7 Scribliolink: Inviting Parents to Respond to Their Children's Writing

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Teachers traditionally give grades to tell parents about their children's academic progress. But in truth, little useful information is exchanged about the children's knowledge or performance capabilities. Assigning letter or numerical grades involves translating the context of the classroom into a solitary letter or number that, in the case of the developmental writing process, essentially fails to capture critical aspects of such a complex task. In this paper I will describe Scribliolink, a strategy that bring parents into the school to share in the writing process by freely responding to their children's written work. Parents become partners with schools in supporting children's growth academically and emotionally.

The idea of Scribliolink—to enhance the exchange of meaningful information between home and school—developed from my experiences as a tutor. When I shared students' written work with parents, the parents often gleaned more meaning from it than I could because they knew the related social situations. For instance, when I worked with a second grader who was having a great deal of difficulty learning to read, she wrote that only her "real" dad read. Her mother responded, "Joanna wrote that nobody in the family reads except her real dad because she's angry about having a new step dad." The mother's explanations added insight about family relationships, suggesting that Joanna's anger over her parents' divorce could be a factor in her "inability" to read. Because she could retell stories so well, I had suspected some intervening factor was influencing her poor reading performance. Without her mother's response, I would not have known

that I needed to help Joanna change her self-concept from that of a helpless, dependent little girl, to someone who could read for herself. By reading stories such as *The Very Little Girl* by Phyllis Krasilovsky, which is about changes and growing up, and by allowing her to write her response, Joanna changed her self-concept. As she developed pride in being an independent reader and writer, she made substantial gains.

Situations such as Joanna's, in which a parent's remarks were critical for instructional decision making, occurred repeatedly. Each time, the collaboration gave insights that, although different, were nonetheless similar in that they guided problem solving which led to the student's academic growth. The process provided an effective link among students, parents, and teachers. Because of the pattern of these observations, I coined the term "Scribliolink."

As a teacher and educator, I worked with several schools, using Scribliolink's general procedures: (1) participants (parents and students) are informed about the process, and parents are invited to come to school at a later date for a conference; (2) teachers facilitate students' writing, using the developmental writing process in response to literature; and (3) parents, students, and teachers confer to support students.

In one private school, I worked with a population of sixth graders. Most of the students were bilingual, coming from Cuban and Nicaraguan backgrounds. The teacher had been in my undergraduate and graduate classes and welcomed me to come to her classroom to do the project.

We sent letters home requesting permission for students to participate and invited the parents to school. We explained the strategy to students, telling them that their parents were going to read and respond to their writing in a conference. The parents showed they were eager to participate. Many arranged to meet with us, even if it meant taking time off from work or finding a babysitter.

The developmental writing process was based on a personal response to literature. I read aloud *The Art Lesson* by Tomie dePaola, an autobiographical story about a strong character who knows he wants to be an artist from the time he is in elementary school. Students then responded by writing their own stories about their interests and goals. The stories were either futuristic biographies, stories about themselves from some future point in time, or about their career goals. I told the students to think about their interests and the related occupations they might pursue. The main point was that one's interests and experiences

from early in life contribute to the occupation that person chooses as she or he grows and matures. What one did in the past, or does now, may have an influence on what that person later becomes. Most students pretended they were already working and expressed their experiences or interests that helped them select particular careers. An example from a child who wanted to be an entertainer focused on a local celebrity from a similar cultural background:

> This story is about a girl who wanted to become a singer ever since she was little. When she was little her inspiration was a very talented singer named Gloria Estefan.... Gloria Estefan is her idol because she is talented and was blessed with a very special gift and she is wise enough to use it.

A few had difficulty with the futuristic time frame and wrote from the present about their thoughts or concerns about particular careers. A typical career goal was to become an astronaut. This example shows the thinking of a student attempting to understand his own motivation in setting his future goal:

> When I grow up I would like to be an astronaut or an aerospace engineer. I would probably like to be an engineer because my parents are architects, and I like to draw with their rulers. As for being an astronaut I do not know why I would like to be that, it cannot be that I was watching a shuttle lift off because the first one I watched exploded.

The interview questions were open-ended, asking parents for their opinions, perspectives, concerns, feelings, and sources of support. The teacher recorded the parents' responses and discussed ideas or concerns that parents wished to comment on from the writing. She recorded responses both by hand and with a tape recorder, with the parents' permission. Writing responses by hand intentionally slowed the pace of recording and responding, allowing waiting time for parents to think through their thoughts (see Figure 1).

In typical conferences, the teacher gave suggestions for guiding parents. The parent of the Gloria Estefan fan said her daughter always liked to entertain and noted with pride the cultural tie. We decided it would be beneficial to supply books about other Hispanic leaders from a variety of careers. The parent of the student who wrote about the exploding space shuttle Challenger realized how images on television can affect children. I suggested that she try to get her sensitive son to talk with family members about his feelings after viewing television or movies.

Scribliolink

Interview the parent or guardian using the following questions:

1. What is your first reaction to the writing?
2. What do you see as the most important theme or idea?
3. Is this consistent with what you know about this child?
4. How would you rate the intensity of feeling in the writing from 1 to 5, with 1 being mild, to 5 being intense?
5. Can you read meaning into this to get any special message?
6. Are there any feelings expressed that give you concern?
7. (If yes) what suggestions do you have regarding this concern?
8. Where could you seek guidance?
9. Do you feel you talk openly with your child?
10. Do you feel there are others in the family with whom your child talks openly?
11. What action could you take at this point?
12. What other thoughts do you have?

Figure 1. Scribliolink parent questionnaire.

Generally, students wrote about situations from their own lives that had left impressions on them, such as the boy's haunting memory of the Challenger explosion. One student wrote about seeing an accident in which paramedics removed a pregnant lady from a car with the "jaws of life" wrecking equipment. Since witnessing the accident, the boy had decided to become a doctor.

Parents understood their own child's words with a unique perspective because they brought prior knowledge of their child, or the situations, to the text. The parent of the student mentioned above said how worried the child had been after witnessing the accident and how she had to call the hospital to see how the woman was. Her son had stopped being so concerned when he heard that the woman was fine and that she had delivered a healthy baby at the hospital. The parent also said she was not surprised that her child wanted to become a doctor: "I'm happy to know that he has the principal ideas of accomplishing these goals, getting good grades and scholarships to get into a science college."

Another child had written that he wanted to be president of the United States. His parent spoke emotionally of how, as a child, her family had been waiting a very long time in Cuba for permission to emigrate to the United States. She revealed that as an adult, she had an American flag hanging in her bedroom for her to see when she opened her eyes, in case she had a nightmare about her childhood. In their

home, they often talked passionately about how grateful they were to be in the United States. Evidently, the child had a very strong sense of patriotism for his family's adopted country and wanted to become the highest elected official. In each interview, the parents' insights gave direction for making decisions about appropriate materials, methods, or the need for other support. This young man was eager to read American history and biographies of presidents, while the others engaged intently in reading about their current idols and heroes. Through writing and conducting the conferences, each student had examined his or her own values, goals, and self-concepts.

The school had a very traditional report card in which teachers gave letter grades. Instead of giving only a letter grade for writing, teachers assessed students on a rubric in three areas: meaning, structure, and language (see Table 1). They shared criteria with the students before the assessment and parent conferences. During the Scribliolink conference, the student and teacher explained each area to the parent. This gave the parent much more information about the child's performance. And yet, the 4 through 1 scale translated directly to A through D grades for report cards. Through the Scribliolink experience, students could verbalize what they needed to work on, an important metacognitive step in improving writing.

Table 1. Holistic Rubric for Student Writing

Score	Meaning (focus, support)	Structure (organization, flow)	Language (correct sentences, word choice)
4	The writing has one important idea or focus, with facts (details) to support it.	The ideas are clearly organized, with the ideas flowing.	The language is vivid, with correct sentences.
3	The writing has an important idea or focus, but gives few details to support it.	The writing is unclear in some parts, affecting the flow.	There are appropriate word choices and mostly correct sentences.
2	The writing has some ideas, but no clear focus and lacks details.	The writing is confused. The flow is not smooth.	Word choices are limited. There are many incorrect sentences.
1	The writing lacks a clear focus.	Ideas are unrelated and do not flow.	Word choices are inappropriate. There are errors in sentence structure.

Scribliolink was also introduced at an inner-city school in which all the students were either Hispanic or African American and qualified for free lunch. A group of ten students in one class participated. Three out of the ten parents came in for conferences. The teacher said this was one obstacle to the Scribliolink process which she overcame by letting the rest of the children take their papers home, along with the list of questions. All seven of the other parents wrote answers to the notes, responding to their children's writing. One mother's written responses were that "he believes in himself," that his writing "comes from his heart," and that his mother wants "him to be whatever he wants to be." The support was there for the student, and the parent still communicated with the school, though she could not come in for a conference. The teacher contacted each parent as a follow-up. She realized that the parents were "extremely interested in what their children wrote. The parents gained knowledge about their children on many aspects. The children also gained a sense of additional support from their parents." Even with this modification, Scribliolink provided a means for positive interaction and communication.

In another inner-city school that serves as a magnet school drawing from all socioeconomic backgrounds, one teacher used the response form for an open-house parent-teacher meeting. Parents read their child's work and responded to the attached questionnaires. Then they all participated in a group discussion of the grading rubrics. The teacher responded to the parents individually, maximizing the effect of their participation.

After working with a private school with a minority population, a public inner-city school with a minority population, and an inner-city magnet school, I realized that this alternative grading procedure changes and extends the teacher's role in the classroom. I believe that professionals need to experience processes themselves if they are going to be change agents. To this end, and to study Scribliolink further, I worked with graduate teachers at a predominately minority university who agreed to try the Scribliolink process themselves before working with their students. Using the process from the students' perspective helped teachers appreciate how difficult it may be for one to share his or her own writing with those who are close to us. The teachers listened to *Aunt Flossie's Hats (and Crab Cakes Later)* by Elizabeth Fitzgerald Howard and wrote stories about people who had influenced them to become literacy professionals. The teachers then had conferences with their own parents, their spouses, or a close friend. Their experiences with response to their own writing showed

them the potential for this strategy. One student shared her deepened appreciation for her mother, who had been "an immigrant to a new country, getting adjusted to a new homeland, trying to make a living," and still finding time to read to her. She felt the process of Scribliolink allowed her to tell her mother "thank you" for all that she had done for her. Another teacher said that when her mother read what she had written, it sparked emotions she had never expected. Several of the teachers found that their spouses, siblings, or friends responded to what had been written as an effort to begin a dialogue on a topic. One teacher and her husband decided to take a more active role in getting their children interested in reading and writing. One of the teachers reflected, "Although there were no obvious expressed concerns or problems, the process allowed us to share and discuss things never mentioned before." This method, adding a step to the writing process, has much potential for opening avenues for writers and responders.

After seeing how Scribliolink worked in a variety of classroom settings with regular students and regular classroom teachers, I realized that some teachers might have reservations about using Scribliolink. For instance, some might fear that they would get into an area they weren't qualified to handle. Teachers might be working with children with complex, varying exceptionalities. To explore Scribliolink with this population, I worked with the school's family counselors. The variation one counselor used was to have each child write his or her story and make a book. The parents came to hear the children read their books at an "authors' tea." The children wrote books with titles such as "The Time I Felt Confused":

> I ran away from home because I got hit in the back by my mother for hurting people. I got hurt by my mother's boyfriend. He was a drinker. He beat my brother for the stupidest things. My brother didn't put his clothes away so he got beat and grounded.

Because the counselor also works with the students' families, she found that the parents were so impressed with the children's openness to their problems that the parents began to talk more openly about their situations. Several other school-affiliated family counselors who work with severely emotionally handicapped children found this technique a wonderful way for parents to interact positively with their children and their schools.

With regular education students, teachers' training in child development and in decision making is adequate. They may need to engage in problem solving to the point where the parent sees a course

of action or to refer the parent to resources to further explore problems. Directing parents to places or people where the parent might seek guidance is well within the scope of a professional educator. If stories contain information about more serious situations, the writing should be shared with resource people in the school system.

Some teachers might say that the only parents who will come are those who already are caring and involved. Not coming to school does not mean that the parent doesn't care. The teacher may use some of the methods described above to modify the procedure, such as sending home the questionnaires. I found that some of the parents who had not responded to phone calls or invitations to come to school for other reasons did come in to discuss Scribliolink. When I first met one parent, I thought she had a problem speaking because of her lack of proficiency in English. However, when I offered her a translator, she said that that was not the problem. She had had a stroke and had not had the courage to speak with anyone except her immediate family or her doctors until that day. She said that since the teacher and I had been interested enough in her child to ask that she respond to her child's writing, she knew we would be patient enough to talk with her despite her handicap. Until Scribliolink was used, the school did not know about her stroke and did not know why she had not answered their phone calls or notes. Parents found out that coming to read their child's writing and having the individual attention of the teacher was not threatening. Indeed, it was very positive and showed a welcoming, accepting attitude.

Other teachers might feel that they have a special population for whom Scribliolink will not work. Perhaps their students are too young to write. However, Scribliolink still works with pictures and sentence dictation. Perhaps some teachers feel that their students' problems are too severe or complex for them to gain from this process. Sharing what students write is, at least, a beginning upon which to build. For many teachers, the problem of a different home language might interfere. Why not ask parents or teachers at the school who are proficient at translating if they will volunteer their services? We found this to be another positive aspect. This project is a way of connecting with those parents and helping them feel welcome.

Some teachers may feel that the time to do another project is just not available. The conference takes only about fifteen minutes and could be done once or twice a year. A form with the interview questions serves as the documentation from the parent session. Underlin-

ing or highlighting key words is all that a teacher needs to do to be able to refresh his or her memory about specifics from the conference.

Whatever reservations teachers have against adopting Scribliolink seem surmountable when considering the benefits to all those involved. The interactions Scribliolink provides give much more information to aid parents and teachers in making decisions about directing learning experiences in support of students' literacy development. Parents see and respond to their child's actual work (instead of getting just a meaningless grade), are introduced to the writing process, and enjoy being recognized by the school as a valued resource for their child. Students gain from the attention and support they receive from this combined audience, empowering them with a sense of ownership and an awareness of their writing voice. This alternative to grading is well worth the effort.

Scribliolink not only serves to communicate students' progress as an alternative to grading, the conference also serves to link the social context to directly enhance literacy growth.

As with ethnographic research, Scribliotherapy evolved from one-on-one tutoring observations. These observations suggested that a conferencing procedure which includes an open-ended survey be added to the writing process as an alternative to simply putting a letter grade or a happy face on children's work. The benefits of the process expand upon a theoretical perspective proposed by Grover Mathewson.

In "Model of Attitude Influence on Reading and Learning to Read," Grover Mathewson explains attitude as a major influence on one's intention to read. He calls the factors that influence attitude "cornerstone concepts": values, goals, and self-concepts. These are built over years, beginning in infancy during interaction with caregivers. The cornerstone concepts create attitudes which give rise to intentions to *read.*

Because reading is one aspect of literacy development and writing is the reciprocal process of reading, I theorize that these cornerstone concepts also impact students' intention to *write* and have therefore chosen to call the last box "literacy" in his graphic, rather than only reading (see Figure 2). I have also added a line for Scribliolink, running from the literacy box back to the cornerstone concepts, because it is a way to open dialogue on those concepts. After listening to parents responding to their children's thoughts and writing, teachers can facilitate meaningful exchanges. Involving parents in respond-

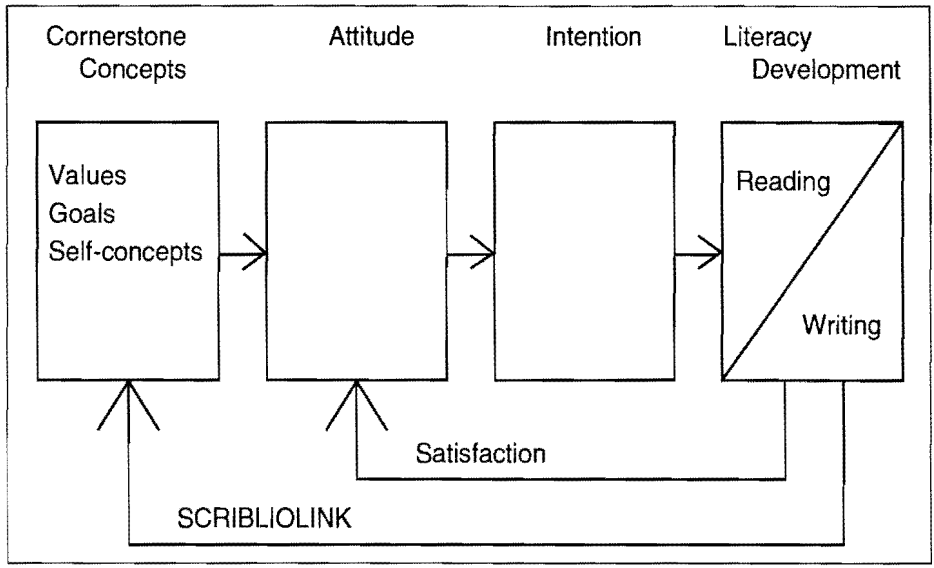

Figure 2. Model of attitude influence on literacy development showing the role of Scribliolink.

ing to their children's writing provides a critical link that influences students' literacy development.

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