problem with grade one. He knew too much. At day care he had maybe 12 or 16 kids with four adults, all teaching. He progressed. He did a lot better that way. (Interview, 14/05/99)

Mr. Sullivan also recalled that Colin entered ECS “knowing how to read” (Interview, 05/14/99). He explained how he thought this had contributed to the problems Colin had adjusting to grade one.

One of the books that he brought home from the library that was given to him to read and practice on, he had already read. The books were just too easy. He kept saying, ‘I don’t want these baby books.’ That frustrated him. I had conflicts with that. (Interview, 14/05/99)

The negative experiences that Mr. Sullivan had with the school when Colin was in grade one have had an impact on the homework support that Mr. Sullivan provided for Colin. He admitted,

I wouldn’t want to try to go any further than what the school is teaching ‘cause then he’d get frustrated with already knowing. I wouldn’t want that to happen ‘cause then he just disrupts the class when he’s bored. And he doesn’t want to do the work. (Interview, 14/05/99).

It would seem that Mr. Sullivan had no desire to relive the events of Colin’s grade one year, and had decided that one way to guarantee this was to have Colin work only on what had been assigned by the teacher.

It was evident from Mr. Sullivan’s participation in the research project and from his specific comments that he felt more positively connected to the school by the end of Colin’s grade three year. During our second interview, Mr. Sullivan stated that grade three “was the best yet” (10/08/99) for Colin and so I asked him to explain what he thought made the difference. He replied,

I think it’s mostly the compassion for children. I know that Colin felt wanted and liked. It’s very important. He wants the positive reinforcement. Especially in grade one, not getting that, and grade two getting it, but he was still apprehensive from the previous year. Then in grade three, he really felt it. That’s why he did a lot better in grade three than in the other years. That’s really what

it's all about, caring. He really felt liked and all that extra time and attention. It affected him incredibly. (Interview, 10/08/99)

When Mr. Sullivan shared the above comments, I accepted them as his perception of his son's feelings. However, following further analysis, I have come to believe that Mr. Sullivan's comments most probably also reflect the difference in how he felt, as a result of our very positive relationship. The "positive feedback" that Mr. Sullivan was given made him feel wanted and liked for what he was contributing to Colin's development, and all the extra time and attention had affected him as much as it had affected his son. It would seem that the relationship we developed validated Mr. Sullivan's involvement and provided an opportunity for him to become a respected partner in his son's schooling.

Mr. Sullivan's advice to teachers was heartfelt and very noteworthy, and I knew it would prove helpful in my future interactions with parents. It was evident that he recalled the negative experiences he had had and appreciated the positive ones. While Mr. Sullivan admitted that although teachers "can not reach all parents," he believed that "Patience is the best virtue when dealing with everything" (Interview, 10/08/99). He recommended, "Instead of calling up and saying, 'Your kid is doing really bad,' try to make it sound like it's not so negative by saying, 'Let's just see how we can work on it'" (Interview, 10/08/99).

I believed that my relationship with Mr. Sullivan and Colin exemplified what can happen when the school and the family work closely together. Epstein (1987) captured the essence of the relationship I believed we had developed, "When teachers and parents emphasize their shared responsibilities, their combination of labor pushes the spheres of family and

school influence together and increases the interaction between parents and school personnel about the developing child" (p. 134).

### **The Davis-School Relationship**

I met Mr. Davis on the first day of school when he showed up outside of the classroom a few minutes before the final bell. We exchanged very brief "hellos" but did not have a chance to introduce ourselves. My team partner later explained that the gentleman had been Christopher's father and that she had had some interactions with him the previous year when she taught Thomas, the older son. She also mentioned that she had found Mr. Davis to be a very dedicated father, who had rearranged his work schedule in order to be more available for his children.

Mr. Davis was the parent from our class who demonstrated the most effective use of the daily student agenda. Mr. Davis initialled each day's notation, the usual indication that a parent had seen the day's entry, and he also utilized the space to note the reading Christopher had done at home, as well as the types of questions he had given Christopher for math review. At times, he also used it to keep the school informed about times when work was not finished or Christopher was to be absent. As Mr. Davis later informed me,

I think that these agenda books that you guys have now are a wonderful thing for parents to sign daily. It lets you know what they (the children) have. You're initialling it and the parents have to initial it too. It's just staying on top of things, staying in touch with the teacher. (Interview, 17/05/99)

Mr. Davis always attended parent-teacher conferences, although at times, he required a special time to accommodate his shift work. He kept in

contact with the school by telephone, in person and daily through the agenda book. Mr. Davis frequently asked how things were going and if there was anything he should be doing to help Christopher. The following example of his involvement will illustrate why he seemed a natural choice for participating in this project.

During the spring parent-teacher conference I suggested a homework activity to help Christopher develop his expressive writing skills. I suggested that a couple of times a week Mr. Davis have Christopher write a short summary of the chapter of the reading he had completed at home that day, or write a few sentences predicting what might happen next in the story. I anticipated that this would encourage Christopher to be more actively involved with the stories he read, and would provide a purpose for thinking and writing about the story details. Mr. Davis agreed to try this strategy and I was amazed at the response my suggestion provoked. It was evident that Mr. Davis was sincere in his interest in supporting Christopher's literacy learning because almost every day after that, Christopher turned in a letter-perfect, neatly printed chapter summary. I could tell that Mr. Davis had been involved in helping Christopher with punctuation and spelling, and I was impressed with Mr. Davis' commitment and consistency. As a working mother, I understood how difficult it was to always provide home learning support for my children. As was suggested in the research, it seemed clear that Mr. Davis cared about his son's learning, understood his role in helping Christopher, and was willing to learn from suggestions aimed at benefitting Christopher's achievement (Wolfendale, cited by Harrison, 1995).

I was intrigued to understand more about Mr. Davis and the routines

he had obviously established for working with Christopher at home. I sensed that Mr. Davis' participation could prove to be very beneficial to my understanding of parent involvement in children's literacy learning. Mr. Davis seemed a natural choice for participating in the research and I was pleased when he responded positively to my invitation.

Although Mr. Davis was also confronted with the issue of attention deficit disorder during his older son's grade one year, his experiences seemed to have been remarkably different from those of Mr. Sullivan, at least in terms of those he chose to share during the interview. There was no data to indicate that Mr. Davis had felt blamed for Thomas' problems adjusting to grade one, or that he felt solely responsible for solving the problems. Mr. Davis' comments suggested that while it had been difficult, at first, to accept the label of ADD and the need for Thomas to receive drug therapy, Mr. Davis was able to overcome his initial reluctance.

We had a hard time with Tommy when he was in grade one. All he did was scream, so he was put in the hallway a lot. We didn't know what the problem was until we took him in and finally had him diagnosed. He is on ritalin. I don't like meds but if it helps him out, that's good. (Interview, 17/05/99)

I did not get a sense from Mr. Davis' comments that he and the school were at odds about the cause of Tommy's early school experiences, nor were they expecting each other to come up with a solution for the problems. On the contrary, it seems that Mr. Davis and the school were able to form a partnership aimed at finding ways for Tommy to be successful at school.

I stayed in touch with the teacher. I came [to school] a lot too. I came quite a bit and just made sure that everything was okay when I picked up the kids. Popped in an extra five minutes early and had a quick little word with the teacher, just to find out what I could do differently. Or, if there were any problems, try to figure out a way

to resolve those problems. (Interview, 17/05/99)

Unlike the very negative experiences that Mr. Sullivan recalled about his early dealings with the school and his son's diagnosis with attention deficit disorder, Tommy's diagnosis became the catalyst for Mr. Davis and the school to work closely together. As a result, his comments did not give any indication that he felt a loss of authority or control when dealing with the school. I asked Mr. Davis to provide more specifics as to how he and the teachers came to work together in a partnership, but his only response was, "We just stayed in touch a lot" (Telephone Conversation, 09/15/99).

Perhaps one factor that made a difference in the experiences of Mr. Davis and Mr. Sullivan was the type of support they received to help them work through their questions and concerns. I know that Mr. Davis relied on his parents, and particularly his mother, to help deal with issues that arose.

She's taught me a lot. Throughout all of this homework deal and everything else involving the school, I've actually phoned her a lot and asked her which way I should go and what I should do.  
(Interview, 17/05/99)

Mrs. Davis had been a teacher for many years and would have been able to help Mr. Davis understand his son's difficulties, from the school's perspective as well as from his own parent perspective. Mr. Davis also recalled going "to a couple of ADD information things to deal with Thomas and the problems he was having" and he "talked to a lot of friends who had kids with the same problems" (Interview, 17/05/99). From the data it would seem that Mr. Davis had a trusting and open attitude to dealing with issues that arose, and was willing to seek out the information and support he needed from a variety of sources, including the school. Perhaps this was why he had been able to

maintain a positive working relationship with his sons' teachers each year.

The process of working through different issues seemed to have had a positive impact on Mr. Davis' beliefs about parent involvement. He stated, "Parents and schools should be very tight with each other. They should be very close and that way the kids are going to be doing really well. Guaranteed!" (Interview, 17/05/99). This belief was certainly demonstrated by Mr. Davis in a variety of ways during the year that Christopher was in my grade three class. Mr. Davis made it clear that he was not going to wait until an issue arose nor was he going to wait until parent-teacher conference time to become involved with the school and his sons' new teachers. He took a proactive approach to forming a relationship with the school. Like Mr. Sullivan, Mr. Davis had an interest in working more closely with the school but unlike Mr. Sullivan, Mr. Davis initiated the relationship.

Perhaps one explanation for why Mr. Davis made such an effort related to his belief that "You have to take the time for your kids" because "they are worth it" (Interview, 17/05/99). And, if that meant helping with homework and working closely with the school, Mr. Davis was prepared to assume those responsibilities. He credited his parents for helping him to develop the attitudes he was teaching Christopher and Thomas.

Mom and Dad taught me good morals and values and respect for people. And that's basically what I want my boys to have because out of everything that your parents do teach you, the things that you hang onto are, to be a decent person and to work hard and to be responsible. That's what I was taught and that's what I want to teach my boys. If they can come out with that, I'll be happy. (Interview, 17/05/99).

These beliefs are evidenced in the data and seemed to account for the responsible and consistent support that Mr. Davis reported providing for his



sons' learning.

Mr. Davis appreciated being invited to participate in the study because he reported, "it gives me a feeling of accomplishment" and "it is something that is involved with helping the kids in the long term" (Interview, 17/05/99). Through my involvement with Mr. Davis, I was reminded of Paratore et al. who stated, "in cases in which parents were consistently and routinely involved, it was almost always because they, rather than the teacher initiated the routine contact" (1999, p. 109). This had definitely been the case with Mr. Davis.

It was not surprising that Christopher showed very good progress in his literacy development over the year. Mr. Davis' took initiative in becoming involved with the school and working with his own knowledge and teacher guidance to support Christopher's learning. In addition, by learning more about the ways in which Christopher's at-home learning was supported by Mr. Davis, teachers could capitalize on the knowledge that he had about Christopher's particular learning needs, and could plan particular school learning activities to support Christopher's home learning.

The relationships that I had developed with Mr. Sullivan and the relationship that Mr. Davis had initiated and established with the school provided noteworthy examples of parent involvement and effective parent-school relationships. In fact, given the nature of the interactions, it was evident that we were involved in a collaborative process focused on their children's school success. As suggested by Christenson et al. (1992), home-school collaboration is related to parent involvement but is broader and more inclusive. While parent involvement focuses on the parents' role in

becoming involved in their children's education, home-school collaboration focuses on a partnership between home and school, and the ways in which parents and educators work together to promote the social and academic development of children. According to the literature, home-school collaboration implies that parents and educators have legitimate roles and responsibilities in the educational partnership, and that their work together is based on their shared goal of influencing children's learning. It also implies that both partners understand that by working together they can accomplish more than either partner could accomplish separately (Christenson et al., 1992).

Although home-school collaboration implies parent involvement, the reverse is not always true, i. e., in the case of Mrs. Becker. It seemed clear from the data that over the years Mrs. Becker had been involved in her children's learning both at home and at school, and that, of the three parents, she had participated in a wider range of activities and to a higher level of involvement than either of the two fathers. However, what the data did show was that Mrs. Becker had not at any time felt that she was involved in a collaborative relationship with the teachers. Given the incidents she chose to report during this project, it would seem that the interactions she recalled most vividly were those that had caused her the most intense emotional response.

### **Summary**

As these cases illustrate, positive home-school relationships are not always easy to create. This bears out the research which has shown that, while

there may appear to be good intentions on the part of both school personnel and parents, these good intentions do not always translate into positive, mutually respectful interactions and working relationships. Requests from teachers for parents to become more involved in supporting their children's at-home learning may become confused with issues of authority and expertise, or sidetracked by ineffective and, perhaps, insensitive communications. However, there are many ways that families and schools can work together to establish respectful, mutually-supportive relationships and there are many educators and parents who have proven themselves to be successful in this regard. Schools can create a positive climate by inviting and welcoming the participation of all families, and by providing a variety of programs and activities that acknowledge their diverse needs and interests. It seems very clear that when parents and educators are able to work collaboratively, student achievement will improve. As Mr. Davis so effectively stated, "So if you have good communication, you're going to have kids that are learning really well and getting the best marks they are capable of" (Interview, 17/05/99).

## **CHAPTER FIVE: AFTERTHOUGHTS AND IMPLICATIONS**

It seems that I have come full circle as a result of working through the process of this research project. I began with the idea of designing and implementing a workshop to help parents become more effective in supporting their children's literacy learning. My intent was to research the variety of parent involvement programs documented in the literature and to make an informed choice as to the one program or combination of programs that seemed most suitable for parents at my school. The realization that I could not presume to know what parents needed, or would find most beneficial, led me to design an exploratory study which focused on the experiences and expressed needs of parents, as determined by listening to the parents' perspectives and not what I determined to be necessary based on my perspective as an educator.

Before presenting my afterthoughts and the implications of this study, I feel it is important to outline the major limitations of my research.

### **Limitations**

#### **Participants**

My research was limited in two ways by my choice of participants. First, I invited those parents with whom I had already established a positive relationship to share with me some of the ways in which they supported their children's learning. While this purposeful sampling might be criticized by some for skewing the nature and diversity of the data collected, I believe that, more importantly, my familiarity with the parents and my knowledge of

their children allowed them to speak more candidly.

Second, I restricted the amount of data collected by limiting the sample size. Although the data can be analysed and interpreted in terms of these three parents in this particular community and in these particular family situations because of the small sample size, few generalizations can be made. However, I believe that the parents' rich and diverse parent involvement experiences provided ample evidence and valid data to satisfy the purposes of this exploratory study.

### **Limiting Questions and Limited Responses**

The research is limited by the fact that the majority of the data was drawn from a ninety-minute interview with each participant, although an additional thirty-minute interview was held with Mr. Sullivan. This data collection method relies on the integrity of the participants, their ability to recollect and verbalize earlier experiences, and their willingness to share those experiences in an open and honest manner. Just as I made choices about the questions I would ask the parents, I assume that the parents made choices regarding the experiences they chose to share with me (Kvale, 1996). O'Neill (1998) points out that participants' responses may be conditioned by their desire to create a favourable impression with the interviewer. If participants think that a particular incident will cast them in an unfavourable light, they may choose to amend or withhold information which might have altered the researcher's interpretation of the data.

While I accept the data as accurate and reliable, I also understand that the parents' responses are simply representative of the involvement they

have had in their children's schooling and not the whole story. Although I did not sense that the participants' stories were being seriously embellished, understated or fabricated, it is difficult to know to what degree, if any, the parents may have sanitized their experiences for my benefit. A more experienced interviewer might accuse me of being too ready to accept the parents' stories as "truthful and consistent" (Kvale, 1996, p. 146) and may have found ways to delve deeper.

The following anecdote points to the possible distortions that might occur when data collection is limited to the perspective of one person, and not verified by others who shared the same experiences. After receiving his copy of the initial case study report, Mr. Davis telephoned to thank me for it. "I wouldn't change a thing you've said," he laughingly shared, "but my mother is wondering who you interviewed" (Field notes, 09/16/99). An interview is a slice of life and must only be interpreted as a slice, not the whole loaf.

### **Interviewing Skills of the Researcher**

I expected that my experiences as a resource teacher and administrator would have given me sufficient preparation for carrying out research interviews and that I would utilize effective interviewing skills ( O'Neill, 1999; Stewart & Cash, Jr., 1991). However, I was not always mindful of using the technique of silence to its full advantage (Kvale, 1996). In my excitement about the topic and the process, I did not always allow parents sufficient time before interjecting a personal comment or asking a new question. I was grateful to the parents when they reintroduced a topic which they felt

deserved more consideration. Although my interviewing skills at times limited the parents' responses, I was very pleased with the overall quality and quantity of the data. With no apparent hesitation and no criticism of my interviewing skills, parents shared their stories and allowed me an opportunity to learn from them.

### **Attention to Task**

Classroom responsibilities, changing administrative responsibilities and my own attempt to maintain some balance between my professional and personal lives definitely interfered with the attention I gave to this work on a consistent basis (Lareau, 1990). I found that, like other researchers, I have experienced a range of emotions (Kvale, 1996) and a fluctuation in interest and energy levels as I trudged the hills and raced down the slopes of this research project. However, I also believe that the process deserves and demands time; time not only for being immersed in the data but time also for being removed from it.

### **Afterthoughts**

My analysis and interpretation of the many experiences of Mrs. Becker, Mr. Davis and Mr. Sullivan leads me to the following realizations and tentative conclusions about parent involvement in children's literacy learning. Although it is not possible to generalize these realizations, it is reasonable to assume that the experiences of the three parents in this study would be shared by many other parents. The data gathered from these three parents is supported by the findings of other researchers in the field of parent

involvement and family literacy.

**There is a need to give credit to both teachers and parents for the roles they play in children's literacy learning.**

Although the parents in the study were already involved in supporting their children's learning in a variety of important ways, they also looked to the school for information and ways to help their children. It was evident that they valued the expertise that the teachers could provide. For example, Mrs. Becker asked for ideas to help Isabel "become interested in reading and writing again" and suggested "parent-child homework projects" so that she could become more aware of what Isabel was learning at school (Interview, 02/06/99). Mr. Davis expressed an interest in having "samples of the types of questions" children need to be familiar with and also suggested that "homework be spread out more evenly" throughout the week (Interview, 17/05/99). Mr. Sullivan commented that he was hoping that the school would "give him some ideas" for using with Colin and suggested the need for teachers to be "positive" and "patient" even when dealing with negative behaviors (Interview, 14/05/99).

However, it is also clear that the parents have their own specialized knowledge but may not value this expertise to the same extent that they value the expertise of educators. For example, a conflict arose for Mrs. Becker when she tried to use a teacher-suggested reading strategy with her sons. She wanted them to be successful readers and she looked to the school for ways to help. However, Mrs. Becker did not find the strategy suggested by the teacher to be effective for her sons. Although she was tempted to teach her sons a



strategy she found personally useful, Mrs. Becker persevered with the teacher's suggestion despite all evidence that her sons were still struggling.

It is important to recognize that both parents and teachers have expertise in the matter of educating children (DuFour & Eaker, 1998). In many instances parents may not receive the credit they deserve for the knowledge they have and the critical role they play in promoting their children's literacy learning. What is more, parents may not even suspect that they have this specialized knowledge.

**Parents' desire to be involved in their children's learning outweighs any negative experiences they may have had in the past.**

It is clear from the stories of these parents that they are interested in working in partnership with the school in order to help their children be successful. This was evident in the behaviors and the comments of the parents. Regardless of whether they waited for an invitation from the school, like Mr. Sullivan and Mrs. Becker, or whether they took steps to initiate a relationship with the teachers like Mr. Davis, these parents demonstrated their desire to work closely with the school. They paid school fees, completed school documents, modelled a positive attitude towards learning, attended academic and social functions, helped out on field trips, provided regular help with homework and chose to be involved in this study

What struck me most about these parents was that their desire to be involved outweighed any prior negative experiences they had had with the school or particular teachers. When I learned of the frustrating and hurtful episodes Mr. Sullivan and Mrs. Becker had endured in the past, I was amazed

that they still welcomed the opportunity to become more involved. Parents are very forgiving when the success of their children is at stake.

**The differences in the ways that parents attend to schooling points out the need for educators to think of parent involvement in new ways.**

Parents care about their children's literacy learning and, when possible, find ways to support them at home and in school (Auerbach, 1995; Paratore, Melzi & Krol-Sinclair, 1999; Redding, 2000). There can be no denying that Mrs. Becker, Mr. Davis and Mr. Sullivan care about their children's literacy development. They shared stories which exemplified the implicit and explicit ways in which they demonstrate their beliefs about the value of literacy and learning, as well as the many ways in which they provide support for their children's learning at home and at school. They have established routines and found ways to make literacy learning a part of their daily lives.

However, each of the families presented a different family dynamic and a different scenario of parent demands and children's learning needs. Thus, the routines that the parents establish and the types of involvement they demonstrate will also be particular to their situations in some ways. Presuming that there is "one right way" in which parents should be involved in children's literacy learning fails to recognize and honour the many different ways in which parents may be involved.

To be most successful in working with parents, educators must begin to develop an understanding of a broader definition of their involvement (Davis, 1991) which recognizes and values the diverse ways in which parents can be and already are involved in their children's learning. With this

expanded notion of involvement, educators would be less likely to make assumptions as to whether parents care about their children's learning based only on their participation in traditional parent involvement activities, i.e., attending parent-teacher conferences and volunteering in the classroom.

**Parents' own experiences in school condition some of the literacy activities they engage in with their children.**

Some of the literacy-related activities that parents engage in with their children occur simply because they offer opportunities for pleasurable family times, e.g., activities such as camping trips, going for walks and reading to children. Others, such as rehearsing a song, writing an essay and listening to children read are directly related to helping the children be more successful at school. It is interesting that regardless of whether the parents regarded their own school experiences as successful or not, their stories indicate that their efforts are aimed at helping their children to achieve in school, either by being more successful than they were or as equally successful as they were in school. Mr. Sullivan recalled not "getting into reading and writing until high school" (Interview, 14/05/99) and Mr. Davis admitted that his own "study skills were limited" (Interview, 17/05/99), indicating to me that their involvement in their sons' learning is at least partly in the hopes of helping them to be more successful in school. Mrs. Becker, on the other hand, recalled that "school was never a problem" (Interview, 02/06/99) and it seems she is hopeful that her efforts can help her children have similar successful experiences.

### **Implications**

I feel that this study has important implications for teachers and administrators in their work with parents, and that it also has implications for researchers in the areas of parent involvement, early literacy development and family-school partnerships.

### **Implications for Research**

I believe that there are two ways in which this study may lead the way for other researchers. First, I discovered that there is almost no discussion in the existing literature of the role of fathers in children's literacy development. Almost all of the literature on parent involvement reports on the experiences of mothers and the literacy support they provide for their children. Although there are some studies which investigated both mothers and fathers within two-parent families (Edwards, 1995; Heath, 1983; Purcell-Gates, L'Allier & Smith, 1995; Taylor, 1983), I was not able to find any research in the area of family literacy that focused solely on the experiences of fathers, particularly single-fathers. I feel fortunate to have had the opportunity to learn from Mr. Davis and Mr. Sullivan and I suspect that research focussed on other fathers would be an important contribution to the field.

Second, much of the current literature focuses on the literacy learning of young children during the preschool and early school years. There is a need for continued attention to be given to the ways that parents support their children's learning as they become more independent learners and move through the middle and upper grades.

Reflecting on the limitations of this study, as outlined above, leads me

to consider different ways in which the research could have been conducted. For example, a similar study but with a larger number of participants would have generated more data and might have lead to different realizations about parent involvement. A diversity of data might also have resulted if I had included parents of E.S.L. children or parents with whom I had had less interaction.

A major change that I would make if conducting a similar study would be to ensure that the conversations were inclusive of other literacies. For example, although parents did raise some issues concerning viewing of television, I did not purposefully gather any data about the influence of television-viewing on children's literacy development. This partly reflects my developing skills as an interviewer; purposefully allowing for more silence during the interview sessions would give participants more opportunities to elaborate their responses in the directions which are important to them.

### **Implications for Teachers**

This research has implications for classroom teachers and pre-service teachers. There is a need for educators to become more familiar with research in the areas of parent involvement and more informed about the many ways that parents support their children's learning, both at home and in school. I think it is particularly important that more teachers come to accept that parents do care, and that parents are involved in their children's learning whether or not this involvement is easily observed by those outside of the family. Parents do more for and with their children than volunteer in the classroom and attend parent-teacher conferences. Many family literacy

experiences are invisible to teachers but critical for literacy learning.

It is hoped that with an increased understanding, acceptance and recognition of the roles parents play in their children's literacy development, pre-service and in-service teachers will find more creative ways to invite and welcome parent involvement. Parents will be reluctant to become partners with the school until they feel that their knowledge is valued and their participation is welcomed and needed.

The findings also suggest that there is a need for some educators to step back from their positions of expertise and authority to allow parents a space in which to come forward and be heard in the matter of educating their children. Mechanisms need to be created which invite parents to come forward to share their experiences and expertise both with teachers and with other parents. In order to create collaborative partnerships it is necessary for families and the school to come together to share their best ideas and to help each other to meet their common goal of educating all children.

Parents can be an important source of influence on their children's emerging literacy, although at times they may also be unsure about how best to help. Parents could benefit from information that helps them realize the importance of the various literacy experiences they provide. For example, parents may appreciate knowing that playing games, viewing and discussing television programs, helping with household chores, and so on can be as important to their children's development as storybook reading.

In my research, it was interesting to reflect on the particular role of the fathers of the three families and on my own reactions to the gender of the parents as I thought about their involvement with their children. Teachers

sometimes make assumptions about parents based on gender or social class or even on the basis of their children's attitudes and behavior. It is critical that teachers reflect upon and realize their own biases so that they do not become roadblocks in their work with parents.

One caution needs to be mentioned. It is important that teachers should not be made to feel that parent involvement is one more responsibility they must assume. Rather, the emphasis should be on increasing teachers' awareness of the rich ways in which parents are involved in their children's learning, with the hope that teachers will come to value the support that parents provide and join with them in educating their children.

### **Implications for Administrators**

There are several implications of this exploratory study for school administrators. First, I think it is important that administrators demonstrate an understanding of the complexities of parent-school partnerships in their discussions with parents and teachers. They need to model an approach to parent involvement that recognizes and validates parents' experiences with their children, and exercise leadership in demonstrating ways to open the door to enhanced parent involvement. Administrators can also act as mediators and facilitators in parent-teacher interactions, supporting both teachers and parents as they move towards a closer partnership.

Second, administrators can actively promote change in teachers' attitudes and behaviors with regard to parent involvement by encouraging and supporting staff development activities aimed at increasing knowledge in

the areas of literacy development and parents' involvement in children's literacy learning. In addition to providing leadership and advice, administrators can often find ways to free up teachers involved in parent programs by scheduling them extra release time or supplying substitute coverage. Finally, school administrators can host and facilitate parent-teacher workshops and study groups based upon a recognition that both partners have specialized knowledge to contribute to the conversation rather than on an assumption about what the parents need to be told.

Last, it is also hoped that administrators will find ways to work with their staff and the families within their school community to open up discussions about parent involvement and family-school partnerships. I believe that their leadership is critical in developing effective and sustainable collaboration among all partners in the business of educating children.

### **Implications for My Personal Work**

So, I arrive back at the beginning focused on offering a variety of parent involvement activities but with a deeper understanding of my role in the process. Rather than designing a program based on my perspective of what the parents need, I see myself as a facilitator, coach and guide. I look forward to working with families and staff together, as they share their experiences and consider strategies which will help children be successful at home and in school. I began this research with the intent of listening to and learning from parents about the ways in which they are involved in their children's literacy learning. As I look ahead to my work with parents and teachers, I am excited to anticipate the stories we will share and the progress we will achieve.



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## **APPENDIX A: SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW GUIDE**

### **At-home Literacy Experiences**

- what do you recall about your child becoming interested in books and reading? also writing?
- what activities did you do with your children to help them become interested in reading and writing? trips to the library?  
sharing stories ? reading to them and having them read to you?
- what literacy materials were available in the home?
- talk about special activities you did, outings you went on, and how these activities may have helped your child, especially with reading and writing activities at school
- talk about your child's involvement with the library
- what role does television play in your family's routines
- what changes to routines, child's literacy skills, etc. did you notice during your child's first years at school?
- talk about the challenges that you faced as a parent helping your child learn to read and write, and what challenges came up as they go through school
- talk about how and why you became involved in reading with your child, helping with their home learning?

### **Parents own literacy / school experiences**

- what do you remember about learning to read? being read to as a child?  
early school experiences?
- what types of reading, writing activities, other literacy activities do you engage in at home?



## **APPENDIX B: PARENT AND FAMILY BACKGROUND QUESTIONS**

1. Age and sex of the grade three child?
  
2. How many older children in the family?  
Age and sex for each  
  
How many younger children in the family?  
Age and sex for each
  
3. How many adults live in the home?  
  
Specify -      Mother      Father      Grandparent(s)  
  
                         Other relatives      Friends
  
4. For each adult in the home -  
  
What is highest level of school/specialized training completed?  
  
What kind of work does he/she do?  
  
About how many hours of work each week?
  
5. Are other caregivers involved with the child on a regular basis?  
  
If Yes - Specify - relatives      day care centre  
  
                         private home care    babysitter  
  
                         other  
  
How many hours each week?

Adapted from L.A. Meyer, C.N. Hastings & R.L. Linn (1990). Home Support for Emerging Literacy: What parents do that correlates with early reading achievement. Technical Report No. 518, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, Champaign, Illinois. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No.325 830)