

**Chicago Foundation for Education  
Teachers Network Policy Institute  
Executive Summary  
Margie Rogasner, Boone School**

**Question:**

**What are effective methods to explain the American writing process to immigrant families?**

There is a great deal of information in the literature demonstrating the significant benefits in academic achievement for children whose families are involved in their education. My anecdotal information as well as much of the literature on immigrant families with relation to that involvement here in the US, suggest that most families will follow through on suggestions made from teachers to increase their children's achievement. Both of these sources of information suggest, however, that the families do not seem to be familiar enough with either our academic expectations for children nor with what roles families should, and are, expected to play in order to encourage that academic achievement. Parent workshops and parent reviews of their student's journals were methods used in this research to help families understand this daunting process.

**Tools:**

- Parent workshops,
- Student journals with questionnaires
- My observations and reflections about the workshops and the responses from the journal reviews
- Short questionnaire given to participants of the workshops
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**Process:**

Flyers were sent home several times, announcing the workshops and the reasons for them. They were offered twice each time, always with the availability of childcare. I offered the workshops immediately after school as well as in the early evenings, in order to insure the possibility of as many participants as possible.

In the workshops, the mothers acted as if they were in school and responded or participated in the writing process as their children do. For example, before they were asked to write, I read a book, and modeled different strategies which I explained the mothers could do at home. Each parent writing experience was prefaced by an explanation of the steps the children use for pre-writing, writing and revising and editing. A strong emphasis was placed on the lesser importance of writing each word correctly and neatly and the larger importance of writing ideas and understanding concepts

I analyzed the 3 15 minute video portions of each workshop. I also analyzed the questionnaires sent home with the journals. These questions were revised each time, based on the quality of the parent responses.

**Data Analysis and Findings:**

From the comments of the parents, it seems clear that the mothers had had different educational experiences. For example, one comment from the last workshop: "Teaching of vocabulary is more direct here".

Related to one of my objectives for the workshops, that of demonstrating some things they could do at home to enhance literacy, one parent responded: "I will help him to learn by "playing" with him as practice, so as not to be so boring". Regarding the videos, the quantity of time that I spoke decreased each time. From the journal reviews, an example of the responses to the question of what the families would do to continue the progress, in their homes, was: "write with children at home". For the second review, the parents were asked for their "thoughts" about their children's progress rather than the more negatively sounding: "What will you do next"? This elicited insights such as from one family who had not previously accepted that their son had deficits, that he did seem to have serious problems, noting that he had not made any progress since the month before.

The high numbers of families who responded on each of the waves of the journal analyses is an indication of the importance my families place on helping their children and about how they want to encourage their children's academic success.

### **Teacher Reflections:**

I believe the workshops were useful in ways that were both anticipated and not anticipated. I expected, and it was borne out, that the participants would learn about the different expectations we have here, and that they would learn of some strategies which they could incorporate in their homes as well. I anticipated, and it was borne out, that a lively discussion would ensue as it related to the writing process. What was not anticipated, was the degree to which we became a community. Mothers met each other and became friends, driving another mother home, checking on a problem situation of another mother, asking me for help. And, this camaraderie with these mothers has lasted even after the workshops, as they have become the ones (to whom) I call if something needs to be done outside of the classroom. The mothers now seem to have some better idea for not only how to encourage their children's progress but also what is considered important to us in the US. This will be important as their children go through the grades.

I was surprised at how effective the review of the journals was. By the second time, the parents knew more of what to look for and so could be more discriminating in their comments. An important byproduct of the journals, I see this as a valuable method of informing parents of their child's academic experiences, as long as it is in conjunction with review questions which infer what is considered important for parents to review.

### **Recommendations:**

- Immigrant families respond much more favorably to individual interactions. Therefore, phoning each participant or sending a personal note home, before each session, should encourage participation.
- Offering workshops at a variety of times allows for more participation; however, child care must be available. There were many more moms at the afternoon sessions than at the nighttime ones. The rationale for doing this applies to many low income mothers who do not work outside the home or who do not drive.
- Workshops should be interactive, not didactic: parents, just like students, learn best when they can experience for themselves what and how their children are learning. Parents are very busy, some have limited literacy skills, some do not see the notes sent home from school, while others may not understand the meaning of the notes: therefore, sending written suggestions to parents may have only minimal benefits.
- When offering parent workshops, to guide further sessions, an "exit" slip should be used each time.
- Teachers should send their children's journals home, monthly, starting earlier in the school year. As with students, with repetition, adults become more observant, more focused and learn the process better. This would also enable parents to better see how their children are progressing over time. Parent conferences would have fewer surprises and would be more focused on what parents can do in the home.
- The journal review questions should be short and specific. Questions should refer to those specific content areas that parents should evaluate. Broader, more open-ended questions can be asked only after parents understand what it is they are to be reviewing.

### **Next Steps:**

The parent workshops are now expanding to all the Spanish bilingual families at the school. All the recommendations related to the workshops will be incorporated. I will be systematic in collecting the exit slips and will try to include the comments/suggestions in the successive sessions.

The other classroom teachers will be encouraged to try the same kinds of workshops, and will be encouraged to offer them as interactive ones, NOT as workshops about learning to write. I will also strongly encourage the other teachers to send the children's journals home with questions to which parents respond.