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**FAMILY LITERACY NIGHTS:  
BUILDING THE CIRCLE OF SUPPORTERS  
WITHIN AND BEYOND SCHOOL  
FOR MIDDLE SCHOOL ENGLISH  
LANGUAGE LEARNERS**

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**CENTER FOR RESEARCH ON EDUCATION,  
DIVERSITY & EXCELLENCE**

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The Center is designed to move issues of risk, diversity, and excellence to the forefront of discussions concerning educational research, policy, and practice. Central to its mission, CREDE's research and development focus on critical issues in the education of linguistic and cultural minority students and students placed at risk by factors of race, poverty, and geographic location. CREDE's research program is based on a sociocultural framework that is sensitive to diverse cultures and languages, but powerful enough to identify the great commonalities that unite people.

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## **Abstract**

This report stems from a 3-year study of two groups of learners in a Title I middle school in Northern California: Low-performing Asian American English language learners (ELLs) placed in a sixth-grade sheltered instruction class and a diverse group of ELLs with mild disabilities placed in sixth- through eighth-grade special education resource programs. The report discusses the development and implementation of "Family Literacy Nights" that were designed to teach family members and other supporters what and how their children were learning in school. These family literacy events were devised with the aim of strengthening the school-family relationship and transferring classroom knowledge to the home environment by building the circle of supporters within and beyond school. As a result, teachers and parents worked collaboratively to support learning among these students and to serve as their advocates. The report is presented in four sections. The first discusses difficulties in forming school-family partnerships. The second highlights two theoretical frameworks that guided the study. The third presents the set of principles used to plan and implement the Family Literacy Nights, and the last highlights findings and implications of the study for field practitioners.

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## Introduction

Achievement in school is key to advanced academic and career opportunities for most students. In Title I middle schools, where the enrollment of low-performing, Asian American English language learners (ELLs) is high, teachers are beginning to realize that many of these students are not on an academic par with their English-speaking peers. This late realization is due in part to the stereotype that Asian American students are college-bound and perform well in school. In fact, according to the U.S. Department of Education's 1998 National Education Longitudinal Study (Peng, 1995), Asian American students perform at two extremes: Some perform above and beyond other minority groups, whereas others are among the lowest performers of all student groups. The academic success of this latter group is often left to chance, depending on whether their teachers are willing to assist them or to advocate for them. Without school administrators and teachers reaching a shared understanding of the need to provide unflagging support, these learners may have difficulty meeting the requirements of state or district content standards and statewide testing mandates. This in turn limits their possibilities for future success.

In Title I middle schools, Asian American ELLs' literacy and language needs are often not addressed effectively. Although many of these students demonstrate oral fluency in English, they tend to lack the academic language skills needed for achievement in school. Placed in a sink-or-swim situation in mainstream classrooms, these Asian American ELLs have little academic language support, and the intervention programs that are provided are largely ineffective. Chang (2001a) suggests that to achieve in school, it is particularly important for ELLs to receive enriched classroom intervention that supports the development of their academic English language proficiency.

Compounding the disadvantages discussed above is the fact that many of these ELLs come from households where the parents are not familiar with U.S.-based school practices. While some studies indicate that many Asian American parents help their children with their homework or provide supplemental academic work and literacy and language support across multiple learning sites (e.g., Chang, Lai, & Shimizu, 1995; Chang, Fung, & Shimizu, 1996; Siu & Feldman, 1996), they do not examine whether parents use literacy intervention strategies that are consistent with those used in their children's schools. For example, traditional methods of teaching and learning in most Asian cultures are based on rote learning, which is not effective for developing many of the skills needed for successful participation in U.S. classrooms. In addition, not only are these parents unaware of how to help their children complete the specific tasks or develop the knowledge expected of them in school, they do not know how to advocate for their children in school. This is not a reflection of their dedication to their children or their children's education, rather a result of cultural differences and a lack of awareness of U.S. school norms.

One of the most serious consequences for these learners upon entering middle school is to be referred for special education assessment and subsequently placed in a more restrictive environment (Chang, 2001a), such as an English-only special day class (SDC). This is often the case, not because these students possess legitimate disabilities, but because they exhibit below grade level reading performance. Once placed in

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an SDC, these students are among a garden variety of students with moderate to severe behavioral and developmental disabilities, separated from their normal-achieving peers. In such environments, students are not only competing for teacher attention and adequate educational services; they are missing out on academic English language development. As a result, such special education programs become a placement and not a service for Asian American ELLs.

When Asian American ELLs are poor, have limited proficiency in English, and are identified with a learning or language disorder in school, they typically experience missed learning opportunities during the rest of their schooling (Chang, 1995). In short, they miss class time or are not given appropriate instruction while in class. These lost opportunities present further obstacles to future success.

To avoid leaving Asian American ELLs behind, schools must work to build multilevel collaboration among administrators, teachers, parents, family members, and community informants, such as interpreters and instructional assistants (Chang, 2003). Multi-level collaboration involves tapping individuals who can serve as strong student advocates both at school (e.g., administrators or teachers), and beyond (e.g., parents, other family members, or community informants). The major intent of building the circle of supporters within and beyond school is to generate the cycle of success that can be established only through administrators' and teachers' shared commitment to high expectations for all students. This requires providing enriched classroom interventions and initiating family literacy training programs that will build and sustain school-family partnerships. Without proactive intervention, the academic future for these students is bleak.

The phrase building the circle of supporters within and beyond school is used in this report to suggest that schools do not always operate as cohesive units or employ systematic approaches for serving low-performing English language learners (Chang, 2003).

This report stems from a 3-year study of two groups of learners in a Title I middle school in Northern California: Low-performing Asian American ELLs placed in a sixth-grade sheltered instruction class, and a diverse group of ELLs with mild disabilities placed in sixth- through eighth-grade special education resource programs (Chang, 2002). The report discusses the development and implementation of "Family Literacy Nights" that were designed to teach family members and other supporters what and how their children were learning in school, with the goal of transferring classroom knowledge to the home environment by building the circle of supporters within and beyond school.

## **Background**

The project aimed to build the circle of supporters for low-achieving Asian American ELLs in the sheltered instruction program by providing professional development to teachers and conducting Family Literacy Nights. It sought to build a collaborative relationship between teachers and parents that would support learning among these students and provide them with advocates from both the school and home environments.

In the first year of the study, teachers in the sheltered program at the participating middle school invited the researcher to observe the program and consider ways of improving students' performance. The first part of the project focused on providing professional development to teachers in the sheltered instruction program. During this time, collaborative action research was used to explore ways to build the circle of

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supporters. A research team was formed that was composed of the researcher, an English language development teacher, two special education resource specialists, and one general education teacher from the middle school. Two of these teachers were also the mentor teachers for the school district. It was through the ongoing, school-based professional development meetings and training sessions that the research team established the goal of transferring classroom knowledge to the home environment as a means of empowering the low-performing students by generating assistance from their circle of supporters. As a result, Family Literacy Nights were conducted in the second year of the study to provide a forum for families to work with teachers to learn instructional strategies that were consistent with those used in the classroom, such as specific strategies for developing the children's' literacy skills. These 2-hour Family Literacy Nights were held twice per group between 6:00 p.m. and 8:00 p.m. at the participating school on a weeknight and conducted by participating teachers from the school.

Teachers from the sheltered program identified two cohorts of 60 incoming sixth-grade students who were among the lowest performers in the school. The main research project was conducted in the classroom and designed for the cohort that had the lowest scores. To recruit participants for the Family Literacy Nights, teachers personally called each of the students' families and invited them to attend. Participants associated with the sixth-grade sheltered classroom were first generation immigrants, and they were very enthusiastic about the opportunity to join in the sessions.

Teachers from the middle school worked in two groups, and each group worked in two Family Literacy Nights held 3 weeks apart. The first group included three content area teachers who taught different subjects to the same cohort of sixth-grade ELLs in the sheltered program at the school. The second group consisted of two special education resource teachers who worked with a culturally diverse group of ELLs with mild learning disabilities, and two general education teachers who taught some of these students in their inclusive classrooms. The primary objectives of the project were to (a) build a circle of supporters to assist participating teachers and students in reaching common goals, (b) reinforce students' learning of academic language by using a set of literacy and reading comprehension strategies for constructing meaning from textbooks (for reading both in and beyond the classroom), (c) broaden participants' home teaching repertoire beyond rote learning, (d) integrate CREDE's Five Standards for Effective Pedagogy (Dalton, 1998; Tharp, Estrada, Dalton, & Yamauchi, 2000), and (e) use the theory of multiple intelligences as a tool for shaping strategies for teaching and learning (Gardner, 1999a).

This report is presented in four sections. The first discusses difficulties in forming school-family partnerships. The second highlights two theoretical frameworks that guided our work. The third presents a set of principles used to plan and implement the Family Literacy Nights, and the last section highlights findings and implications of the study for field practitioners.

## **Problems in Forming School-Family Partnerships**

The issues raised here are critical to learners from low to middle socioeconomic status (SES) backgrounds who are enrolled in schools facing extreme shortages of qualified teachers and responsive administrative leadership. A government report has documented that 68 percent of fourth graders in high poverty schools are unable to read at the basic level. In addition, among the 15 million students who graduated from high school in the last 15 years, not all were able to read at the basic level (Bush, 2001). Furthermore, the U. S. Census Bureau has suggested that tough times

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are ahead for the nation's schools, given the high enrollment of students coming from low-income families (*The Los Angeles Times*, March 23, 2001). The anticipated high enrollment of learners from low-income families and diverse groups of English language learners, coupled with the scarcity of school-family partnerships, unintentionally places some schools, teachers, and students at risk of failure.

In our study, teachers often found it difficult to form partnerships with the parents of their Asian American ELLs. Epstein (2001) identified an existing gap that may hinder or even prevent teachers and administrators from working effectively with the parents of any of their students. In teacher and administrator credentialing programs, teachers learn to teach and administrators learn how to manage and run schools, but many are "unprepared to work positively and productively with their students' families" (p. 5). This is particularly acute when teachers are unfamiliar with the different cultures of their Asian American students. At the same time, while teachers and administrators are unfamiliar with Asian cultures, new Asian immigrant families are not familiar with American school culture or teaching practices.

An advantage held by white or middle class students is that learning in the home is often compatible with and supportive of school learning. This was not the case for the Asian American ELLs in our study. Due in part to this culture gap, the middle school in our study had no systematic approach for establishing meaningful teacher-parent partnerships or for providing family literacy training sessions that would inform parents or other family members about school practices.

## **Rationale and Theoretical Frameworks**

To build the circle of supporters for students and to develop productive and meaningful teacher-facilitated Family Literacy Nights, we drew up guidelines based on two major theoretical frameworks, both of which value social and cultural influences on individuals' learning and development. The first is the sociocultural/sociohistorical framework influenced by Vygotsky's (1978, 1981) theory of learning and cognitive development. The second is Howard Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences (Gardner, 1983, 1999a, 1999b). Both perspectives argue against the widespread use of IQ tests as measures of learning potential and human intelligence, and both offer concepts, foundations, and strategies for effectively transforming teaching in today's classrooms and building the circle of supporters within and beyond school.

### **A sociocultural/sociohistorical framework**

The sociocultural/sociohistorical framework is rooted in Vygotsky's (1978, 1981) ideas on what influences individual learning, language, and cognitive development, as well as on meaningful education. He proposed that we do not need to wait for children's developmental readiness before we begin instruction, because children will develop through interaction with adults in sociocultural settings. He suggests that a child's higher mental functioning, such as thinking, reasoning, and problem solving, occurs first at a social level in interactions with more capable individuals.

Vygotsky proposed the concept of a zone of proximal development (ZPD), which asserts that as an adult guides a child through problem solving, the child internalizes the steps modeled by the adult when the level of learning is slightly above the child's level of readiness. Only through interactions with a more capable individual is the child able to master and apply such steps to solve similar problems. ZPD reflects a zone between what the child can do independently and what the child can do with assistance from a more experienced individual (Moll, 1992; Vygotsky, 1978). Hence, a "scaffolding" process is provided by an adult and is sustained through social interaction or assisted performance.

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Tharp and Gallimore (1988) contend that to establish a ZPD, “there must be a joint activity that creates a context for teacher and student interaction (p. 71).” They offered two reasons for the absence of assisted performance in many classrooms. Class size makes it difficult for teachers to interact with students in joint activities within the time they have together, and the curriculum may not lend itself to assisting students’ performance. The current trend of measuring teacher and school performance based solely on standardized test scores may leave teachers less time to consider the ideas of teaching within students’ ZPD.

Drawing from Vygotsky’s perspective, we adopted two tools to inform our effort in planning, training, and interacting with participants in the Family Literacy Nights. The first was CREDE’s Five Standards for Effective Pedagogy (Dalton, 1998; Tharp, et al., 2000), which offers ways to scaffold instruction within an individuals’ ZPD. The second was Rogoff’s (1995) planes of analysis, which examines the contextual factors that impact the learning environment.

### **CREDE’s Five Standards for Effective Pedagogy**

These standards were developed and advanced through a systematic review of research and field testing on effective instruction for diverse learners (Tharp, 1999a, 1999b). Moreover, they are critical to students who must rely on effective and culturally responsive teachers to succeed in school. The standards include the following:

- 1) Joint productive activity (JPA), which refers to teacher and student collaboration on a common product to achieve a specific instructional goal;
- 2) language and literacy development (LLD), relating to developing instructional language across the curriculum, with a focus on enhancing academic language proficiency;
- 3) making meaning through contextualization (CTX), involving teachers’ efforts to connect classroom teaching and learning activities with students’ prior knowledge and experiences within as well as outside of school;
- 4) cognitively challenging activity (CA), which highlights teachers’ commitment to foster students’ use of higher order thinking skills through engaging in complex tasks that apply past and new content knowledge in achieving specific instructional goals; and
- 5) instructional conversation (IC), which guides teachers in systematically organizing small-group and goal-directed classroom instruction that weaves students’ prior knowledge or experiences with new content knowledge, assisted with relevant examples or contexts (Hilberg, Chang, & Epaloose, 2004).

### **Planes of Analysis**

The second tool was advanced by Rogoff (1995), who proposed three interconnected planes of analysis: Community, interpersonal, and personal. She suggests that while a phenomenon observed in any plane can be closely examined by foregrounding that particular plane, the phenomenon cannot be fully understood without reference to other planes. For example, the success or failure of teacher-facilitated Family Literacy Nights is often influenced by diverse factors within the home, the school, and the community.

**The community plane.** This plane considers the overall school context, which is subject to local, state, and national influences, and how it affects ELLs. For example, funding and administrative priorities, unfulfilled needs for school-family partnerships, and school accountability measures all impact the academic environment for ELLs. These are institutional factors rooted in wider sociocultural and economic realities.

**The interpersonal plane.** This plane centers on collaboration and interaction. For example, in our study, collaborations existed among teachers across disciplines and

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between general and special education programs, teachers and researchers, teachers and students, teachers and administrators, teachers and parents, and among teachers within the sixth-grade sheltered instruction program. The community and personal planes influence activities observed in this plane.

**The personal plane.** This plane involves the individual teacher's willingness, belief, and commitment to (1) participate, contribute, change, and explore effective strategies for various groups of participating students; (2) build the circle of supporters for students at two levels within and beyond school; and (3) engage in planning and implementing the Family Literacy Nights.

## A Multiple Intelligences Framework

The second theoretical framework we drew on is Howard Gardner's (1983, 1999a, 1999b) theory of multiple intelligences (MI). He refined his definition of intelligence as "a biopsychological potential to process information that can be activated in a cultural setting to solve problems or create products that are of value in a culture" (Gardner, 1999b, pp. 33-34). Gardner proposes that each individual possesses at least eight intelligences. These intelligences include the following: (1) linguistic, (2) logical-mathematical, (3) musical, (4) spatial, (5) bodily-kinesthetic, (6) interpersonal, (7) intrapersonal, and (8) naturalist. He believes that intelligence tests only measure linguistic and mathematical intelligences. From an educational point of view, MI theory fosters the belief that every child can learn, and there are many ways to teach for understanding. Teachers are encouraged to draw on multiple strategies to support the different needs of their particular students. In classrooms where teachers face learners from different language and cultural backgrounds, Gardner's perspective offers teachers a healthy reminder to value and empathize with diverse learners who are struggling in the classroom.

## Findings of schools using MI theory

We were interested in how an MI approach could inform our project. We were encouraged by research conducted by Kornhaber and colleagues (Kornhaber, 1999; Kornhaber, Fierros, & Veenema, 2004) that systematically examined how MI theory can work to reform school practices. Kornhaber reported that MI "provides educators with a useful tool to organize and develop their own practice." (Kornhaber, 1999, p. 184). Teachers are required to draw on multiple strategies to support the different needs of their particular groups of students.

In a study of 41 effective schools using MI theory, six central practices were identified (Kornhaber, 1999; Kornhaber, Fierros, & Veenema, 2004). Each practice, referred to as a compass point, enabled teachers to value and fully apply students' multiple abilities to advance their learning. The six compass points included the following:

<b>Culture</b>	Teachers believed that all students could learn, and they provided support for diverse learners.
<b>Readiness</b>	Administrative leaders helped build an awareness for implementing MI and for facilitating the transformation to an MI approach.
<b>Collaboration</b>	Informal and formal teacher interactions were carried out through joint productive activities.
<b>Tool</b>	MI was used as a means to foster high quality work and to achieve instructional goals and objectives.
<b>Choice</b>	Meaningful curriculum and assessment options were developed that allowed students to make choices on how they could acquire and demonstrate their knowledge.
<b>Arts</b>	Arts were adopted as both an end and a means for mastering the academic content areas.

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Among the 41 participating schools, Kornhaber's (1999) findings showed that the MI-inspired practices led to a number of improvements, including improvements in standardized test scores, student discipline, parent participation, and performance among students with learning disabilities.

These research findings confirmed our beliefs and inspired us to further explore how MI could be systematically introduced to participants in our Family Literacy Nights. Our focus was not just on raising students' achievement test scores but also on assisting their learning both in and beyond the classroom.

Our goal was not to formulate instruction based on the eight different intelligences but to guide Family Literacy Night participants away from a "within-child deficit" orientation to a multiple abilities orientation (Chang, 1999). That is, to move away from an approach that views the child's difficulty in school as the result of a deficit within the child to one that considers how compatible instruction and individual learning style relate to the child's learning.

## **MI approaches to teaching for understanding**

Gardner suggested that there are at least three ways that MI can be applied in teaching for understanding. These include diverse entry points, metaphors and analogies, and multiple representations in teaching and learning the main concepts in the school curriculum.

### **Diverse entry points**

Gardner (1991, 1999a) believes that in teaching new concepts, a skilled teacher can open a number of different windows or doors to attract students' attention. Using the metaphor of a room to represent the academic topic, he suggests that there are multiple doors or entry points into this room. He proposed that any concepts worth teaching in school can be approached in at least several different ways that will map onto the MI (Gardner, 1991, 1999a). These diverse entry points offer educators a meaningful framework for closely examining and designing school curricula and instruction. When adopted properly, the entry points provide critical and fair access for diverse learners to learn from the core curriculum.

### **Metaphors and analogies**

Once teachers are able to pique students' interest and attention, they can use analogies and metaphors to bring students into full contact with the core ideas of topics. Analogies are examples drawn from another realm of experiences, such as students' cultural background or prior knowledge, in which the students are more familiar. Metaphors (and similes) illuminate the less familiar topic in terms of the more familiar (Gardner, 1999, p. 199).

### **Multiple representations**

While metaphors and analogies help learners connect or make comparisons to a given concept, the core ideas of a new concept require teachers to use multiple representations to assist students' deeper understanding of that concept. Gardner acknowledges that there is no single best representation for any core idea or set of ideas. He suggests that teachers look for a family of representations that can convey the core ideas in numerous ways that are accurate and complementary, for example, using the symbol system as well as natural and pictorial languages when teaching the topic of evolution (Gardner, 1999a).

The following section highlights principles that were devised for planning and implementing the Family Literacy Nights.

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## Principles to Guide in the Planning and Implementation of Family Literacy Nights

Drawing on the theoretical perspectives of Vygotsky and Gardner, and based on knowledge generated through CREDE's five standards and Rogoff's planes of analysis, we devised a set of principles that guided us in planning and implementing the four Family Literacy Nights.

### **Provide ongoing professional development activities with the goal of transferring classroom knowledge to home practices.**

The overarching goal during the planning stage was to forge the teacher-parent partnership for literacy training. This involved negotiation and planning among teachers and the researcher. They co-taught and worked in sixth-grade language arts and history classrooms over a period of 5 months. They engaged in joint productive activities, integrating their effective practices with CREDE's Five Standards and MI. They field-tested a set of adult-child, integrated language and reading intervention strategies. The first set of strategies was modified from Palincsar and Brown's (1984) model, which engages students in predicting, clarifying, questioning, and summarizing activities before, during, and after reading. The second set of strategies included student-centered multiple paths to teaching and learning vocabulary and content knowledge in history, language arts, math, and science. Such paths included role plays, drama, interviews, art, and book projects. These multiple paths to teaching and learning were co-constructed by the research team on the basis of MI as tools for diverse entry points, metaphors, and multiple representations.

These activities helped the researchers and participating teachers reach a shared understanding of what would work for the groups of learners and parents. Through classroom participant observation and scheduled professional development activities, the researchers and teachers gradually aligned their expectations for the project outcome, ultimately deciding on Family Literacy Nights as the vehicle for nurturing the home-school relationship and hence transferring school knowledge to the home environment.

It was also through ongoing professional development that teachers learned how to scaffold learners within their ZPD in various activity settings. Because scaffolding within a student's ZPD is not an easy task, hands-on activities were used to discuss what it was like to scaffold a learner within her ZPD. Teachers learned when and how to remove the scaffold to allow the learners to develop independence in learning certain concepts and skills.

Other professional development activities included small-group formal presentations by outside experts, hands-on modeling, teach-share, role-play, co-producing training materials, and individual classroom consultations. For example, in one session, a teacher who had successfully implemented the theory of MI in his classroom for many years made a presentation on using MI as tools to enhance understanding. During others, researchers from CREDE conducted an after school workshop on CREDE's Five Standards for teachers and administrators and modeled a teacher-led instructional conversation within the sixth-grade sheltered classroom.

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**Apply activity settings that highlight joint productive activities as the basis to plan and implement Family Literacy Nights.**

Activity settings are naturally observable in many familiar contexts beyond school or the classroom; for example, we can easily observe a parent collaborating with a child to search for a lost item. In this setting, the parent serves as the expert and the child a novice. Activity settings in well-organized Family Literacy Nights can be observed when either teacher or other participant assistance is made available to each family team in small group-based activity centers that have specific goals, settings, and participants (Hilberg, Chang, & Epaloose, 2004).

To create a ZPD for participants or family team members during Family Literacy Nights, we designed joint productive activities that provided activity settings for teacher-parent, parent-child, teacher-parent-child, and family-family interactions. During the first Family Literacy Night, parents participated in joint reading activities with their children. Within each activity setting, they followed the process of modeling-explaining-interacting-feeding back (Tishman, Perkins, & Jay, 1994) to practice the four reciprocal teaching strategies—predicting, clarifying, summarizing, and generating questions—to enhance reading comprehension (Palincsar & Brown, 1994).

In another activity setting, teachers created a questioning tree (see Appendix A) to help parents engage their children in dialogues. The focus was on generating questions that are text explicit (or on the surface of a tree, reflecting the main branches) and text implicit (or under the surface of a tree, reflecting the roots) to promote reading comprehension. We also designed various activity settings for participants to assist their children in co-constructing meaning from their textbooks. (The debriefing session held among teachers, researchers, and other informants after the first Family Literacy Night is another example of an activity setting. See Appendix B for an excerpt of the first debriefing session.)

**Contextualize all training activities and pedagogical strategies.**

To create the proper learning context for participants, school-based family literacy training activities should ideally be connected with participants' home or community experiences. Because none of the parents in the study had received formal schooling in the United States, the hands-on and experiential activities we implemented were designed to provide them with an opportunity to learn about U.S. school culture, the sheltered program, and particular teaching strategies. During the first Family Literacy Night, the participants were divided into three groups. Each group of participants and their children visited each content area classroom, just as the children do on a daily basis. To give parents an idea of what their children do in school, each content area teacher essentially simulated a typical day in their classroom, modeling some of the instructional strategies they use during class time. Through parent-child interactions, parents learned strategies for co-constructing meaning from textbooks the same way their children had learned those strategies through interactions with their teachers.

Efforts to transfer classroom knowledge for home practices through experiential and interpersonal points of entry helped educate participants about U.S. schooling. For example, not all family team members were aware of the importance of prior knowledge and experience in the reading comprehension process. To help them better understand, a teacher worked with them in small groups to brainstorm ways to implement joint productive activities at home that would build their child's general information about their world, experiences, and funds of knowledge. The ideas that surfaced centered around gathering information by shopping at the supermarket,

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department stores, or on the Internet; looking for bargains with coupons; reading newspapers and magazines; and making ethnic crafts or food.

Using MI as a tool for developing home practices was another area that needed to be systematically contextualized for participants in order to show them that rote learning alone would not greatly enhance their children's language and literacy development. Many participants openly shared their own experiences about schooling that emphasized memorization. CREDE Standard 4: Challenging Activities, runs counter to rote learning and demands adult modeling and scaffolding within the child's ZPD in order to develop higher order thinking skills.

Through joint productive activities, family teams brainstormed with other participants and teachers about what kinds of activities could enhance higher order thinking. Some of the home-based activities that were discussed included comparing and contrasting ethnic and American food, entertainment, and sports; analyzing cause-effect from watching ethnic or American TV or video programs; listing steps to solve daily problems; and applying past knowledge to new situations.

### **Adopt the theory of MI as a tool to assist learner performance in school.**

The researchers identified and reinforced specifically how MI theory was used in the project. We felt strongly that we had to guide participants in reflecting on how they could use MI as a tool for assisting learner performance in school. Throughout the night, we reinforced the ideas of using the tools of MI to open more doors for learning and teaching for understanding.

We used two sets of MI screening devices as a point of entry, one screening device for the students to self-assess and one device for the parents to assess their child. These devices were intended to let participants independently identify the strengths and areas of weakness of the child, so that the two profiles could be compared. After comparing the two profiles, some parents were surprised by the gap between their assessment of their child and their child's own assessment. As a result, the parents were motivated to observe their children through activities in many different contexts in order to verify their child's profile. Many parents were interested in reviewing which pathways seemed most compatible for supporting their child's learning.

As a point of entry to our second Family Literacy Night for each of the two groups, we showed several slides, each of which was embedded with two or more images. The group actively brainstormed what they were seeing, and we recorded three different types of modeling used by individual participants to assist others' understanding of the images. Some participants used words, others used body gestures, and a few came forward to cover parts of the image in order to highlight a specific feature. This entry point generated a great deal of interest in the main idea that we have different ways of approaching tasks, and by combining our diverse strengths through joint productive activities we can better tackle the challenges that are before us.

We also reflected on which methods of explaining were most beneficial to participants and how the tools of MI could serve as a foundation for exploring different methods for assisting their children beyond rote learning. Through modeling, explaining, interacting, and feeding back, the groups generated lists of "what-to-do" at home for supervising school work. Suggestions included creating a word map with illustrations to support vocabulary development; using examples to clarify academic concepts; using

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flowcharts to illustrate how to complete classroom projects; and dialing-up a homework hotline to clarify assignments. Many parents maintained that they would have done much better in school if they had been assisted in this manner while doing schoolwork.

**Foster powerful habits of mind to scaffold within an individual's ZPD.**

Habits of mind, or thinking disposition, is a set of intelligent behaviors (Costa & Kallick, 2000; Tishman, et al., 1994; Marzano, 1992) that complements CREDE's Standard 4 (cognitively challenging activity). This principle is a reminder to engage students in complex tasks that develop and employ habits of mind, which include applying past knowledge to new situations, finding humor, or gathering data through all senses. Our research team was constantly addressing the use of habits of mind while participating in joint productive activities. Because almost everything we attempted to do focused on assisting individuals within their ZPD, we had to continually learn and think flexibly, listen with understanding and empathy, and remain open for continuous learning in order to design appropriate and meaningful activity settings for teacher-student or parent-child interactions.

Through the Family Literacy Nights, participants acquired meaningful information and strategies not only for assisting their children's language and literacy development, but also for developing self-regulated behaviors with productive habits of mind. Often, because of the emphasis on statewide testing, the knowledge and strategies that are critical for developing students' habits of mind to solve problems and address uncertainty are not automatically covered or reinforced in the classroom.

Transforming classroom pedagogy for home practices requires monitoring old habits, facing challenging conditions, solving problems, and exhibiting intelligent behaviors that yield positive outcomes. It is parents' awareness and use of powerful habits of mind that will ultimately enable them to act on such information. The same will be true for teachers and school administrators to forge meaningful partnerships with parents.

**Build the circle of supporters to apply six strategies that will assist individual performance within the ZPD.**

We explored ideas about building the circle of supporters within and beyond school as a means of further highlighting joint productive activities that are supportive and interdependent. We discussed the need for a shared understanding in the teacher-parent partnership to "advocate" for our learners. Generally, it is parents who are a child's best advocates. In the context of the circle of supporters, however, we reinforced the role of teachers as advocates as well, emphasizing the importance of their becoming better informed about how to apply specific strategies to scaffold learners' performance within their ZPD. We systematically explored and identified six strategies by integrating CREDE's Five Standards for Effective Pedagogy and Gardner's ideas on using MI as tools to assist individuals within their ZPD. We linked three interrelated contexts: professional development, the classroom, and the home environment. The six strategies presented in Figure 1 provide guidance to the circle of supporters for transferring classroom knowledge to the home environment through personal experiences and a commitment to act upon new knowledge gained through joint productive activities. We also expanded these strategies to provide parents with guidelines for helping their children at home. (See Appendix C for Strategies for Home Use.)

**Figure 1:**

**Six Strategies for Scaffolding Learner Performance in Different Contexts**

	<b>Professional Development</b>	<b>Classroom</b>	<b>Home</b>
<b>Strategy 1 (CREDE's JPA): Build the circle of supporters by engaging participants in joint activities that are aligned with learning goals.</b>	All participants form the circle of supporters to co-plan, inspire, implement, and evaluate the family literacy events and to produce products (i.e., a parents' handbook) that will help participants achieve the shared goals of the project.	Teachers and students jointly participate in setting classroom rules, modeling and practicing the set of literacy strategies, and establishing the circle of supporters within and beyond the classroom for each student in order to sustain motivation and provide opportunities to learn and practice.	Adults and learners participate jointly in learning and practicing the use of literacy strategies, producing products to monitor reading for meaning (i.e., a learning log or questioning tree), and reinforcing the circle of supporters for home literacy practices.
<b>Strategy 2 (CREDE's LLD): Teach, model, and cultivate appropriate academic and social language development across content areas and relevant contexts.</b>	All participating teachers and researchers acquire, use, and clarify professional language (i.e., jargon) and abstract concepts via proper metaphors and examples to foster a shared understanding and mastery of professional language.	Teachers model the use of instructional language whenever teaching subject matter, generate text implicit and explicit questions to enhance reading for meaning, and compare and contrast oral and written language and academic and social language.	Adults use language that is meaningful to learners to help them continue expanding knowledge about their world, clarify concepts or language using culturally relevant examples, and develop both oral and social language in the school and home language.
<b>Strategy 3 (CREDE's CTX): Connect school learning with learners' lives.</b>	All participants are actively engaged in sharing their prior experiences and knowledge about learning topics and expectations; all topics and teaching strategies are grounded in classroom practices that incorporate opportunities to connect learning with real life applications.	Teachers create a context that will activate students' prior knowledge or generate necessary experiences through diverse entry points; teachers and students work together to reinforce the notion that anything worth teaching and learning will have real life applications.	Adults use daily or family experiences, examples, or stories to help learners connect school learning with personal or collective experiences, such as funds of knowledge, as well as systematically build general information about the child's world.

	Professional Development	Classroom	Home
<b>Strategy 4 (CREDE's CA): Integrate activities that foster higher order thinking skills and powerful habits of mind.</b>	All participants actively explore and engage in reflective practices that tap the higher order thinking skills informed by Bloom's taxonomy (Bloom, Engelhart, Furst, Hill, & Krathwohl, 1956), scientific thinking processes, and habits of mind. They are assisted with an enculturation approach of modeling-explaining-interacting-feeding back to engage in classroom-based action research to promote habits of mind.	Through small group-based activity centers, teachers model higher order thinking skills and habits of mind and guide learners to compare, contrast, synthesize, and self-evaluate classroom learning and performance against a set of jointly constructed rubrics; teachers connect parts with overall content standards on a regular basis.	Adults model for learners ways to generate open-ended or text implicit questions to enhance reading for meaning; help them develop meaningful strategic behaviors, such as predicting, clarifying, and summarizing to replace rote learning; and assist them in developing powerful habits of mind.
<b>Strategy 5 (CREDE's IC): Engage learners in small group-based instructional conversations (IC) to deliver differentiated instruction.</b>	All participants engage in small group-based conversations that are informed by project goals and objectives; through IC, participants clarify what is and what is not an IC, as well as brainstorm ideas about stages and steps each might take to implement IC in the classroom as a means of delivering differentiated instruction.	Teachers engage students in small-group teacher-led ICs at least once a week in which they weave learners' old knowledge with new knowledge, according to the specific learning goals of the group; model and guide learners' use of academic language and literacy strategies and develop their relevant habits of mind and higher order thinking skills.	Adults engage learners in friendly and supportive conversations that center on weaving old knowledge with new knowledge by using familiar examples, and through interaction, generate higher order questions, model and promote habits of mind, and detect as well as clarify misconceptions.
<b>Strategy 6 Use Multiple Intelligences (MI) as tools to foster learners' positive self-concept and peer acceptance and to enhance teaching for understanding.</b>	All participants subscribe to Gardner's views of human intelligences and abilities, believe that all learners can succeed with effective pedagogy and the circle of supporters, and design multiple pathways, such as diverse entry points, use of metaphors and analogies, multiple representations, and MI-oriented assessment, to enhance in-depth understanding.	Teachers value all students' multiple abilities, highlight peer acceptance and respect for each individual, use MI as tools in administering pre/post assessment, and teach core subject areas via multiple pathways that will lead to a shared understanding between teachers and students.	Adults engage learners in activities to learn and observe MI-oriented learning styles, clarify the role of MI in learners' lives, acquire the language to value multiple abilities that will foster healthy self-concepts, and explore multiple pathways to develop strategic behaviors and habits of mind (i.e., gathering data from all senses to resist rote learning and learned helplessness).

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## Findings and Implications for Field Practitioners

To assist those who are interested in learning more about how to plan and implement the Family Literacy Nights, findings and implications from the overall study are organized by the specific tools we used in the project.

### Planes of Analysis

Rogoff 's planes of analysis provided a structure for the research team to conduct participant observation in the classrooms and interviews with teachers and administrators. A brief list of findings obtained from each plane shows how foregrounding each plane identified challenges and highlighted issues relevant to sustaining our effort to build the circle of supporters for Asian American ELLs and those with special needs.

From the community and interpersonal planes, we observed that when statewide testing becomes the major school accountability measure, classroom practices focus on raising test scores. In fact, some of the mainstream teachers in the middle school in our study objected to the inclusion of sixth-grade Asian American ELLs in their classrooms out of fear that they would lower the class test scores. In addition, statewide shortages of qualified teachers and administrators can negatively affect schools' day-to-day operations, instruction, teacher collaborations, school-family partnerships, and accountability for student performance. Such shortages are particularly common in districts that have high enrollments of ELLs from low to middle SES backgrounds. These schools may experience frequent changes in administrators and frequent shifting of administrative priorities. In the participating Title I middle school, within the duration of our project, we witnessed a change in leadership three times. It was particularly difficult for our participating English language development teachers to compete with new administrative priorities when the shared decision-making that was established at the start of the research project was no longer in place. As a result, the teacher-initiated sixth-grade sheltered program was abandoned during the last year of the project.

Data gathered from the interpersonal plane revealed that the participating teachers' cumulative knowledge and experience contributed to the successful completion of the project through joint productive activities. It also informed us how the circle of supporters held firm among participating teachers in this project. In addition, the mentor teachers played a critical role in assisting and influencing other participating teachers in the day-to-day operation of the project. They often met during lunch and other prep time to co-plan the lessons and exchange information. They shared concerns as well as strategies for assisting students in the program. From the personal plane, we observed the individual commitment among participating teachers in their desire to assist low-performing students. The Family Literacy Nights were made possible by the participating teachers' invitation to the researcher to enter their school and classrooms with a common goal of supporting low-performing sixth-grade Asian American ELLs.

### Activity settings as the units of analysis

The use of activity settings as the unit of analysis in the project provided us with a tool for documenting and identifying how to implement the scaffolding process. Because we cosponsored four Family Literacy Nights for two groups of learners from the sixth-grade sheltered classroom and sixth-through eighth-grade learning disabilities resource program, the use of activity settings enabled us to highlight the major differences between the two groups of participants. One difference we found was that, for the family teams that had a child with a learning disability, it was necessary to provide one teacher per family team to engage in joint productive activities to scaffold within the family team's ZPD.

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### **Three approaches to using MI as tools in teaching for understanding**

In general, the diverse entry points were easy to communicate and implement. However, we found that it was important to field test the particular metaphors and analogies that were used in order for them to be effective and to avoid misunderstanding when working with culturally and linguistically diverse groups. Metaphors, similes, and analogies are culturally grounded, and careful selection and clarification are necessary if they are to be effective in teaching new concepts. Without a shared understanding, comparisons between what is known and what is new will not lead to teaching for understanding. In the project, we used various examples to clarify these often confusing terms in school language. For instance, it was essential that everyone in the group understand the physical structure of a computer, such as the role of the central processing unit (CPU) and terminology associated with cognitive psychology, before using the following example: Your brain is a computer (metaphor). Your brain is "like" a computer (simile), and your brain is to human information processing as the CPU is to a computer (analogy). The application of multiple representations to teach core ideas can be a very complex task. It does not imply that teachers simply use multiple pathways corresponding to the eight multiple intelligences.

To support the incoming low-performing sixth-grade Asian American ELLs, the three content area teachers explored many ideas related to using MI in their effort to assist these learners. To enrich the instructional activities and opportunities for students to obtain content knowledge as well as develop language and literacy, they designed a set of integrated units across all content areas. The teachers met regularly to plan topics, activities, classroom projects, and homework assignments. Because they had the overall integrated curriculum design and team support, it was natural for them to tackle the multiple representations for each core topic, guided by the district's content standards. Hence, by building the circle of supporters for teachers, as well as for their sixth-grade Asian American ELLs, most of the big ideas covered in the curriculum were represented in multiple ways when the cohort moved from one classroom to the next.

Teachers selected topics from the sixth-grade history curriculum as the guiding theme in their integrated units for the cohort of sixth-grade ELLs. To reflect their prior knowledge and what was learned about a major topic, drawing was often used. For example, for a unit on early man, many sixth graders drew figures wearing T-shirts and Nike shoes; some resembled cartoon characters seen on television, which revealed what students thought they knew about early man. Comparing their illustrations of what they knew about early man before and after the unit, students were able to analyze and identify the gaps in their knowledge, as well as what they had learned from the lesson. In teaching the unit on early man, teachers immersed students in literature reflecting that era and showed videotapes and photos depicting cultural events in the integrated language arts and history classroom. Students then engaged in computation with symbols, created timelines in their mathematics class, and designed models in the science classroom.

For participants of the Family Literacy Nights, the team of teachers from the sheltered program modeled a unit on a volcano to explain why multiple representations are key to enhancing the understanding of specific content knowledge. All participants used gestures and body movements, observed the illustrations of various types of volcanoes, and interacted with their children to learn about the facts and core ideas of the unit. Many participants reflected in a post-Family Literacy Night survey that they had never been instructed in the ways their child is learning in the sheltered classroom. All of them found the hands-on modeling and interactions to be invaluable experiences that made a lasting impression on them.

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## Conclusion

Building a circle of supporters to reach a common goal was the key to the success of the present project. The two theoretical frameworks guided the research team in exploring and validating research tools that would strengthen the circle of supporters in participating teachers' professional development activities, in classroom instructional activities, and in Family Literacy Nights. The six strategies generated from the study provided a set of generic tools that would accommodate reading, language, literacy, and content area learning in various classrooms within, as well as beyond, this Title I middle school.

The principles and strategies presented in this report also apply to other school-family partnerships. For example, upon completion of the project discussed in this report, the same ideas were applied to sponsor "Family Information Nights on College and Career" in two participating high schools. These evening events helped us reach the goal of transferring school knowledge to families. Currently, our ideas of family literacy training activities are being field-tested in one district-sponsored adult class for new immigrant parents learning English as second language. These state-funded classes have the mission of training parents to assist their children with schoolwork or to serve as room parents when they are ready. Hence, the Family Literacy Nights training ideas have become an integral part of these adult classes.

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# Appendix A: Questioning Tree

## Sample Questioning Tree Shared with Participants in Family Literacy Nights

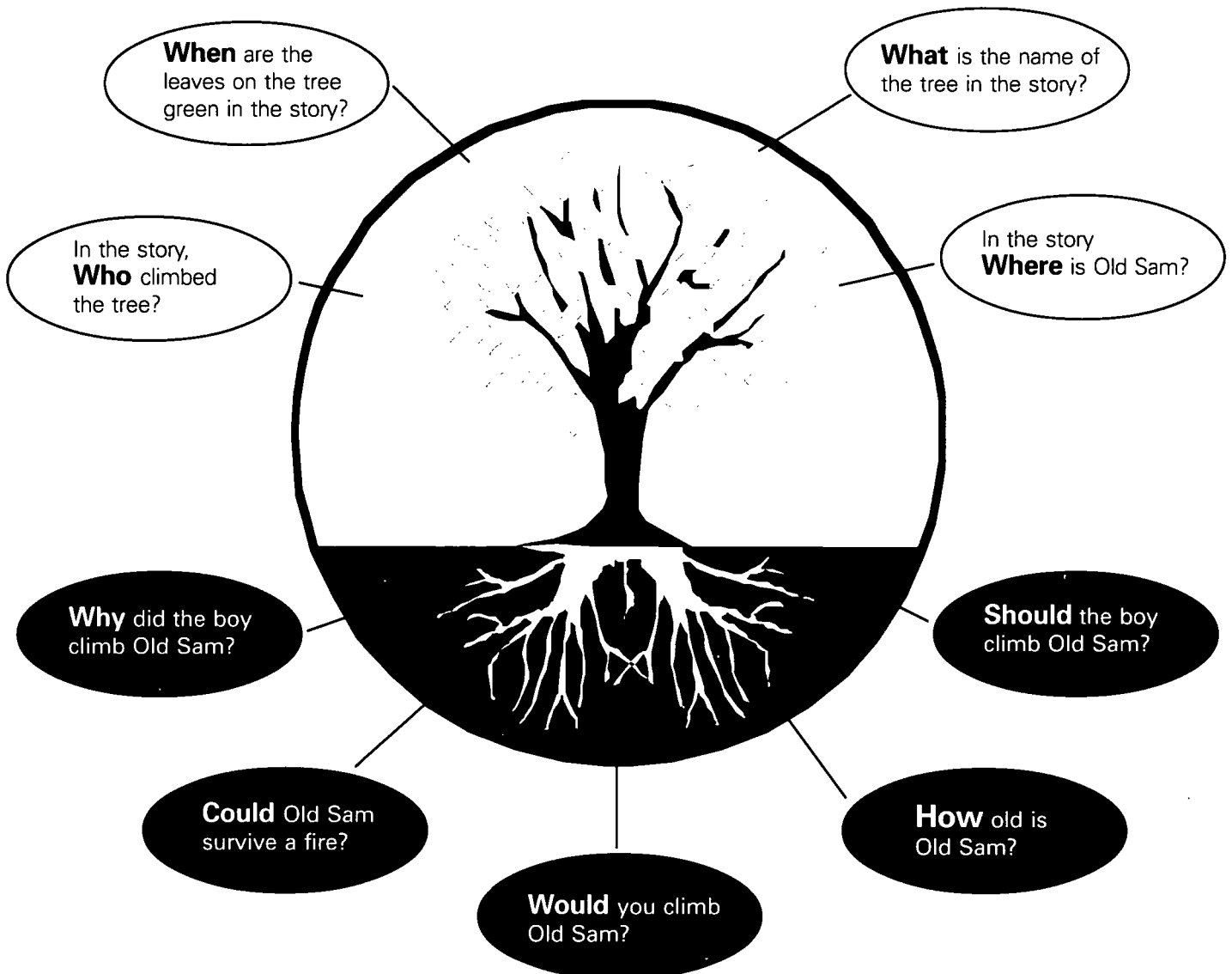
Please note, based on the nature of stories, "why" and "how" may also be used in generating text explicit or on the surface questions.

### Old Sam by Ward Shimizu



In my backyard, there is a big tree. We named it, Old Sam. He stood very majestic and proud. Every autumn, Old Sam began losing his leaves, until winter when he lost them all. Then, every spring his leaves started to come back, and every summer he was fully dressed in leaves.

Old Sam was very tall. I remember the first time I climbed Old Sam. First, one hand on his trunk, then another. I reached for a big sturdy limb. Up and up I went, 50 feet in all. No one had ever gone so high before. I had conquered Old Sam.



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## Appendix B:

### Excerpt of Debriefing Session Among Teachers and Researchers After the First Family Literacy Night

Teacher A: I have to say I called the parents and told them that this is important and you need to be here, and all but one of them showed.

Researcher: Yeah. You know both teachers called and that's why there was such a good turnout. Talk about family literacy, even the little ones participated. It was a full house. How do you feel about it?

Teacher A: I think it was a very beneficial night. I felt good about having more contact with the parents. It gave me a chance to see parents interact with their children.

Observer 1: Was this a better turnout than Back to School Night?

Teacher A: Oh yeah.

Science Teacher: It's really the phone calls . . . I really liked the part where the parents and students were reading, looking for surface questions, and the parents couldn't answer the questions. Hey man, the kids were so skilled at asking us questions. . . .

Observer 2: I liked when the kids were training the parents. It was really great.

Vietnamese Translator (VT): The Vietnamese parents that I worked with they said English is their second language, so they need more time. The words go so quick, so they can't pick it up. They ask, "What is this, what is this?" Because you say so fast . . .

Teacher A: . . . that they didn't understand.

Vietnamese Translator: So maybe you can present it a little slower the next time.

Teacher A: Sure.

Researcher: What about the observers? Anything you want to share with us about the presentation?

Observer 3: It was great.

Teacher A: I think the fact that each person built upon the last one, and the same strategies were reiterated three times in history/language arts classroom, math, and science, by the last one parents were starting to get it.

Science Teacher: They heard those same words: predicting, questioning . . .

Observer 1: Yeah, they heard it in three different classrooms by three different teachers, so finally they really started to get it.

Science Teacher: And that really was the goal when we set out—powerful learning tools.

Researcher: Yeah, I went to the math at the end; even math at the end you have to clarify this is the most important part for math. Many Asians think that math is computation. In your presentation, you explained what you do beyond computation, so you clarified for them.

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- Observer 2: Yeah, that was great form that you developed.
- Math Teacher: Thank you. I changed the form, so it fit my class better. Our students know these strategies.
- Observer 3: I thought the posters were really helpful. I thought that the visual aids were good at the beginning. They went to science room and math room and saw the same questioning tree. I also noticed that there were lots of parents' talking. This one gentleman was talking the whole time, especially in math. He was like, "What's this?" "How do you do that?" The dad was really into it. The son was kind of quiet.
- Observer 3: That's what I saw, lots interaction between parent and child. Another thing I saw was a parent frantically writing everything down. She was even drawing the [questioning] tree.
- Observer 1: A while back, parents were asking me for the word maps to make at home; so parents are interested in this.
- Researcher: What do you see as a nice follow-up?
- Teacher A: We need to address multiple intelligences. I know you'll do it the next time.
- Researcher: It wouldn't fit today.
- Teacher A: No, no . . . too much this time.
- Researcher: In one activity we may ask adults and the student to each use a checklist to screen the child's MI profile. We can break into three groups. We will then design activities to show how we may use multiple intelligences as tools to help learn science, math, and language arts. How's that?
- Science Teacher: Yeah, that little checklist will be important. Find out where you are. I think they'd love to find out where they are.
- Researcher: We have one for children and one for adults. So we can use the one we did for children. Based on this, they're likely to come back. What do you think?
- Science Teacher: Great . . .
- Observer 2: Good. Maybe one topic that you guys all do; one topic in a different modality or representation.
- Science Teacher: That's a good idea. Maybe teach a science concept, such as volcano.
- Teacher A: Great. We can all work together.
- Science Teacher: When I gave students a certificate tonight, the parents wanted one.
- Teacher A: I know.
- Science Teacher: The parents said, "Where's mine?"
- Observer 1: Make it a family one.
- Teacher A: The final one should be a family one.

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## Appendix C: Strategies for Home Use

(From Chang, 2001b)

- 1. Always work with and help your child produce something that conveys what and how much she really knows.**

Joint Productive Activity (JPA) highlights the need for families to interact and work jointly with their child to produce something that will clarify and reflect their child's learning. It is particularly important that the parent and child sustain motivation and avoid fatigue by taking turns reading at night. Parents are encouraged to work on a log or word map designed for paired reading, as well as search for multiple paths that will help their child master the assigned vocabulary.
- 2. Always help your child develop language used at home and in school by modeling, talking, or working together. Always give your child opportunities to use new words in different ways.**

Language & Literacy Development Across the Curriculum (LLD) informs families of the importance of talking and listening to their child, while restating, probing, or praising their child's ideas, opinions, or judgments related to specific topics or a school assignment in a calm and encouraging manner. The use of multiple paths, such as role play, is encouraged to enrich the quality of such adult-child interactions and to highlight the similarities and differences among words or phrases.
- 3. Always help your child relate what s/he has learned in school to daily life.**

Contextualization (CTX) emphasizes the need for families to connect their child's experiences and skills from the home and community with school learning. This is most critical in reading and vocabulary development when their child encounters new words or concepts; families are encouraged to use related events to strengthen vocabulary comprehension.
- 4. Always help your child think or ask questions using on- and under-the-surface questions. Always help your child see how ideas or concepts are related. Always give positive feedback.**

Challenging Activities (CA) stresses the need for families to guide their child to apply a set of reading comprehension strategies and to address "who, what, where, when, why, and how" text-explicit questions. Families also need to generate and address a deeper level of questions by probing into their child's opinions or interpretations of the author's intent through text-implicit questions.
- 5. Always talk with your child about school or lifelong learning. Always listen to your child when discussing how s/he can think about learning, and what s/he can plan or do for it.**

Instructional Conversation (IC) guides families to engage their child in relaxing two-way conversations by showing interest in what their child has to say and what needs to be clarified in relation to reading or school assignments. By listening and responding, families can relate to their child's knowledge and experience and promote lifelong learning.
- 6. Always value your child's abilities in multiple ways. Always help your child learn through multiple paths that s/he would like to try.**

MI as tools for learning enhances families' abilities to verbalize how their child may develop a healthy and productive sense of self-respect and confidence. It provides a framework to help them access domain knowledge, such as history and literature, through drama, films, pictures, and stories.

