



PANDEMIC MIGHT SHIFT EDUCATION POWER TO FAMILIES

BY KELLY MATTHEWS

Parents and guardians are a child's first teachers, and never has this been more true — or more visible — than during the pandemic. For an entire school year, families were involved in the daily routines of their children's education on a larger scale than during any era in our lifetimes. As we emerge from the extremely unusual school year behind us, we may find that the shared responsibility for children's schooling has shifted to a more equal balance of power.

Many parents gained more respect for teachers as they struggled with the challenge of keeping their children occupied while fostering and assessing their learning. And, conversely, many teachers have learned much more about their students' families than they ever thought possible, as teaching through Zoom took them into living rooms, bedrooms, and kitchens, where siblings, parents, and guardians were in closer range than they could ever have been during a standard school day.

Wise teachers have long sought ways to partner with parents and families in their shared project of guiding

young people's developing curiosity toward literacy, numeracy, and knowledge of how the world works. Two decades ago, researchers at Boston University introduced the concept of a "family literacy portfolio" to collect, document, and analyze children's emerging work with letters and words as their families coached them through reading and writing during after-school hours and weekends.

Researcher Jeanne Paratore and her colleagues worked with parents who were newly arrived in the United States as they participated in an intergenerational literacy program, where parents and their preschoolers learned English in separate sessions, several mornings or evenings per week. The family portfolios that Paratore helped develop were collections of children's writings — drawings, stories, letters — outside of school time, and outside of formal instruction.

Parents were asked to bring their family literacy portfolios to formal conferences with teachers — which most schools are required to host on a regular basis, at least once per year.

Paratore and her team found that bringing a portfolio from home altered the dynamic in these conversations: parents felt empowered to show teachers how much their children were reading, writing, and learning in the home environment, and teachers gained new perspective on children's development as well as new ideas to try out in the classroom. Most importantly, teachers gained newfound respect for parents, as together they examined and discussed children's reading and writing for real-world purposes.

The shared experience of the pandemic offers opportunities to rethink our approach to the respective roles of families and teachers. We might find that blurring the boundaries and shifting the balance of power will help our children emerge from this challenging era more knowledgeable and more confident in their own learning. They will certainly have more to teach us as they grow through the coming years.



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