BREAKING DOWN THE BARRIERS:
PARENTS AS COMMUNITY
TUTORS IN LITERACY

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Teachers, educators and researchers have long pointed to the
almost miraculous way in which children master the complexities
of spoken language before the age of five years. Parents play a
dominant role in this development, intuitively prompting and
prodding their children towards meaning making. From birth
parents treat their babies as communicators, and respond to them
in the light of this desire to make meaning (Wells, 1986).

The child focuses on meaning and the care giver responds to
the meanings he or she makes. In the context of this purposeful
exchange, meanings develop. In this way, language develops as
the child actively participates in communicative acts, and
engages in a constructive process of meaning making (Lindfors,
1985).

The parent's role in this is as a listener, prompter,
information giver, asker of questions, and fellow meaning maker
interested in the communication process (Cairney, 1989; 1990a;
1990b). It seems that the keys to early language development are
the volume of opportunities to make meaning (Wells, 1983), the
degree of one-to-one interaction with adults with a focus on
matters that are of interest and concern to the child (Wells, 1986), and finally, the type and nature of adult interaction with children (Snow, 1983).

But ironically, our interest in the role parents play in literacy development, has been stimulated by the observation of a surprising anomaly. The same parents who fulfil the above rich and complex role with spoken language development, can fulfil more limited roles with literacy learning once school age is reached. The same parents who responded to their preschool children as meaning makers, can suddenly begin to focus on spelling, punctuation, decoding and syllabification.

Literacy's roots in culture
The anomaly that we have just described reflects a cultural view of school literacy that requires parents to fulfil the role of corrector, driller, and interrogator of text. But not only are parental roles culturally based, the way literacy is viewed reflects culture practices. In fact, it has been argued by some that the extent to which children cope with schooling is related closely to a range of cultural factors (Heath, 1983). It would appear that the place literacy enjoys in specific cultures helps to prepare children, to greater and lesser extents, to succeed or fail in the school system.

The reality is that schools staffed by middle class teachers reflect middle class culturally defined views of what literacy is and how it is best developed. It should not surprise us that specific cultural groups experience difficulties coping with literacy in such a context. As Bourdieu (1977) has pointed out, schools inconsistently tap the social and cultural resources of society, privileging specific groups by emphasising particular linguistic styles, curricula and authority patterns.

One way in which these basic cultural influences can be minimised is by involving parents more closely in school education. The purpose in breaking down the barriers between home and school is not to coerce, or even persuade, parents to take on the literacy definitions held by teachers. Rather, it is to enable both teachers and parents to understand the way each defines, values and uses literacy as part of cultural practices. In this way schooling can be adjusted to meet the needs of families. Parents in turn can also be given the opportunity to observe and understand the definitions of literacy schools support, and which ultimately empower individuals to take their place in society.

Parent participation
Attempts to bring schools and communities closer together have taken many forms, and at times have been anything but helpful. Bruner (1980, in Briggs & Potter, 1990) has pointed out that parent involvement in schooling is often a "dustbin term" which
can mean all things to all people. Parent involvement programs are often ineffective and frustrating to both parents and teachers.

One of the reasons for the failure of some programs is that many teachers have negative attitudes about parents and parent involvement. These teachers sometimes claim that parents are apathetic, and come to school only to criticise (Briggs & Potter, 1990).

Others have suggested that the failure of some programs to attract parental interest may be due to parents not feeling competent to deal with school work. As well, it has been argued that this phenomenon may reflect the fact that these parents feel insecure in the school setting, and fearful about participation in the learning of their children (Moles, 1982; Greenberg, 1989).

Halsey and Midwinter (1972, in Briggs & Potter, 1990) have argued that the best way to overcome some of these problems and to empower working class students, is to change the nature of education to equip students with the knowledge and skills necessary to gain power over their own community. This they argued requires the transformation of primary schools into focal points for their communities, thus bringing teachers and parents closer together, and leading subsequently to changed attitudes on the part of both parties.

Unfortunately, some schools have adopted a very narrow definition of parent involvement, which primarily seeks to determine what parents can do for teachers, rather than what schools can do for families. This view is often evidenced by parents filling a variety of unpaid teacher aide or custodial roles (Cairney & Munsie, In Press).

Parents must be viewed as equal partners. There must be a reciprocal relationship. We need to go beyond involvement and recognise the vital role that parents play in education. As Kruger & Mahon (1990, p. 4) point out, "parental involvement in literacy learning has much greater value than as an add-on to what teachers do".

If parents are to be viewed as partners in children's learning then teachers need to re-examine their assumptions about parents and attempt to implement initiatives which bring schools and communities 'closer' together.

Why has the TTALL program been developed?

The Talk to a Literacy Learner (TTALL) program was developed in response to a NSW State Government initiative as part of the International Literacy Year in 1990. As the title suggests it was designed to focus on parent interactions with their children. It was also designed to focus on the adult, rather than the
child. Most parent programs are initiated because of the needs of specific children with literacy problems, and invariably revolve around these children's needs. In fact, the majority of programs involve the development of individual child programs and support of parents as they implement a range of strategies (e.g. Kemp, 1989; Pearce, 1990).

In contrast to many other parent initiatives TTALL was not planned simply in response to school identified student literacy problems. Rather, it was designed and implemented to enable parents to reflect on the roles they assume when talking to their children about reading and writing.

Conduct of the TTALL project

Setting and Funding

The principal site for this project was the community of Lethbridge Park. This community is located in the sprawling western suburbs of Sydney. It is an area that faces many common problems associated with urban living, including isolation, lack of family support, low educational participation, high unemployment, drug problems, vandalism, crime and high rates of marriage breakdown. Our project was based in the local primary school and the adjacent preschool.

Purpose of the Study

The major purpose of the project was to design and implement a specific educational program which sought to:

* Raise parental participation in the literacy activities of their children;
* Change the nature of the interactions adults have with children as they read and write;
* Train community resource people who could be deployed in a wide range of community literacy activities;
* Raise community expectations concerning literacy and education;
* Serve as a catalyst for a variety of community-based literacy initiatives.

Design of the Project

The project was designed to be completed in three distinct stages over a period of eighteen months. The three stages were as follows:

Stage 1 - Involves identifying and working with parents to enable them to:

interact more effectively with their own children (aged 1-12 years) as they engaged in literacy;
use a range of strategies to promote literacy development;
makes greater use of literacy resources within the community.

The initial program requires attendance at 16 two hour workshops, and between class work with their children, spread over a period of eight weeks.

All parents completing the program receive a Certificate of Completion.
Stage 2 - Involves additional workshops for parents in stage 1 who are interested in acting as school or community tutors. This course provides more advanced knowledge of literacy. These parents usually are deployed in the school to work with a variety of children.

Stage 3 - Involves training of selected the parents from stage 2 to act as community tutors. These 14 parents are trained to use a specially prepared package of six one hour sessions, designed to introduce other parents and their children to some of the TTALL strategies, and to share insights gained as part of their experiences in the previous stages of the programmes.

The training programs at all stages within this program were conducted by a full-time program co-ordinator (Lynne Munsie) and selected university, school, preschool and community resource people.

The content in stage 1 covered basic child development, issues concerning the nature of reading and writing, strategies for assisting children with reading and writing (e.g. directed reading and thinking, conducting writing conferences etc), the use of the library for research, and the development of self esteem (see Cairney & Munsie, 1992a, for complete program details).

The program was presented using a mixture of short lectures, workshops, demonstrations, and apprentice teaching sessions. A critical part of the training was the use of demonstrations of all strategies. This workshops were characterised by a cycle of activities (see Figure 1) which was recursive in nature.

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Figure 1 about here
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The content of the stage 2 program consisted of 12 workshops presented in a similar way to those in stage 1. These sessions provided workshops which included further work on the reading and writing processes; additional strategies for responding to children's reading and writing; questioning skills; and conducting conferences with children.

The third stage of this project will be outlined in more detail later in this paper following a brief description of the findings of the stage 1 evaluation.

evaluation of the STAGE 1 TTALL PROGRAM

Subjects
A total of 25 parents took part in the first TTALL program. These 25 parents and their 34 children served as the participants in the stage 1 evaluation. A further 75 students were selected randomly from all classes within Lethbridge Park Elementary School to serve as control subjects.
The experimental group was established after all parents at Lethbridge Park Primary and Lethbridge Park Preschool were invited to consider involvement in the project in a series of written notices. This was accompanied by extensive media publicity following press releases sent to national and local media. After several weeks of advertising, a public meeting was organised at the primary school. At this meeting the purpose of the program was explained and a simple information sheet distributed requesting an indication of interest. From an initial meeting of 50 at Lethbridge Park, 25 accepted our invitation to be involved in the 8 week program. One parent subsequently dropped out of the program because she obtained a new job which prevented her attendance.

The time slot selected by parents for the program was 9.00 to 11.00am on Mondays and Wednesdays. A total of 24 women and 1 man were in the first program. These parents had virtually all left high school early and had no tertiary education. Many had not proceeded beyond junior high school.

Evaluation Instruments and Procedures
The evaluation of the project was based on a variety of qualitative and quantitative measures:
* Pre and post-test information for all experimental and control students consisted of the ACER Primary Survey comprehension tests, ACER Primary Survey vocabulary, ACER spelling, and a test of reading attitudes (devised for this project).
* Interviews with all parents before and after the program, including small group structured interviews, large group unstructured interviews, and individual interviews.
* Post program survey of all parents involved.
* Videotaping of parents at various stages throughout the project.
* Field note data (recorded by program co-ordinator and Assistant Principal).
* Reflective journal material kept by co-ordinator.
* Group interviews with students and school staff.

Results
While phase 1 results have been described elsewhere (e.g. Cairney & Munsie, 1991; Cairney & Munsie, 1992b & 1992c) the major findings will be outlined. The TTALL program had a strong influence on parent/child relationships, parent and child attitudes to literacy and schooling, and student literacy performance. This impact has been evidenced in nine major ways:
* The program had an impact upon the way parents interact with their children
Analyses of parent interviews, video data, and the post-program
survey, suggest that the program has led to changes in the way parents talk to and with their children. By the end of the program parents were:

- offering more positive feedback;
- providing a different focus when listening to children reading (e.g. less emphasis on phonics);
- asking qualitatively better questions;
- providing qualitatively better responses to their children's writing and reading.

* The program offered parents strategies they did not have before.

The data have also suggested that the program has provided parents with new strategies for talking to their children about reading and writing. Post-program surveys, and interview data show that parents now use a variety of new strategies.

* The program helped parents to choose resource material, help children with book selection, and use libraries more effectively.

Analysis of video evidence, survey and interview data and teacher comments indicate that parents in the TTALL program are now more aware of the diversity of resources available in the school and community. They are more capable of finding appropriate resources within the community library, and can now use a range of research skills that previously were not available to them.

* Parents gained new knowledge.

Post-program evaluation and interview data confirm that parents have gained new knowledge concerning reading, writing, learning and schooling.

* The parents' families were affected.

One of the most interesting outcomes of the TTALL program has been the indication from interview data that there has been an impact on families generally. This has been most evident in the way they spend their time. The effects included family use of time, parent roles (both men and women) with homework, and parent involvement in school activities.

* The parents began to share their insights outside the family.

Interview data have also revealed that the project has had an impact on extended family members (e.g. sisters, brothers and their children etc), neighbours, and friends from other schools. This has shown itself most commonly in conversations about school and literacy and direct help and advice concerning a range of school related learning tasks.

* Parents gained a greater understanding of schools.
One of the unexpected benefits of the program has been an increased understanding of the ways schools operate. This was evident most clearly in responses to the post-program evaluation and from teacher reports from the school and preschool.

* Parents have grown in confidence and self esteem
Participants in the TTALL program have grown in confidence and self esteem. Responses to the post-program evaluation indicated that almost all parents felt more confident working with their own children, or when working as a parent in the school, and that many were considering further education.

* Impact upon children's literacy performance levels, attitudes and interest
A variety of qualitative data from interviews, classroom observation and video analysis have confirmed that the children of TTALL parents are:

  more positive about themselves as learners;
  more confident readers and writers;
  reading more regularly;
  reading more difficult work;
  selecting a wider range of reading material;
  finding school work less difficult.

Analyses of a variety of standardised test measures also confirmed significant performance gains for students of TTALL parents, relative to those whose parents did not complete the program. These gains were for attitude to literacy, vocabulary, and comprehension (some upper primary grades).

DESCRIPTION OF THE COMMUNITY TUTOR PROGRAM
Purpose
The Community Tutor program was designed as a vehicle to enable parents who had completed Stage 1 of TTALL to share their insights and experiences gained as part of this program with other parents. As such it has the following specific goals:

* To raise parental awareness of the importance of their roles as supporters of their children's literacy development.
* To introduce parents to a number of effective strategies for responding to their children's reading and writing.
* To increase parental knowledge of the way children learn to read and write.
* To increase parents' ability to help their children select appropriate reading material for enjoyment and learning.
* To provide a range of literacy strategies for parents to assist their children with research work.
* To act as a vehicle for encouraging parents to participate in
the Stage 1 TTALL program.

Participants
The first intake into the Community Tutor program consists of 15 parents (14 women and 1 man) who have completed stages 1 and 2 in the past three years. Participants were selected after invitations were issued to all parents who had completed the previous stages of the TTALL program. A personal letter was written to all and an introductory meeting was organised to explain the purpose of the Community Tutor program. Twenty five people attended this meeting and from this group 15 agreed to participate in Stage 3.

Content of the Community Tutor Program
The delivery of the Community Tutor program is dependent on a series of resource sheets (see example in Figure 2) which are designed to act as the focus for a one hour discussion between two parents (and in some sessions a child).

Each of these resource sheets is a also a summary of key principles and strategies for a specific literacy topic. The program consists of 8 such topics designed to cover a range of important issues for parents of children aged from 0 to 12 years (see Figure 3). Community tutors ask parents with whom they work to select at least 6 topics to be discussed. The choice of topics varies depending on the age of the parent's children and their specific interests.

Parents who wish to become tutors in the Community Tutor program are required to attend 4 two hour workshops. Each of these workshops provides an overview of two topics available within the Community Tutor package. Each workshop involves a guided discussion of the resource sheets, selected reference back to the TTALL materials, an outline of basic procedures, and an indication of the tutor's role. The basic format of each session includes:
* Introduction - Questions and concerns from the previous session are discussed.
* Literature study - The leader shares a specific piece of literature then allows time for participants to share anything that they have been reading.
* Introduction to two modules - The first module is distributed and the leader talks in
general terms about the content. The leader and participants read through the module discussing key points as they proceed. The hometask to be completed after the session is discussed. At the conclusion of the session tutors review the content with a partner. This process is repeated for the second module.

Within the first session of the Community Tutors' program the role of the Tutor is outlined. It is explained to tutor's that their role is to:
* share insights gained working with their own child in Stage 1;
* introduce and distribute the resource sheets designed to assist parents to work with their children;
* encourage parents to reflect on the way they currently support their children as literacy learners;
* raise parent awareness of the importance of literacy for achievement in school.

Conduct of the Community Tutor Program

While the Community Tutor program is yet to be fully implemented the procedures that are being followed involve the following steps:

Step 1 - A letter is sent to all parents associated with the school (see Figure 4). As well, information is included in school and childcare centre newsletters; and if the timing is appropriate Kindergarten orientation days are used for a personal promotion of the program.

Step 2 - Parent Tutors will be asked at the end of the Community Tutor training program to identify another parent with whom they might meet.

Step 3 - Parents approach specific parents either identified themselves or who have requested involvement. They provide a brief overview of the purpose of the program and outline the parent's commitment as part of the
program.
That is to:
meet with the tutor on at least 6 occasions over a 6 week period for
a minimum of one hour each time;
be prepared to work with their child between visits from the
tutor;
involve their child in the sessions when required.
Step 4 - The Community Tutor negotiates a regular time to visit
and begins the
program.
Step 5 - A parent co-ordinator is nominated to act as a resource
person for parent
tutors and to provide information for new parents who show
interest in
the program.
Conclusion
While we are still implementing the Community Tutor program, the
outcomes are encouraging. Parents have once again shown a
commitment to the program, and a willingness to consider a more
complex role as community resource people. However, what remains
to be seen is if parents can fill the more complex role required.
At this early stage of our work there has been some reticence on
their part. For example, one parent (Caroline) commented in an
early workshop:
I really couldn't talk to anyone about the program. I'd be
frightened to say the wrong thing.
   And yet this reticence appears to reflect lack of
confidence, rather than lack of ability. Caroline, for example,
later in the same session in which she made the above remarks,
offered the following comment:
I was telling my friend about the TTALL program. She hasn't got
anything like this at her school. Well, I explained what I was
doing, I gave her my parent books and we talked about it.
   In her second comment Caroline shows that she is not only
capable of working as a tutor, she has already begun to share her
experiences and insights with other parents. The challenge is to
help all fifteen parents to do this effectively.
   It appears that the TTALL program has been highly
successful. The stage 1 program has:
* Increased parental participation in the literacy activities
  of their children;
* Led to a change in the nature of the interactions adults
  have with children as they read and write;
* Raised parental expectations concerning literacy and
  education;
* Had a positive effect upon student attitudes to literacy and
  learning;
* Led to increased levels of literacy competence for the
  children of TTALL parents.
Currently 15 schools in NSW are implementing stage 1, this will permit further long term evaluation to occur. Each of these schools is a potential site for the stage 3 Community Tutor program. Additional funding has also been obtained to develop a new program for parents of secondary school children. This program is particularly exciting because it has been initiated by parents in one of Lethbridge Park Primary's neighbouring high schools.

The aim of the TTALL program is to introduce parents to a much broader range of literacy practices. The great strength of the Community Tutor program is that it offers an effective way for parents to talk to parents about specific literacy practices which have helped to empower their children to cope more effectively with the demands of schooling. Marguerite when commenting on how the program has affected her family provides an insight into how this is occurring:

We try to make it a set time each night to sit down and turn the TV off and try and go over the story...we try and talk about the book as I've learnt through the course, talk about the book before we start and what's on the cover and the illustrator and all that sort of thing, and then we try and start reading...

Marguerite's comment shows how one family is engaging in different literacy practices as a result of the TTALL program. The challenge is to develop the Community Tutor program as an effective vehicle that provides an opportunity for parents to share these experiences with other parents.

Bibliography
Cairney, T.H. & Munsie, L (1992b). Talk to a Literacy Learner


Figure 1: The Educational Cycle Used in the TTALL Program

Figure 2: Sample resource sheet for Research Writing topic within the Community Tutor Program
Figure 3: Overview of all topics (and resource sheets) available in the Community Tutor Program

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Modules Available</th>
<th>Pre-School</th>
<th>Kindergarten</th>
<th>Year 2 to Year 4</th>
<th>Year 6</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>to Kinder-</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 4 to</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supporting the Reader and Writer</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reading to your child</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Listening to your child read</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Books to Share</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paired Reading</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writing with your child</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Writing</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning through Play</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 4: Letter sent to all parents associated with Lethbridge Park School to invite them to participate in the Community Tutor program

Community Tutor Program Invitation

Dear Parents,
I would like to invite you to join our new Community Tutor Program. It is a terrific way to help your child with reading and writing activities at home. There is no money involved and you don't have to leave home. All you have to do is invite a 'Community Tutor' from Lethbridge Park Primary School to visit your home.

The Community Tutor Program will support regular classroom activities in reading and writing and show you how you can talk with and help your children. The program has been developed around eight important areas of literacy learning. These include:

- Supporting the reader and writer.
- Reading together.
- Reading at home.
- Books to share.
- Paired Reading.
• Writing together.
• Research Writing.

The Community Tutors are parents from Lethbridge Park who have been involved in the Talk To A Literacy Learner Program.

If you would like to know more about the program, join us on __________________ at ____________.

This meeting will answer many of your questions and concerns and help you to decide how you can best help your children grow in their reading and writing. If this day is inconvenient ring the school and speak to Anthea McLellan, the Deputy Principal.

Looking forward to meeting you.

Co-ordinator,
Parent Partnership Programme

Community Tutor Program

Parent Survey
Name:

Address:

_____________________________   Post Code

_____________________________

Phone: __________________________
Age of children.   ______   ______   ______   ______   ______

Name of school/s your child/ren attend(s)  ____________________

The Community Tutor Program can help you to understand how to talk with and help your child/ren with reading and writing. The program is run by parents who have completed the Talk To A Literacy Learner Program.

I would like to invite a Community Tutor to my home to discuss some of the following topics. Please tick the areas you would like to know more about:

Supporting the Reader and Writer. Encouraging children at home.
Reading together. Reading to children.
Reading at home. Listening to children read.
Books to Share. Books children enjoy reading from 0 to 12 years.
Paired Reading. Helping children with reading.
Writing Together. Talking to children about writing.
Research Writing. Researching information for projects.
Learning through Play. The importance of children learning through play.

Best time to contact me is:
Mornings       Afternoons     Evenings

Parent Signature