

For this volume year, we have turned our department over to educators in the field whom we have met and who have made a difference in the lives of their students by making family involvement in literacy a priority. In this issue we feature the story of an extraordinary teacher from New Jersey.

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Department Editors

Getting Parents and Children Off to a Strong Start in Reading

Frances Imperato

I have implemented, with the wonderful cooperation of the kindergarten teachers and principals in my school, a phonics and fluency instructional routine as a family literacy component for kindergarten students in my school. My name is Frances Imperato, and I am a reading specialist at Martin Luther King School, a K–5 school with 600 students in suburban Edison, New Jersey. Our school has a wonderfully rich and diverse ethnic population. Some families are new immigrants, but we also have families whose parents and grandparents attended Edison schools. English as a Second Language (ESL) programs are in designated magnet schools within the district, so all of our students can function in English-speaking classrooms. When they exit the ESL programs they return to us.

As a reading specialist, I make presentations to parents of incoming kindergartners about literacy. I found the most frequent question asked of me is, “What can I do with my children to help them learn to read?” My standard answer was always, “Read to and with your child, play rhyming games, label items at home.” But I felt that this answer was becoming more and more inadequate as the population of the school shifted to include more recent immigrants from many different parts of the world. No longer were there common cultural links that could be referenced or, for that matter, one cultural link among the newer immigrants.

Then, one day I attended an informative and interesting workshop and during a break I spoke to

the presenter about my concerns for kindergarten students. He recommended a parental involvement and reading instructional routine (Padak & Rasinski, 2004, 2006; Rasinski, 1995; Rasinski & Stevenson, 2005) that involves a daily rhyme that children read repeatedly with their parent (or teacher) and that is followed by one or more simple and quick phonics or phonemic awareness activities. The daily 10–15 minute format goes this way:

- Parent (or teacher) sits side by side with the child sharing one short passage (usually a brief rhyme, song lyric, or other rhythmical text).
- Parent reads the passage orally to the child 2–4 times, pointing to words as they are read. Parent and child talk about text content and how the parent read.
- Parent and child read the passage chorally 2–4 times, with either the parent or child pointing to the text as it is read.
- Parent invites the child to read the text orally to the parent, 2–4 times, pointing to the words in the text as they are read. Parent praises the child’s reading.
- Parent and child engage in a brief phonics or phonemic awareness activity that is derived from the text. For example, for the rhyme *Little Bo Peep*, the parent might note for the child the *-eep* word family, write a list of words from the poem that contain the rhyme, and then

brainstorm and write other words that may contain the same word family (e.g., *keep, sleep, beep*, etc.). Parent and child read these words. The words are posted on the refrigerator and are read regularly over the next several days (e.g., at breakfast time, after school, etc.).

Several days after chatting with the inservice presenter, I decided to try the instructional routine in my own school. I was impressed by its simple format, the clear directions for parents, and the multileveled activities for all the passages (poems). That December, I approached my principal with a proposal for a pilot program to begin late January 2006. I proposed that the district's January assessments be used as a baseline with two classes participating and two classes being used as a control. In June we could use the final assessments to determine if participation affected growth. I suggested that we look at readers versus nonreaders in the beginning and at the end of implementation, with reading levels measured by running records (correlated with Fountas and Pinnell Guided Reading Levels) and the gains that were made relative to the degree of participation by the students and their parents. The control group would also be evaluated.

With the approval of my principal, we chose the two participating classes and enlisted the cooperation of the teachers. The first year, I created a two-pocket folder made from laminated construction paper. I created a pretty cover and I stapled the general directions for the routine to the inside on the left side. The right-side pocket was used for the current week's packet of poems and activities. Armed with my sample folder and copies of selected poems that I used as a handout, I conducted two parent-training sessions, one in the evening and one in the afternoon. (In subsequent years, I have given presentations at Kindergarten Parents Night in the spring and on Back to School Night.) At these sessions I stressed the benefit of frequent 10–15 minute work sessions (4–6 times a week) versus fewer longer sessions. I told parents my motto: Ten minutes a night keeps the activities fun, and this reading program should be fun. During the pilot program parents reported that folders were too messy so I have switched to large manila envelopes. I glued the general directions to the front and I reduced the Family Activity page to fit onto the back of the envelope. I then laminated the envelopes.

Parents kept log sheets of weekly activity and used a comments column to leave me messages. Occasionally, because of second-language issues, parents had difficulties with some of the activities. When questions arose they would write and leave a phone number so that I could contact them. Then, when I used the log sheets to record participation, I responded to parents as necessary.

To track student participation, I created a master list of each class with columns to check off returned log sheets. Each week I delivered a packet of poems to the classrooms. I made a fuss about how wonderfully the children were working and gave stickers to students who had returned their log sheets from the previous week. I allowed students to turn in log sheets at any time so as not to discourage them. The classroom teachers were wonderful about collecting the sheets. I circled logs that were turned in late on the master list to make sure students received stickers for participation. I also had popcorn party contests to stir up enthusiasm and competition among the classes. I would announce a "best participation party" to each class and then mention it in my weekly parent letter. Children would come up to me in the hall to tell me their class was going to "return the most reading logs this time." Everyone wanted to win. At the end of the program we had a small celebration and gave each student a certificate and a book for participating. We also acknowledged all students who had submitted at least 29 of 30 log sheets. They received a second book as a special prize.

My analysis of the pilot program suggested a correlation between participation and increased reading levels, as measured by district assessments. All kindergarten classes showed an increased number of students reading; however, the class with the highest participation had the greatest increases in reading. The class that had an average participation of 60% had 15 students increasing three or more guided reading levels. The other classes had no more than five.



Based on these results I decided to implement the program in October of the following year in a similar manner. All kindergarten students were included this time. The January baseline showed 40 of 86 (66%) students as nonreaders; at the end of the year 17 of 86 (19%) were nonreaders. Further analysis showed that those students with the lowest participation (0%–35%; $n = 23$) had the most nonreaders ($n = 13$); conversely, the students with the greatest participation (66%–100%; $n = 48$) had the fewest ($n = 2$) and the greatest number of students ($n = 22$) reading above grade level.

Encouraged by these remarkable results, I continued the program the next fall, again beginning in October (2007). Analysis of the 2007–2008 school year showed that participation rates increased. In 2007–2008 only 19 of 88 students (21.6%) versus 23 of 86 students (27.7%) in the previous year were at the low participation level. In addition, the number of students at the highest level of participation increased: 53 (60%) versus 48 (55.8%) the previous year. The number of students leaving kindergarten reading did not increase in 2007–2008: 69 out of 88 (78.4%) versus 77 out of 86 (89.5%) the previous year. A number of factors may have influenced this outcome. Class sizes were larger as was the special education population. Still, a significant number of students left kindergarten reading.

Without doubt, this family instructional routine, as well as others that involve real reading and word play between parents and children, have had a positive influence for literacy in my school. It is worth the time and effort it takes me to write a weekly parent note for the poetry packet, to create packets for all the kindergarten classes, to distribute and collect all logs, to record return logs, and to make lists of students by class who are receiving a sticker that week. I believe that family involvement programs of this type, coupled with full-day kindergarten containing a literacy-rich environment can reduce significantly the number of students leaving kindergarten identified as at risk.

Parents of kindergarten students have stopped me in the halls to let me know how much they enjoy reading with their children using the program and how it is helping them help their children. ESL parents have told me that it helps with their understanding of the structure of English. Parents also felt free to leave me notes or ask me questions in the comments column of the log, which helps to create a friendly, cooperative learning community for parents and teachers. My principal continues to support this program. She has donated book club bonus points and helped me obtain district funds for purchasing books for students. She particularly enjoys helping with the end-of-year celebrations that recognize student achievement.

I have found that simple, at-home literacy programs that feature authentic and engaging reading activity and that are easily understood, implemented, and administered show positive results in literacy learning, align to good teaching, and are enjoyable for parents, students, and teachers. Parents want to help their children become good readers. Teachers need to help parents help their children.

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