



# Letting kids lead the way to literacy



lol: little  
 wanna: want  
 dunno: don't know  
 ML: much love  
 kno: know  
 BF4L: Best friend 4 life  
 IM: instant message  
 AIM: aol instant messenger  
 sry: sorry  
 ppl: people  
 {3: heart  
 Lylab: love ya like a bro



**FOR MANY OF US, THE FIRST PLACE WE ENTER** as strangers is school. If we think about that idea for a minute and try to imagine the child in that circumstance, everything about how we teach might change, say leading figures in the world of early childhood education. That theory is put into practice at the College of Education, where grade-school teachers come to explore ways that open up classrooms to the differences, and thus the heart, of the children who make up their rosters.

A University of Iowa project called Escuela Familia extends the boundaries of the classroom into the community. Twice a year for the

grants from Latin America, appreciation for a broad range of literacy comes from her visits to the homes of her students.

“We can shine the light on the kids as experts,” Medd says.

The home visits help Medd incorporate the special expertise of her students into the classroom curriculum. During one visit, for example, Medd saw a little girl, normally quite shy at school, enthusiastically help her mother make elaborate Mexican festival dolls. At school, after Medd’s visits, the girl began sharing stories about the dolls and her mother, to the fascination of her classmates. Medd

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past two years, the College of Education has sent grade-school teachers into the mobile home park neighborhood of Spanish-speaking families whose children attend Horace Mann Elementary School, a K-6 building located in one of the oldest parts of town near the University of Iowa campus and filled with the most diverse student population in the district. In this project, Horace Mann teachers pay visits to students at home, where they share family meals, organize neighborhood summer camps, and lead story- and art-making projects.

“There’s a big difference from other ESL programs,” says Stacey Medd, one of the participating teachers and a 2001 nominee for Iowa’s Best Teacher award. “We’re not trying to fix anything. Instead, with Escuela Familia, we’re learning from the kids.”

**ESCUELA FAMILIA IS ONE OF SEVERAL** projects in the College of Education’s Language, Literacy, and Culture curriculum, through which seasoned teachers can combine research and service. Jim Marshall, associate dean for teacher education, notes that there are many languages in schools, including foreign languages and English, of course, but also the languages of mathematics, science, and athletics, as well as social languages that range from computer jargon to Harry Potter idioms to skateboarding lexicon.

For Medd, whose students are recent immi-

relies on her impressions to select books she hopes might inspire her students to jump into reading—maybe a storybook about doll making for that little girl, for example.

Medd also depends on the stories the families tell as a way to foster an interest in literacy. Anecdotes told at the dinner table become pretexts for art- and book-making projects she and the families work on together. Memories surrounding birthdays, holidays, and other special occasions become the texts for these custom-made books—written by the parents in Spanish, translated by the teachers into English, and illustrated and put into final form by the children. The results proudly reside on shelves inside the library at Horace Mann Elementary.

The books also represent important resources that schools too often overlook, according to associate professor of education Kathy Whitmore. Escuela Familia taps what she calls funds of knowledge—those special skills and intellectual resources that reside in all families.

“It’s challenging for schools to shift from their position as transmitters of knowledge to a position of learning from kids and families,” says Whitmore, whose nearly decade-long research with Horace Mann’s teachers, students, and families has been published in the National Council of English Teachers journal, *Primary Voices K-6*.

### ANOTHER OF THE PROGRAM'S PROJECTS

dives into the symbiotic nature of language and culture through a look at yet another kind of literacy—this one springs from modern technology. Cynthia Lewis, associate professor of education, and Bettina Fabos, who recently completed her doctoral degree, have been fascinated by instant messaging (or IM, in computer parlance). This form of on-line communication has captured the imagination of more than 70 percent of America's teenagers, according to an America Online survey. For two years, Lewis and Fabos tracked the computer habits of teenagers in a study that suggests instant messaging calls for a sophis-

by breaking off their replies midway and manipulating aspects of language and writing like capitalization, abbreviation, and even spelling—all of which carry significance that may escape the casual observer.

"Children using this technology demonstrate keen awareness of important writing principles—concepts straight from the language arts classroom, such as voice, parody, metaphor, and narrative," Fabos says.

Although there's probably not much practical application for instant-messaging technology in the classroom, teachers need to recognize that many schoolchildren are spending hours every day engaged in writing, according

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Students familiar with instant messaging subscribe to a faster and less cumbersome version of e-mail. Instant messaging lets users maintain a list of people with whom they wish to interact, and to send messages to any of the people in such a list, often called a buddy list or contact list, as long as that person is on-line. Sending a message opens up a small window where the sender and a friend can type messages that both of them can see—almost the same instant either hits the send button.

### ALTHOUGH FABOS THINKS OF HERSELF AS

technologically savvy, observing adolescents engaged in navigating the frenetic world of instant messaging astounded her. Her study subjects often had as many as 20 windows open at a time on their computer screen, each window containing an ongoing conversation with a different person from their buddy list. At the same time, the teens often used e-mail, surfed the Internet, listened to music, ate snacks, and talked with siblings in the same room.

Far from finding herself bored by the on-screen banter, Fabos was drawn to its drama and the way instant-messaging users mimic face-to-face conversation, building suspense

to Lewis, who, in collaboration with Fabos, has published her findings in the *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy*.

"It's important for teachers to understand how children use literacy outside of school," she says, "particularly when it's a form of literacy children are passionate about."

### AN INSPIRATION FOR SCHOOLTEACHERS AND

teachers-in-training across the country, the Language, Literacy, and Culture program may be something of an anomaly in the current educational climate. More and more elementary schools are limiting the time children spend playing and instead favor structured exercises that emphasize "skill building" and "school readiness." Whitmore believes the program resists this trend and prioritizes play and storytelling. For her, these are some of the best ways of expanding children's cognitive development. And, since she and the staff of Horace Mann Elementary began developing literacy and community-building projects, the school's Iowa Test of Basic Skills scores have soared.

"These scores are one indicator that home-school relations, students' literacy interests outside school, and families' funds of knowledge are all essential," Whitmore says. "They're key elements in our work of helping kids become successful learners."