

# Smile on Your Brother

## Teaching Siblings Together

Paula Carter

**"YOU WERE SO EASILY TRICKED,"** I teased one of my brothers during a recent phone call. I was referring to summer days when our mom would set a tub of water out in the backyard. She'd tie a string to a can opener, dangle it off one end of a long stick, and call it a fishing pole. "I wondered why I never caught any fish," he admitted, as we laughed about this childhood memory that belongs only to us.

For better or for worse, no one knows you like a sibling does (Kelsh & Quindlen 1998). Usually schools take great pains to separate siblings into rooms with different teachers. In our multiage classroom, we've done the opposite. Sometimes you have to flip an old notion on its side and look at it in a different way. In a school serving children deeply affected by poverty, my team-teaching partner and I believe that by teaching young siblings to work as cohesive family units, we can help maximize their educational potentials and opportunities (Schorr & Schorr 1998).

Sixteen of the 34 children in our multiage classroom have a sibling in the class. Another six are brothers, sisters, or cousins of former students. There are always new siblings or cousins waiting in the wings, and current students talk as if our classroom will always be there for the new family members coming up. We find it difficult to even think of retirement.

Many of the families we serve are "the tired, the poor, the huddled masses yearning to breathe free" described by Emma Lazarus's words at the base of the Statue of Liberty. Eighty percent of the students speak a language other than English at home. So many of the children qualify for free and reduced-price lunch that the school offers three federally funded meals a day to all the students.

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### Multiage in the standards era

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The mandates required by No Child Left Behind (NCLB) have created a need for greater uniformity and regimentation in our school. Luckily for us, our principal, has carved out a place for the multiage program that my teaching partner and I have been implementing, either singly or as a team, for most of our 20-year careers.

In our multiage first, second, and third grade classroom, we two teachers are held responsible for the results of all the applicable grade-level assessments. We are accustomed to using a developmental approach—meeting each child at his or her level and building up from there. The fact that we must administer more formal tests than we did in the past means that each group of students being tested must be separated out by grade level and given a quiet place in which to test. We must adhere to regulations for administering tests to avoid testing violations. Before NCLB policies went into effect, we were able to informally assess in a manner that was less disruptive to the flow of our teaching (Pardini 2005).

Our elementary school, in an impoverished urban area, has been designated, under NCLB, a school "in need of improvement." Scores derived from our State of Nevada Criterion Reference Tests must show that the school is reaching adequate yearly progress (AYP). If a school makes AYP one year, it must then exceed the percentage of students scoring proficient the next year, as set forth by a formulaic increase established through NCLB policies.

Despite not making AYP, our school has achieved phenomenal growth over the past three years. In 2004, less than 15 percent of our school's third- and fifth-graders scored proficient in reading and math. By the end of the 2006–2007 school year, 55 percent scored proficient in math and 43% scored proficient in reading (Nevada Annual Reports 2008).

Like other schools that must meet annual yearly progress goals under NCLB, we have paid a price. We tend

to push aside physical education, art, and recess to allow sufficient time to address "measurable skills" such as those needed to answer reading or math questions phrased in a multiple choice format.

Often we feel pressured to fracture, compartmentalize, and label the things we do, despite knowing that a child's progress cannot be characterized by mere numbers plugged into boxes on a page. Common sense tells us that learning is more complicated than that. No matter how sophisticated our assessments and teaching strategies, it helps to know the children we teach if our teaching is to have lasting effects (Miller 1994).

### A place for families

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There are times when we wonder if we can keep juggling it all. Then, something endearingly wonderful happens, and we think, "How could we do it any other way?"

"This is my little brother," a second-grader said to me, one Friday as he stepped off the bus. "He'll be in our class next year." Even the children take it upon themselves to invite their family members into the group. After all, it is their classroom as much as it is ours.

Parent conferences are family affairs. My team partner speaks fluent Spanish, which helps to make our Spanish-speaking families feel comfortable. Our big, round table often accommodates children, parents, grandparents, and former students—all at one conference. Even kindergartners and toddlers, not yet in our class, join in. Many immi-

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grant families, who welcome the help of extended family in raising the children, tell us that this makes them feel welcome and comfortable (Miller 1994).

"You will be brothers and sisters for the rest of your life," we tell the children. "If your little brother doesn't know his letters, you can teach him. Help him get ready to come to our classroom. Help each other! Other people will come and go. You'll leave this school one day, but you will still have your brothers and sisters around you."

### Four priorities

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In addition to creating a welcoming environment for children and families, four things receive top priority in our classroom: attendance, responsibility, honesty, and reading achievement. These issues are so intertwined that anytime you give attention to one, the others are affected. Our overall goal is to encourage the children to value education and bolster positive character traits in themselves and one another. As part of the process, we guide them to develop a form of dialoging that they can take with them. We teach them how to talk about the elements in literature, such as plot, setting, and character attributes. Then they can learn to critically analyze the events that take place in a story and maybe even their own lives. This gives them a strategy for taking their learning into their homes (Calkins 2001).

### Attendance

Three of the children joining the class this year have missed an entire year of school because a homeschooling experience did not go well. Others have had poor attendance due to transportation problems, trouble waking up in the mornings, or minor illnesses. Many of the children in our class have had spotty attendance, leaving noticeable holes in their education. First and foremost, we establish the expectation that children come to school every day. We follow up with phone calls to parents when a child is frequently absent to see what the problem might be and to offer our help. In extreme situations, we initiate visits to the home by a truant officer, the principal, or the vice principal to see if further services are needed.





When attendance problems continue, we have serious talks with young children, asking them to remind the adults in the household to help them get ready for school. We pair up new students with other children who have seen the light and can serve as buddies. We hear them tell the new students, "I used to have a problem with attendance, but now I know I need to be here."

"When you grow up, you must show up for school or work every day!" we tell the children. "You can't stay home just because you have a little headache or you don't feel like getting out of bed."

While offering the academic side of education, we also strive to provide a setting in which children can enjoy full membership with a sense of belonging. We try to make school so interesting and enjoyable that they don't want to miss a day (Schorr & Schorr 1998).

### Responsibility

Getting homework home and back again is a great barometer for figuring out if a child is taking responsibility for his or her own actions. In our view, "My mom didn't put my homework in my backpack," is a poor reason not to turn it in. "It's your responsibility," we remind them.

"Where's your homework?" we asked one of the girls one Friday.

"I left it at the bus stop," she replied.

"Let's go get it," my team partner said, as I saw a look of utter disbelief flit across the girl's face.

When it wasn't at the bus stop, she said, "Uh, it must be at home."

"Then let's go there," the teacher said.

They found the homework at home, and my teaching partner spoke to the mother in Spanish. Until then, we'd had few opportunities to talk with this mother. Only the father, who speaks English, communicated with the school. Since that home visit, the mother has made several visits to the school, and she attends conferences for her children. My teaching partner's Spanish skills were key in communicating with the family.

### Honesty

As seen in the homework story, children can become masterful at confusing parents and teachers by using a type of shell game. If they keep changing their stories, adults may tire of trying to figure out where the truth lies. Working with siblings has helped us to disrupt some of those destructive patterns of deception. That's one skill that we don't want our students to become proficient in.

On Fridays, the children visit the principal to show their good spelling test scores. The principal hands them a small pen as congratulations. When a prized pen disappeared from one girl's cubby, we had a class meeting to discuss how important honesty is. As a group, we arrived at the decision that it was very important to find out the truth. Everyone was in agreement that it was important to feel safe and secure at school. Three weeks passed before a girl told me that the pen was at her house. "I don't know how it got there," she said.

She was one of three siblings in our classroom. I told her, "You three discuss it tonight, at home, and see if you can find out what happened."

The next morning, they still had not arrived at a conclusion. When it came time for lunch recess, I asked the three siblings to stay inside and discuss it with each other. "See if you can figure it out," I told them.

An agonizing discussion ensued. "Tell the truth," I heard the two older ones say. "You'll feel better." A few moments later, the youngest, a first-grader, confessed.

Later that day she wrote in invented spelling; the words said, "Mrs. Carter. I did want that pen. It was cool. I like the pen. It wasn't available to take away. It was wrong."

Having the siblings together in the classroom helped the children resolve this dilemma. Although it took nearly a month to find out what happened, the entire class, and these siblings in particular, grew from it. They could see

*(cont'd on p. 23)*

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that, like their parents, we believe honesty is a big deal. Children still go to the office with good spelling test scores, and nothing else has been taken.

### Reading achievement

Reading achievement affects every academic area. "Learn to read and then do something wonderful with it!" is our anthem. "Teach your little brothers and sisters and cousins." The fact that we focus on reading doesn't mean that we ignore other academic areas. On the contrary, the ability to read enhances all of the others. Reading comprehension is so closely linked with English-language development that it ends up taking center stage. Even many of the children whose home language is English come to school with limited vocabularies. Reading and its close cousins, writing, speaking, and listening, all combine to invite children into a complex, intellectual world where the exchange of ideas captivates their imaginations. Reading skills give children the tools to interpret and analyze text and ultimately think critically about their own lives (Calkins 2001).

### Conclusion

Family turmoil and uncertainty are constant fixtures in the homes of many U.S. children (Schorr & Schorr 1998). Twenty years ago, I would have probably rejected the idea of putting siblings together in one classroom, fearing that the children would not develop their own identities. But these are difficult times for many children, and some are in desperate need of lifelines, something to hold on to and anchor them to hope (Hart & Risley 1995). Multiage classrooms can benefit children from all socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds by reinforcing family ties.

On an intellectual level, I am aware of the daily struggles many of the children face. But there are times when I'm caught off guard. Recently, a child who is homeless and whose father is in jail,

wrote, "My dad spent all his money on beer and didn't feed his kids."

On another day, after I asked the children to give advice to a student who had just become an uncle, a boy wrote, "Feed the baby."

Others wrote things like, "Remember to read to the baby" or "Teach him the ABCs." The children wrote these notes with the same number two pencils they used to fill in the bubbles on assessment scan sheets. And that is at the crux of why I do what I do; education can provide a path to a better life.

Why not work with siblings in the same classroom to build strong, positive alliances that can help them through life's hardships? A single school year—or even three—is such a short amount of time to help children learn how to be full, contributing members of society. We teach children in our classroom why it is important to show up, take responsibility for their own actions, and tell the truth. And when times get rough, perhaps the children can turn to one another and speak and think critically about what's going on around them. Together, *maybe* they'll be able to better negotiate the choices available to them.

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