

# Family Invitations: Collaborative Assessment Conversations

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The adults who are central to students' lives are eager to understand, support, and celebrate their student's successes in and out of school. Through collaborative conversations, teachers and families can share unique perspectives on student growth while also expanding the ways we recognize the multiple literacies students engage with in and out of school. When teachers honor family literacies and intentionally build classroom learning experiences in light of information families share, students are likely to be more motivated to engage in school literacy experiences.

As teachers, the information we glean from families is particularly valuable. Their insights allow us to honor and build upon our students' current funds of knowledge. (*Luis Moll developed this concept. Read more about this and his influential work [here](#).*) In addition, family perspectives help us understand how the literacy goals we strive for in the classroom play out in students' daily lives. Building on this foundation of a broader, shared definition of literacies allows us to shape formative assessment practices that attend to and honor this expanded definition. (*See [this earlier blog post](#) by Valenté Gibson about culturally-responsive assessment practices.*)

While there are many avenues to attain such information, the following prompts and invitations provide ways to initiate collaborative conversations with our students' families. This list focuses primarily on reading and writing. Similar prompts and invitations can be crafted to gather information about students' oral language skills and experiences or to emphasize experiences interacting with and creating with multimedia formats. Teachers use this information as another valued source of data when making informed decisions about student growth and goals for future learning.

## **Inquiring Into Our Students as Cultural Beings**

1. What family/community rituals and events are important in this student's life? (*This might include preparing for a rite of passage in a religious organization such as First*

*Communion or quinceañera, volunteering at a shelter, fishing with grandpa, attending the county fair, cooking with family members, listening to family histories, singing together.)*

2. What are the gathering places in our community that are important in this student's life? *(This might include a library, cultural center, museum, community garden, after-school program, local park or ball field, or place of worship.)*

### **How can teachers use information about their students' cultural assets and resources?**

- Honor and validate students' out-of-school literacy experiences. Demonstrate to students and families the value of these literacies as part of school learning.
- Intentionally talk about connections between experiences with out-of-school literacies and in-school experiences.
- Cultivate students' sense of expertise in these events, activities and practices. Invite students to use these as a foundation for school literacy experiences (writing topics, community inquiries, connections to science and social studies content).
- Develop content that is culturally relevant to students, including access to multicultural books that offer mirrors, windows and sliding glass doors into familiar and less-familiar cultures and life experiences. *(Rudine Sims Bishop introduced this metaphor for using multicultural literature. Read more about this idea and her significant contributions [here](#).)*
- Use examples throughout the school day that reference students' home and community experiences, demonstrating the value of these experiences and their connections to school learning.

### **Inquiring Into Our Students' Past Experiences with Learning and Schooling**

1. When you look back at your student's prior schooling experiences, what are you celebrating? What questions or concerns do you have? *(This might include details about earlier literacy learning experiences, examples of classroom routines that supported your student, or the impact of friendships on school motivation.)*
2. What examples can you share of your student's recent accomplishments? *(This might include learning to ride a bike, gaining independence in household chores or using public transportation, achieving an award in an out-of-school organization, performing well in a skill competition such as sports or chess.)*
3. What special skills is this student learning through interactions with important adults in the student's life? *(This might include skills related to storytelling, childcare, cooking, home maintenance/repair, outdoor landscaping, agricultural skills, sewing/crafting, or social media production such as YouTube or TikTok, or video gaming.)*

4. What skills and habits do you feel your student needs to develop -- in or out of school, in order to be successful? (*This might include time management or organizational skills, learning to navigate social pressures or manage money.*)

***How can teachers use information about their students' past experiences with learning and schooling?***

- Set goals together with the student and family related to these accomplishments.
- Help students understand how new goals and accomplishments build on their earlier successes.
- Develop greater understanding of students' ways of learning and capitalize on these in shaping school learning experiences.
- Develop school learning experiences that invite the student to use and reflect on these out-of-school skills and habits.
- Observe and share examples with families of students using these same skills and habits in a school setting.
- Collaborate with others to reflect on and revise school curriculum, materials, and formative assessment practices to include consideration of these family/community skills.

## **Inquiring Into Our Students' Home Literacy Practices**

1. What language(s) does your student encounter outside of school? Does your student read or write or communicate in more than one language at home or in the community? (*See this [earlier blog post](#) by Bobbie Kabuto about Assessing Linguistically Diverse Students.*)
2. What types of reading materials and experiences does your student engage in at home and in the community (i.e., text messages, videos, instruction manuals, environmental print, murals, graffiti, sculptures, menus, public transportation schedules, text-heavy video games, social media, searching for information on a tablet or phone)?
3. Is this independent or with support?
  - a. Does your student enjoy reading? If so, which formats/texts in particular?
  - b. Does your student demonstrate confidence as a reader? Does this change from one type of text to another?
  - c. How do you offer support? What can I do to help from school?
4. From your observations at home, what do you notice about your student's skills, habits, and attitudes as a reader?
  - a. What does your student do really well?
  - b. What seems to be a struggle or something your student can almost do independently?

- c. How can I support you and your student from school?
5. What types of drawing and writing does your student engage in at home and in the community (i.e. text messaging, making lists, diagramming basketball strategies, making cards for deployed troops or posters for neighborhood news)?
  - a. Is this independent or with support?
  - b. Which forms of writing or drawing does your student most enjoy?
  - c. Does your student demonstrate confidence as a writer/creator? Does this change from one form of writing to another?
  - d. How do you offer support?
  - e. What can I do to help from school?
6. From your observations at home, what do you notice about your student's skills, habits, and attitudes as a writer?
  - a. What does your student do really well?
  - b. What seems to be a struggle or something your student can almost do independently?
  - c. How can I support you and your student from school?

***How can teachers use information about their students' home literacy practices?***

- Intentionally talk about connections between out-of-school literacies and in-school experiences.
- Demonstrate to caregivers how sharing lullabies, poems, and family stories contributes to concepts such as rhyming words, character and plot development, sequencing, vocabulary, and references to cultural norms.
- Develop content that is culturally relevant to our students, including classroom materials and resources in familiar languages and reflective of familiar community-based literacy experiences.
- Invite families to offer critical cultural input on the curriculum materials and resources used in the classroom.
- Develop formative assessment practices that honor home and school literacies, providing families with information about how their student is growing in the literacy skills valued at home and in school.
- Invite families and community members to review formative and summative assessment tools and practices for cultural bias, and to offer alternatives.
- Provide support that is responsive to the specific needs of our classroom parents and caregivers.

Additional strategies for collaborating with families may be found in  
[\*\*\*Going Public with Assessment: A Community Practice Approach\*\*\*](#)  
*Pierce & Ordoñez-Jasis, 2018, NCTE*