



Family Literacy Events: A Framework for Teacher Candidates

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Introduction and Background

Trelease (2013) believes that a “nation that does not read much does not know much and therefore is more likely to make poor choices in the home, the marketplace, the jury box, and the voting booth” (p. xxvi). Literacy continues to be an essential must for individual and community well-being. Families represent a crucial role in the literacy development of their children, and family involvement is associated with numerous benefits for children, families, schools, and communities (Chance, 2010; Livingston & Wirt, 2003). In addition to research findings describing how family perceptions of reading frame literacy practices, data also support the proactive influence of parents as children’s initial literacy models (Larocque, Kleiman, & Darling, 2011; U.S. Department of Education, 2001). Yet, teacher candidates, as they newly prepare to enter the educational profession, may not always understand this integral connection between classroom and family learning (Falk-Ross, Beilfuss, & Orem, 2010). Consequently, in order to establish the groundwork for the significance of family literacy and further, to provide teacher candidates with a framework toward building this critical relationship between families and schools, this discussion describes how a genuine need exists for university coursework to include a variety of relevant experiential service-learning opportunities.

In particular, in our increasingly diverse and complex school learning communities, ensuring teacher candidates participate in “real schools with real families” is integral toward building positive family school relationships. Toward establishing networking on behalf of children and families, collaborative planning for family literacy events is a viable alternative to connect families, local schools, university colleagues, and community agencies.

Contemporary teachers, viewing each family as an asset, honor and extend children’s current literacy learning. In order to foster optimal literacy learning experiences for all children, teachers respect children’s unique and personal contexts including cultural, socio-economic, ethnic, ability, and language differences.

In planning a family literacy event, it is important for the university to communicate collaboratively with both local elementary schools and community agencies. Interactions during family literacy events include immersing teacher candidates in real-world professional development, building relationships between teacher and families, and connecting families with relevant community agencies.

Funding and Support

Practitioners evidence a key role in identifying partners and resources to plan and implement family literacy events. Community organizations such as *Read to Succeed*, *Books from Birth*, and the *Children's Reading Foundation* support schools by providing books, volunteers, and resources. Business sponsors may provide meals, volunteers, and/or financial support. Parent-teacher organizations or school district resources also provide assistance.

Funding for meals, books, and materials often become available through both university public service and community-based grants. In collaboration with university faculty, teacher candidates and classroom teachers identify different grant resources to support family literacy programs. An initial starting place is to look at public service grants provided by local universities. Additionally, community-based grants also provide possibilities for funding. Importantly, identify funding that specifically describes the needs of the school and children you wish to support.

Writing the Proposal: Important to Know

Most successfully written grants include the following six major components:

- 1) target group to be served
- 2) location
- 3) rationale
- 4) objectives
- 5) estimate of funds
- 6) evaluation.

Target Group. Perhaps, the most critical first-step is to identify the target group. This means, “who will this funding immediately serve?” Once the children and families become intentionally identified, the remaining components will naturally follow. Ask yourself: Will it be a school wide event (often the case for a Title 1 school) or a specific population such as English New Language (ENL) Learners?

Grant writers consider:

Why am I identifying this particular group?

What is the purpose for the event?

What are the outcomes the school intends to achieve?

How can an evaluation inform teachers' instruction and children's learning?

Location. In identifying a school to support, questions to consider include:

Where is the most critical need in your service area?

Are there local schools requesting assistance in the area of family literacy and community involvement?

Are there Title 1 schools that barely miss this designation and lack the funds to support a family literacy event?

Rationale Justification. The rationale/justification is the “why” of the family literacy event. For this component, it is important the grant writers know - truly know- their population.

Additionally, identifying existing research to support their funding claims is beneficial. For example, in justifying the importance of the family literacy event, a key component includes describing how and why each participating child receives a copy of one of the featured books to own and take home. Regarding the take-home book, contrary to appearing as merely a door prize, research clearly demonstrates the critical importance of providing children access to literature; family engagement remains as a critical concern in literacy education (International Literacy Association, 2018).

Identifying Objectives. When Identifying objectives, write as an advocate for the family. Be consistent describing advocating the importance of family literacy; objectives support families’ emerging understanding of how to implement best literacy practices in the home.

Estimating Funds. Funding depends on the numbers of children and families to be served. Scholastic is an extraordinary resource to purchase books in large quantities at reasonable prices. Also, book companies such as Barnes & Noble will often give discounts for such events, and local literacy agencies represent access to different book outlets who can offer reduced prices on many titles.

Evaluation. Importantly, evaluation originates with school personnel and families. Classroom teachers and family members become involved in the assessment as a process and thereby, ensure facilitating their particular school needs. University faculty members assist in designing the questions, collecting the information, and analyzing the data. The evaluation process, however, is unique to each school community; university faculty remain as support personnel.

The Teacher Candidate

Critical to the current discussion is a consideration of the importance of teacher candidates’ emerging awareness of the relationship across the classroom, family, and community. In meeting the needs and abilities of a diverse student population, in order to be effective, the contemporary teacher builds upon and extends from children’s home literacy experiences. Involving teacher candidates in a range of family literacy events provides real-life opportunities for preparing teachers to understand effective instruction is not about a lesson plan, but instead about relationship-building. Helping teacher candidates to deeply reflect upon the range of experiences occurring during family literacy events provides abundant professional development. Through meaningful interactions, reflective papers, and critical discussions, teacher candidates

begin to understand that genuine learning is supported by the family in the home; teachers and families collaborate and become partners in children's learning.

As a teacher education instructional strategy, providing teacher candidates with this grant-writing family literacy framework, describes not only the importance of establishing this school-community connection, but as well provides emerging teachers with strategies to maintain and extend this integral school-home relationship. The aim of the grant becomes two-fold: to improve children's and families' literacy as well as to establish a school-home rapport. But, all schools, all children, and all communities are not the same. "What specific needs and issues do I consider that most clearly represent the unique characteristics of this school-home connection?" Providing this ability to personalize the particular school-home connection significantly enhances the grant proposal.

Teacher Candidates and the Process

Collaborating with building principals, literacy coaches, and university faculty represent a team approach for writing a grant. After the grant funding is secured, teacher candidates also become instrumental in the process of implementation. The following example illustrates a framework for implementation.

First, identify a theme and a featured book (s). Then, under the supervision of the university faculty, teacher candidates work together to organize, plan, and lead literacy activities. The literacy activities follow a cross curricular focus incorporating social studies, art, science, music, and math which relate to the featured book (s). Featured books include both fiction and informational texts; activities may include graphing favorite foods to reader's theatre to making slime to creating journals!

Examples of featured books include: *Grace for President* (DiPucchio, 2012), *Math Curse* (Scieszka and Smith, 1995), *The Three Ninja Pigs* (Schwartz, 2012), and fiction/non-fiction selections from the *Magic Tree House* series. Additionally, community organizations supply a meal /snack for families to enjoy, provide information at a community resources table, and identify volunteers to assist with check-in and family photo opportunities.

Guided by the leadership of the teacher candidates, families participate together in the literacy activities including an interactive read aloud. This capacity to interact, communicate and share becomes the essence of family literacy learning. Each participating child receives a personal copy of the featured book (s) for them to keep and enjoy as well as any materials used during the learning activities. This take-home aspect is a critical component of the family literacy event; research clearly evidences book ownership is a lasting and positive impact on children's achievement (Selmawit & Washington, 2013).

Conclusion

In addition to fostering the importance of children's literacy learning and engaging teacher candidates' civic responsibility, family literacy events also evidence supporting the local schools, partner universities, and nearby community agencies. Through family literacy events, the local schools interact and build relationships with their children's families, university programs network and support local schools, and community agencies become visible and accessible to families. In other words, family literacy events become a win-win-win-win-win for all participants – the families, local schools, community agencies, and teacher candidates, but above all, the children benefit.

Importantly, as teacher candidates move forward in their chosen profession, they begin to acquire the knowledge, skill, and personal experience to effectively become a partner in grant funding and as well understand how to be supportive in the literacy event implementation and subsequent evaluation. In all regards, teacher candidates become more effective practitioners as they follow through and extend this collaborative role as they become classroom teachers. Providing teacher candidates with a range of opportunities to collaborate in grant-writing as well as to participate in family literacy events, allow first-hand experience regarding the personal and integral connection between classroom learning and family learning.

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