21st National Conference on Family Literacy

Research Strand

Conference Proceedings

2012

Edited by:
Blaire Willson Toso
Goodling Institute for Research in Family Literacy
Pennsylvania State University
Dear National Conference on Family Literacy Participants,

We are delighted to be publishing the first NCFL Research Strand Conference Proceedings. We are aware of the need to highlight and make accessible research on family literacy. These proceedings are another step in bringing family literacy, as a research supported issue, to the forefront of policy, academic, and practice-based conversations.

In this publication, you will have the opportunity to explore family literacy as the multi-faceted field that it is as researchers address a range of pertinent topics. These proceeding papers were chosen because they are relevant and informative to teachers, administrators, and scholars.

We were encouraged by the success and feedback we received on the Research Strand presentations at the conference in March and hope that this proceedings will remind each of us of the work that is being done and continues to be done in the name of family literacy.

Many thanks to everyone who made the conference possible: to the researchers who shared their work, to the research participants who let us into their lives, and to the conference participants who engaged and added their work to the work in the proceedings. As is common in conference proceedings, little editing was done to the papers as they were submitted. Any omissions of references, inaccuracies in citations, or other errors in papers are the responsibility of the authors. We have included contact information for the first author of each paper if you would like to obtain additional information or ask questions.

We owe great appreciation to Gail Price and Elizabeth Grinder for their assistance in getting this document in its current format.

Sincerely,

Blaire Willson Toso, Research Associate
Goodling Institute for Research in Family Literacy

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August 2012

Dear National Conference on Family Literacy Participants,

Our relationship with the National Center for Family Literacy (NCFL) and its National Conference on Family Literacy has grown since 2001 when Penn State’s College of Education established the Goodling Institute. It has been my pleasure to be involved in the increased focus on research supported and offered in the National Center’s well established annual conference, especially since one goal of the Goodling Institute is to support research that can make a difference in program quality and policy development. Collaboratively, we support nationally and internationally known researchers as Featured Speakers at the Conference as well as sessions devoted to new and ongoing research about or relevant to family literacy as illustrated in this, the first proceedings from the National Conference on Family Literacy.

These proceedings provide evidence that the National Conference on Family Literacy, while still providing research-based practical sessions for family literacy practitioners, has evolved to include cutting edge research for researchers, policymakers, and practitioners who want in-depth information about specific topics. The papers included in these proceedings reflect the quality of the research presented in the sessions as well as the practical application of the research to improve classroom and program practices. Participant evaluations consistently remarked on the value and practicality of the research sessions they attended.

Although federal support for family literacy through the William F. Goodling Even Start Family Literacy Program has ended and state and private support has become more limited or disappeared, family literacy continues to be an issue in education, particularly for our most vulnerable families. The name might change from family literacy to parent engagement and the focus might change from a four-component to a more flexible model, but the need for families to work with educators to support literacy development has not changed.

We look forward to our continuing relationship with the National Center for Family Literacy and a growing commitment to providing the field—researchers, program administrators, teachers, volunteers, policymakers, and parents—with research and strategies for using the research to improve lives.

Barbara Van Horn, Co-Director
Goodling Institute for Research in Family Literacy
Institute for the Study of Adult Literacy
The Pennsylvania State University
August 2012

Dear educators and family literacy advocates,

The National Center for Family Literacy (NCFL) is pleased to present, alongside the Goodling Institute for Research in Family Literacy at Penn State University, the first formal compendium of research strand proceedings from the National Conference on Family Literacy.

Held March 25 through 27, 2012, in San Diego, California, our national conference continued to provide critically important family literacy research and information to conference attendees through this set of research sessions. The impact of this annual dissemination of and focus on research findings cannot be underestimated, and we are delighted to extend this body of information to a broader audience with this publication. The contents of this publication will share and illustrate the successes of family literacy to date; promising new directions and approaches; and the power of research to inform practices and programming as well as further policy and funding supports for family engagement and family-focused programming.

NCFL is committed to continuing the research strand at our conference and engaging even more researchers in family literacy. We encourage programs nationwide to apply research findings and proven strategies to everyday classroom instruction, a practice that will surely support better outcomes for families.

To learn more about future research strands at the conference and other exciting initiatives and resources for families available from NCFL, please check www.famlit.org often. Thank you for your dedication and commitment to family literacy, and families learning together in the communities you serve.

Sincerely,

Sharon Darling
President & Founder
National Center for Family Literacy
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RESEARCH PAPERS
Working in Diverse Communities: 
A Social Capital Perspective of Family Literacy Programs

Jim Anderson, University of British Columbia; Ann Anderson, University of British Columbia; and Fiona Morrison, Decoda Literacy Solutions

Abstract: The purpose of this chapter is to report on two studies which document how family literacy programs can contribute to capacity building that supports families in developing social and cultural capital that enhance their participation in school. In Study 1, working-class participants who participated in a family literacy program more than two decades ago were interviewed retrospectively. Findings indicated parents: became more aware of the expectations the school had of their children; better understood how they could support their children; developed broader conceptions of literacy; and became familiar with, and comfortable in, schools. In Study 2, participants in a bilingual family literacy program: saw the importance of helping children maintain their first language; reported their own language/literacy was enhanced; and better understood western curriculum and pedagogy. The results suggest that family literacy programs that are responsive to the social context have benefits that extend beyond children’s early language and literacy development.

Key words: social capital; capacity building; bilingual family literacy programs; diverse communities

In this chapter, we share the results from two research studies involving family literacy programs in very different contexts. In the first study, we interviewed a group of parents who had participated in a community-initiated family literacy program twenty years earlier in a rural community in Newfoundland, Canada. In the second study, we documented the implementation of the Parents As Literacy Supporters (PALS) in Immigrant Communities bilingual program involving over 400 families from four cultural/linguistic groups (Farsi, Karen, Mandarin and Punjabi) in the Greater Vancouver area of British Columbia, Canada.

Framework/Background

Theoretical Frame

Our work is informed by socio-historical theory (Vygotsky, 1978; Werteh, 1998) and the perspective that learning is social in that more competent/experienced members of a community guide and support younger members acquire necessary and valued skills and knowledge. However, as Clay (1993) pointed out, the value ascribed to literacy, its functions/purposes, and how it is learned and taught vary across social and cultural groups. Also guiding our work is Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) ecological theory of human development. He proposed that children’s development is influenced by overlapping and interacting spheres of influence; for example, the microsystem consists of family and those closely connected with the child whereas the macro system are the cultural beliefs and values of the community (Swick & Williams, 2006). For example, researchers (e.g., Gregory, 2005; Mui & Anderson, 2008; Taylor & Dorsey-Gaines, 1987) have documented how home, school and community contexts interactively support learning. In addition, we draw on the work of Pierre Bourdieu to inform our research and practice. A key construct of Bourdieu’s is that of social capital or cultural capital. He proposes that just as economic or financial capital is inequitably divided across social classes, so too is social capital. For example, members of middle and upper classes have the knowledge and skills that allow them to interact more successfully with and operate within powerful institutions such as schools. They are able to advocate for their children to ensure that their needs are being met and that they have the material and other resources necessary to learn and be successful. A related construct of Bourdieu’s informing our work is habitus or our “ways of viewing, and living in the world – which influence, shape, and even frame, our choices and actions” (May, 2011, p.236). For example, Lauraeau (1987) used a Bourdieuan frame to compare how working class parents and middle class parents were involved in school. She likened “Open House” at the school to a “cocktail party”, a context which the middle class families were familiar with and comfortable in but which the working class families were generally unfamiliar with, uncomfortable in, and tended to avoid (p. 78).

Family Literacy Programs

Although there are ongoing concerns about the lack of systematic assessment and evaluation in family literacy programs (e.g., Hannon, 2010), there is converging evidence that family literacy programs “work” and that they do have a positive impact on adults’ and children’s literacy development (e.g., Anderson, Purcell-Gates, Jang, & Gagne, 2010; Brooks, Pahl, Pollard, & Rees, 2008; Jordan, Snow, & Porche, 2000; Phillips, Hayden, & Norris, 2006). However, we believe that families accrue other important benefits, in addition to increasing children’s (and adults’ when there is adult literacy instruction) literacy skills and knowledge. In this chapter, we focus on families developing social capital which we see as an important additional benefit that can result from family literacy programs that are responsive to the social and cultural context of the communities where we work.

Study 1

The Context

In this study, we interviewed a cohort of parents who had participated in a locally developed family literacy program 20 years earlier in a rural community in Newfoundland, Canada. The
principal of the community school was concerned about the low literacy achievement, high dropout rates, and high number of children needing remedial education in his school and approached the school district to establish an intervention program that would give children a head start in getting ready for school. The coordinator of early childhood education and other district administrators then collaborated with parents, teachers, social workers, churches, health care workers and other community members to establish and promote the project. The program consisted of monthly, two-hour sessions held in the kindergarten classroom attended by parents or significant other family members and their four year old children. The facilitator introduced each session by sharing information about and discussing the topic of the day (e.g., early mathematics). The adults and their preschoolers then circulated among a number of learning centers which contained age appropriate activities while the kindergarten teacher and the early childhood coordinator who were co-facilitating the program, circulated among the families, modeling different ways to support children’s learning. Each session concluded with the adults discussing their observations about the session, the facilitator sharing a book with the families, and each child being provided a children’s book to take home.

Method

We first distributed a letter describing the study and requesting their participation to the 12 parents that we were able to locate from the original cohort of 20 families. Ten parents agreed to participate and each was interviewed by a trained research assistant, who had recently completed B.A. and was enrolled in the first year of a teacher education program. The research assistant was from the community and knew all the participants. The interviews were recorded on a digital recorder and then transcribed in their entirety. To analyze the data, we read through all of the interviews identifying themes (Glaser, 1998). A Graduate Research Assistant trained in Early Childhood Education coded the data using the themes that we had identified. Then a second Graduate Research Assistant also trained in Early Childhood Education coded about 50 per cent of the data; comparing results of the two independent codings resulted in an inter-rater agreement of 90 per cent and the differences were reconciled through discussion.

Results

All of the parents interviewed remembered the program quite vividly and generally spoke quite highly of it. We also informally talked with several of the children who had participated in the program but, perhaps expectedly, now as adults, they had no recollection at all of their participation.

Making Expectations Visible

Nearly all of the participants indicated that through their participation in the program, they became more aware of the expectations that the school had of their children and how they as parents could support their children’s readiness for school. This sentiment was expressed by the two parents below:

It also introduced parents, at first time parents, I should say [with] first children, it gave them a chance to actually know what the system was all about. What was expected of their child, what was expected of you to present your child before they start school.
I think that's important because kids prepare for the school, but also parents to know what's gonna happen, when they go and what's expected of them.

Of course, over the years, the school had sent home messages about school readiness, reading to children, helping them with homework and the like. Interestingly, one of parents protested that these messages were “too wishy-washy”. What these parents appeared to appreciate was actually being involved and experiencing the activities alongside their children and the old adage about “showing, not telling” appears to be very pertinent here as we made expectations more visible to parents.

**Parent as Child’s First Teacher**

As a result of research demonstrating the importance of the early years in children’s development, families are bombarded with the message that *parents are the child’s first and most important teacher*. Several of the participants indicated that the program helped them realize the important roles that parents/significant others play in supporting children’s learning. This point was made perceptively by one of them, who said,

I think it's important because in reality, yes, a child goes to the school and a child learns in the school environment from a teacher that is during the day. But that has to be sustained through the child's whole life, through their rest of day, or through their evening or so on. And, you know, so all parents need to understand that the importance, their importance, or their roles, the importance of their roles in their child's learning.

Indeed, this parent not only affirms her role but also points out that learning is a lifelong process that occurs across contexts, a perspective reflective of Bronfenbrenner’s ecological theory.

**Beyond Basic Skills**

Researchers such as Fitzgerald, Spiegel, and Cunningham (1991) have found that working class parents tend to have fairly restricted views of literacy learning and believe that children learn best through a skills-based approach such as completing workbook exercises. However, this was not the case here and the parents indicated that the program had helped them see the benefits of a more experiential approach to learning and teaching. According to one parent,

To me, it's not only about learning from books, learning to read and learning mathematics, those are the basics and very very important. But to me, a child has to learn to interact with others, a child has to learn how to live in the street, I don't mean that as living in the street, I just mean that they have to learn to live in the real world. And that's just as important to the education of any child as the book learning.

**Feeling Comfortable in School**

As Laureau (1987) and others have found, many working class parents tend to feel uncomfortable in school for a variety of reasons. For instance, one mother commented about how when she was a child, parents were only expected to come to school when there was a problem. She elaborated, “Because like when we went school like even mother did not anything, and if the mother came school and that was bad. Like … bad news”. Another parent commented on the
friendliness of the principal and the staff, stating, “I found definitely they [the principal and teachers] were friendly and didn’t do anything different, they were just friendly”. Indeed, the feeling of being a part of the school community is summarized by one of the interviewees as follows,

And I feel that it was nice that I had an opportunity to go over and be with the part of his education and meet his teacher, and see what is all about. And I was just as excited as he was, he knew that.

Of course, it is important to recognize that involving families in schools is a fairly recent phenomenon and as Hannon (1994) points out, not too long ago, parents were not welcomed in school and expected not to teach their children to read and write. Thus it would seem the program increased these parents comfort level with the school, both as an organization as well as with the personnel there.

Study 2

The Context

In this study, we documented the implementation of a bilingual family literacy program called Parents As Literacy Supporters (PALS) in Immigrant Communities in Vancouver, British Columbia. The first author had participated as a district administrator in developing and implementing the program described in Study 1 and was also a co-developer of the PALS program and thus the programs shared many features. PALS (Anderson & Morrison, 2000) was developed as a multi-agency, inner-city, community development initiative led by the mayor of Langley, BC. The developers organized focus sessions with families, early childhood educators, and administrators, from which they developed a set of principles and prototype modules. These were piloted in two inner-city schools in Langley, and the next year, expanded to two other schools in Vancouver. The goal of PALS is to work with parents and caregivers in supporting children’s (ages three-five) early literacy development. The program consists of 10–15, two-hour sessions held two to three weeks apart addressing topics identified by families, such as learning to read, learning the alphabet, early mathematics, and digital literacy or ‘computers’ as the families named it. PALS shares a similar format to the program described earlier and involved: eating together; introducing and discussing the topic of the session; adults and children working together at learning centers; debriefing with the adults; and providing the families with books, and other early learning materials. In the PALS in Immigrant Communities project, the sessions were conducted in English and the home language of the families. A cultural worker from the same linguistic group as the families co-facilitated in four of the five communities; in one community, the Kindergarten teacher was fluent in English and Punjabi and code switched as necessary during the sessions. The families were provided with bilingual books and other materials at the end of each session.

As part of documenting the implementation of the program, we conducted focus group sessions at each site just past the halfway point. The first author asked the focus questions in English and a cultural worker then translated them into the participants’ first language, clarifying as necessary. Responses were usually provided in the first language and translated into English by the translator and where necessary, clarification or supplementary questions followed. Focus sessions were recorded in their entirety and the English portions were transcribed. We then used the same process of identifying themes and coding the data as described in Study 1.
Results

First Language Maintenance

There are sound cognitive, linguistic, social and psychological reasons for promoting first language maintenance in young children (Bialystok, in press; Schechter & Cummins, 2003; Wong-Fillmore, 2000) and indeed learning to read and write in a second language is impeded if one’s first language has not been developed (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998). For various reasons, however, many new immigrant and refugee families believe that their children will be disadvantaged if they continue to use their home languages (e.g., Li, 2003; Pacini-Ketchabaw, 2006). However, the participants here indicated that they were very supportive of their children’s maintaining their home languages and for a variety of reasons. For example, one of the parents identified the importance of being able to communicate with her child, explaining, “Because parents don’t speak English, so if the parents don’t speak in Karen, the kids will forget their own language, the relationship between the parents and the children will be hard and [inaudible]”. Some parents offered very pragmatic reasons for children maintaining their home language, suggesting that it would be easier for them to obtain employment when they grew up if they could speak a second language. Others indicated that the home language was an important part of their identity, as one of them said:

I think that it is our duty to continue to speak Farsi more. Because I think that it is not just language because our culture is transferred…it’s not just Farsi, it’s the Persian culture…you cannot translate that culture.

Although the families saw value in, and various reasons, for maintaining their home language, they were also very concerned that their children learn English so they would do well in school. However, unlike previous studies that suggest families elect not to promote maintenance of their children’s first language in the belief that they will be less proficient in English if their first language is retained, families in the bilingual PALS program appeared to see the benefits of additive bilingualism (Schecter & Cummins, 2003).

Adults Learning English

Some of the adults were quite facile in English, while many of them were at various stages of learning the language. Although adult language and literacy learning is not the focus of the PALS, participants across all five sites identified it as an important benefit of their participation. One of them explained how the bilingual books were helpful to her learning.

Very useful in my opinion, because when we got the books to translate English and Farsi, maybe I had some problems with translation and it improved my English. When I read the book to my son, if I had a problem with the translation it was improved.

Others commented that although they were not proficient readers, they were able to read the picture books that we provided, allowing them to practice reading in English at an appropriate level of difficulty in a very authentic context (e.g., Anderson, Purcell-Gates, Lenters & McTavish, in press). As well, participants commented that they were acquiring new English vocabulary during the sessions and through reading with their children in authentic and supportive contexts.
Understanding Western Schooling

Some of the families with whom we worked had had limited experiences with schooling prior to immigrating while the experiences of others in their home country were vastly different from the child-centered, learning through play philosophy promoted in early childhood classrooms in Canada. As one mother explained, “[I] like it so much because my daughter learn by herself and play –learn from the game and also I don’t have to force her to learn” while another concluded, “Learning through playing. Children can learn happily.” Critics of family literacy suggest that family literacy programs colonize families by promoting western notions of learning and schooling (Reyes, & Torres, 2007). However, the participants here overwhelmingly indicated that they were very pleased to be learning about education and schools in their new country. And as we have demonstrated elsewhere, (Anderson & Morrison, 2011) the facilitators in the program also respected and promoted the families’ culturally different ways of learning and teaching.

Discussion

Because randomization was not used in these studies and the sample size in Study 1 was small, caution is needed in interpreting the results of these studies. Although the family literacy programs occurred more than two decades apart and in very different social and cultural contexts, there was considerable overlap in the findings from the two studies. For example, in both contexts, the families indicated that they valued how we made explicit the activities that they could engage in that would support their children’s development in concrete ways as they worked alongside their children in age-appropriate activities in the learning centers in the classrooms.

In addition to learning about ways to enhance their children’s learning, the adults indicated that their own learning was advanced. This was especially apparent with those for whom English was a second language; however, several of the parents in the first study also indicated that they had become more aware of the role of literacy in their own lives and for example, purchased and read more books themselves. The PALS program also reaffirmed the importance for the parents of maintaining their home language and encouraging and supporting their children in retaining it. Indeed, families tended to view first language learning and maintenance as an asset, not a deficit, unlike the findings from previous research with immigrant and refugee families.

We suggest that in addition, the effects of these programs extend beyond families learning about literacy and language. Many of the parents acknowledged that they were much more comfortable in the schools and better understood how schools function. They also believed that the hands-on, participatory feature helped to make visible what exactly was expected of them in the admonitions to be their child’s first teacher that they received through the media, and the ubiquitous flyers, newsletters and so forth that they received from health and educational institutions. According to Symeou (2007) families who have the cultural and educational resources and tools that align with the expectations of the school are able to support their children in being successful at school. We believe the two studies here suggest how in modest ways, we helped the families with whom we worked, develop and extend these resources.

Implications

Notwithstanding the limitations noted, several implications may be drawn from the work reported here. First, engaging parents in working alongside their children appeared to be effective in enhancing and extending their understanding of children’s learning and development. Family
literacy program facilitators might want to ensure that there is a “learning-by-doing” component in which there is sufficient time for families to work on age appropriate and engaging learning activities. Second, because the programs were located in schools, the families became quite comfortable there suggesting that the model utilized can be one way of developing positive home-school relationships. Third, we typically measure the efficacy of family literacy programs by looking at literacy achievement or outcome measures of participants. However, we suggest that family literacy programs can have much wider impact that positively affects families and we need to ensure that we document and consider these in the assessment and evaluation of the programs.

References


### Acknowledgements

We would like to thank sincerely the families for their participation in the projects and their generosity in agreeing to participate in the research studies. Appreciation is also extended to the program facilitators and others who participated in and supported the projects including school and district administrators and support personnel, research assistants and others who contributed in various ways. Finally, thanks to 2010 LegaciesNow and the various ministries in the Government of British Columbia and the Government of Canada for their financial and other support of the PALS in Immigrant Communities project.
Assessing and Improving Outcomes Through a Research-Practice Partnership

Shayna D. Cunningham, Sociometrics Corporation; Holly Kreider, Raising A Reader; Julia Wu, Sociometrics Corporation; and Georganne Morin, Raising A Reader

Abstract: Nonprofits face numerous challenges to measuring their performance, including pragmatic barriers like cost, as well as psychological and methodological barriers such as negative attitudes toward measurement and difficulties claiming causal relationships between a particular activity and outcome (Moxham & Boaden, 2007). This paper describes the preliminary results of an innovative research-program partnership between Raising A Reader (RAR), a national nonprofit organization that has helped families build and sustain literacy routines in their homes, and Sociometrics Corporation, an applied research and development firm specializing in social science applications, to design a sustainable performance measurement system to monitor and evaluate the implementation and impact of RAR. It focuses specifically on RAR’s rationale for investing in such a system and key steps employed in the two-phase development process. Lessons learned through this experience will be of value to other nonprofit agencies considering packaged software solutions to meet their monitoring and evaluation needs.

Keywords: Family Engagement, Partnership, Performance Measurement

Background

In recent decades, the nonprofit sector has faced increasing pressures of accountability and achievement, with an emphasis on measuring outcomes and impacts rather than just activities and inputs (Moxham & Boaden, 2007). Many funders, for example, now require ongoing measurements to help evaluate the impact of services. Education nonprofits, and specifically literacy nonprofits, may be especially under pressure to show impact, given recent education budget crises at the national and state levels (Cavanaugh, 2011), and increasing attention to grade level reading as a critical predictor of long-term school and life success for the most vulnerable children (Feister, 2010). Likewise, nonprofits hoping to impact children’s outcomes through family engagement efforts are under similar pressure, with increasing policy attention to family engagement as a means of reducing the achievement gap (PTA, 2012), yet with program evaluation evidence not as convincing as the broader research base on the critical role of families in children’s success (Mattingly et al., 2002; Henderson & Mapp, 2002).

Nonprofits face numerous challenges to measuring their performance, including pragmatic barriers like cost, as well as psychological and methodological barriers such as negative attitudes toward measurement and difficulties claiming causal relationships between a particular activity and outcome (Moxham & Boaden, 2007). Nonprofit performance measurement is in its infancy (Moxham & Boaden, 2007), but case study research and performance measurement software platforms, such as Social Solutions’ Efforts to Outcomes and Salesforce.com-based systems, exist and are becoming more widely utilized to help overcome these barriers and inform and support data collection, analysis, and use (Gair, 2009). For example, new recipients of federal Promise
Neighborhood grants, will utilize Efforts to Outcomes and the Results Scorecard for Place-based Solutions software tools to track their efforts and impact on children (A. Bordone, personal communication, August, 10, 2011; Blackwell, 2011).

This paper describes the preliminary results of an innovative research-program partnership between Raising A Reader (RAR) and Sociometrics Corporation to design a sustainable performance measurement system to monitor and evaluate the implementation and impact of RAR. It focuses specifically on RAR’s rationale for investing in such a system and key steps employed in the two-phase development process. Lessons learned through this experience will be of value to other nonprofit agencies considering packaged software solutions to meet their monitoring and evaluation needs.

**Partners**

Raising A Reader (RAR) is a national nonprofit organization that has helped families successfully build and sustain literacy routines in their homes since 1999. Through a network of 167 affiliate agencies in over 2,500 implementing sites nationwide, the organization delivers an evidence-based early literacy and family engagement program to over 116,000 children ages birth through kindergarten each year. Three core components make up the program: 1) weekly rotation of high-quality children’s books into families’ homes via bright red book bags, such that children are exposed to over 100 books during the typical program duration, 2) parent training including an orientation and skill-building session in interactive reading techniques, and 3) a connection to the local library via literacy events and blue book bags for children and families to keep, thus sustaining the practice of borrowing books and shared reading routines at home. Over twenty independent evaluations point to the program’s effectiveness in changing family literacy attitudes and behaviors; more recent evaluations also point to children’s emergent literacy outcomes (Kreider, 2011).

Established in 1983, Sociometrics is an applied research and development firm specializing in health and social science research applications. The company’s core products and services include evaluation, curriculum development and training, dissemination of evidence-based programs and best practices, and data archives and tools to facilitate public access to and analysis of exemplary social science data. Sociometrics’ Evaluation, Training, and Consulting Services group, in particular, offers a variety of services to support ongoing learning and strategic decision making by organizations including, but not limited to, providing training, and technical assistance to build program implementation and evaluation capacity of internal and external stakeholders. These services are based on the premise that monitoring and evaluation efforts should be: (1) based on tested research models; (2) sensitive to socio-cultural and economic differences among clients’ target audiences; (3) a component of every program and project; (4) a key to building organizational capacity; (5) a means to ensure sustainable funding; and (6) a cornerstone for learning and success.

**Phase I: Process and Findings**

**Step 1: Extracting Lessons from Early Efforts**

Prior to working with Sociometrics, RAR had amassed 20 independent evaluations that provide an empirical base for the program, particularly pointing to its positive effects on changing family literacy knowledge and behaviors. This evaluation foundation stemmed from an early investment among RAR’s venture philanthropy founders, who believed in the power of evidence for program expansion and sustainability, and supported local affiliates to evaluate their own successes.
As part of this, RAR commissioned the development of several linked tools for voluntary local affiliate use: a validated parent survey translated into several languages, an Excel database for local data entry and at-a-click analysis, and templates for evaluation reporting. Not surprisingly, many local RAR affiliates have conducted internal evaluations and commissioned independent evaluations as a result using these series of tools. Yet these data are difficult to aggregate across studies (and affiliates and evaluators) or fully maximize for National Office purposes. A synthesis of the outcomes from these studies was among the first steps in broader RAR National Office evaluation efforts (Kreider, 2011).

Another major first step in monitoring and evaluation activities included a voluntary annual survey of affiliates begun in 2009, which is first and foremost a census of who and how many children and families are being served by the program annually, and the 2,500+ implementing sites through which these services are being delivered. The survey also assesses aspects of program coordination, implementation of the core program model (i.e., book rotation, parent training, and library connections), evaluation practices, and funding sources.

Despite the intense effort involved in carrying out this data collection effort -- especially in collecting data from veteran affiliates unused to data demands from the National Office -- the yield was substantial. First, much was learned much how to go about collecting data successfully from affiliates. On average, ninety percent of affiliates have completed the survey each year. This success has hinged on several factors: 1) consistent messaging about the purpose and importance of this data, with key examples of how data have been used to secure funding, support programs, and improve book collections, shared back with affiliates; 2) repeated and personalized requests to complete the survey, which in many cases afforded relationship-building and problem-solving unlikely to occur with less contact; 3) a survey with clear focused questions that is revised and improved upon each year and a user-friendly interface (i.e., Survey Gizmo); and 4) incentives and disincentives for survey completion -- with National Office grant opportunities only extended to compliant affiliates and materials ordering privileges frozen for non-compliant affiliates.

Second, the data itself informed both funding and pragmatic supports, as well as supports for quality programming at the national and local affiliate level. RAR’s Development Department was able to identify affiliates with a strong library connection to take advantage of a corporate partner interested in supporting this program component. Program sustainability was also aided by accurate information about the over 2,500 exact implementing sites connected to local affiliate agencies, for example, because it was possible to identify and elevate the status of strong implementing sites to that of a coordinating agency when existing coordinating agencies folded during state budget crises. In addition, it was possible to easily facilitate the transfer of program materials to nearby sites when an affiliate became deactivated. Data also helped improve the quality of national and local programming. Information about the linguistic backgrounds of children and families informed additional translations of parent training videos and specialized bilingual book collections. Findings about regional weaknesses in the implementation of the core program model (in which affiliates across an entire state were rotating books, but few were conducting parent trainings or library connections), led to a statewide re-training of coordinators.

Developing a Plan and First Steps

After these early successes, the RAR National Office prioritized program fidelity and quality even further, as a key goal in its 5-year strategic plan starting in 2011. The two objectives under this goal were to: 1) establish and implement program quality, performance rating and evaluation
policies and procedures and 2) to collect and evaluate data demonstrating RAR’s capacity to improve outcomes.

In Summer 2011, RAR issued a request for proposals, for which Sociometrics was awarded the contract, to begin to address the second objective noted above, by streamlining current National Office evaluation efforts and researching options for enacting a more comprehensive performance measurement system. Phase I of this work entailed the development of an Excel database to automate data analysis and generate scorecards to facilitate reporting the results of data from the voluntary annual affiliate survey data that the National Office was already collecting to local affiliates. The scorecards, or “feedback cards,” are annual snapshots of affiliate performance on key indicators of quality, both in terms of “scored” core components of the program, as well as unscored best practices (see Figure 1). Affiliates are rated against National Office expectations, as well as against their own past year’s performance and that of other affiliates (both on average, and by similar size). In this way, affiliates can easily see their own incremental improvements in key areas, and their performance in comparison to expectations and others’ performance. At this point, only the completion of the survey, but not the ratings themselves, are tied to National Office incentives or disincentives. Rather, the ratings are meant to provide data that can help affiliates measure and improve program fidelity and share program successes with local stakeholders. In 2011, the RAR National Office conducted focus group research with an affiliate leadership group, as well as a small pilot of the scorecard with several lead affiliates, both with very positive feedback on the usefulness of the scorecard concept and the simplicity of the data presentation.

Figure 1. Annual Affiliate Survey Card Developed with Sociometrics
Phase II: Process and Findings

Phase II of the partnership, described in detail below, involved the development of a shared measurement strategy including the identification of performance measurement software that would incorporate and enable RAR to expand upon current activities to monitor and evaluate the implementation and impact of the program at the local affiliate and national levels. Shared measurement refers to the identification of “common metrics for tracking progress toward a common agenda across organizations, and providing scalable platforms to share data, discuss learnings, and improve strategy and action” (Hanleybrown et al., 2011, p.6). Agreement on the ways success will be measured and reported is essential to ensure that all efforts remained aligned and to measure the collective impact of a program (Kania & Kramer, 2011). Benefits of using shared measurement include: improved data quality, tracking progress toward a shared goal, enabling coordination and collaboration, learning and course correction, and catalyzing action (Hanleybrown et al., 2011). Recent advances in web-based technologies have enabled the development of shared systems for reporting performance and assessing outcomes using the same set of measures across hundreds of organizations. Although the identification and customization of such systems may require a significant initial investment of resources, their use can increase efficiency, reduce cost, improve the quality and credibility of the data collected, and increase effectiveness by enabling participants to learn from each other, and contribute to the progress of the field of family engagement as a whole (Kania & Kramer, 2011).

Step 1: Developing a Shared Vision and Identifying Metrics and Data Collection Approaches

Through a series of meetings between RAR and Sociometrics, it was determined that the shared measurement strategy for RAR should serve the following three broad purposes: (1) management of program operations and service delivery; (2) monitoring and analysis of data to support ongoing program implementation and improvement; and (3) program evaluation to assess performance of key services and to determine the outcome or benefit of these services. Table 1 lists the initial set of quality assurance and impact questions that were generated to guide development of indicators to be assessed for each local affiliate and collectively at the national level.

The selection of specific indicators was informed by theories of program operations and existing practices for measuring family literacy programs. All were designed to be specific, measurable, attainable, relevant, and time-bound (SMART) and included: (1) impact indicators to measure overall program performance (e.g., percent increase in number of children achieving literacy scores at the highest level); (2) outcome measures that describe the accomplishment of the outcome, i.e., the value, benefit and return on the investment (e.g., percent increase in the number of parents who shared books with children five or more times per week); (3) output indicators that measure the goods and services delivered (e.g., number of families reached); and (4) inputs or resources provided (e.g., child-to-staff ratio).

Potential data sources for many of the selected indicators already exist including the previously described voluntary annual affiliate survey; optional parent survey that measures family knowledge, family literacy behaviors (reading routines and library use), and child interest in reading; and an optional site rubric for local program coordinators to measure fidelity of implementation at individual sites. Affiliates’ current use of these assessment tools and their capacity for engaging in evaluation in general vary greatly. At one end of the spectrum are a
### Table 1

**Initial Quality Assurance and Impact Questions**

| Program Fidelity | • How well do affiliates rotate bags, conduct parent training, and connect families to the library as defined in the core program model?  
|                  | • Which, if any, of core program practices or combinations of practices, better predict child and family outcomes?  
|                  | • How, if at all, do additional optional intervention activities and intermediate outcomes relate to child and family outcomes (e.g., additional parent trainings, content and pedagogy of training, high parent attendance, provider read-alouds with children)?  
|                  | • Which, if any, coordination activities (e.g., site visits, implementer trainings, evaluation practices, funding practices) relate to fidelity of implementation and child and family outcomes?  
|                  | • Which, if any, organizational features relate to program fidelity and outcomes (e.g., size, setting, number of years implementing program, child-to-staff ratio)?  
| Family Outcomes  | • To what extent does the program improve family literacy knowledge and behaviors?  
|                  | • To what extent does the program improve other aspects of family engagement known to reduce the achievement gap?  
| Child Literacy Outcomes | • Does the program positively affect children’s language, emergent literacy, and reading skills?  
|                  | • How, if at all, are child literacy outcomes mediated by family outcomes?  
|                  | • Do child outcomes persist to the critical Pre-K/K and third grade junctures?  
|                  | • How do child outcomes vary by key child and family demographics?  
|                  | • How do child outcomes vary by implementation variables (e.g., type of implementation setting, dosage and duration of program, number of parent trainings)?  
|                  | • Does the program add value in the form of improved child literacy outcomes to comprehensive interventions?  

handful of affiliates that are 501(c)(3) organizations devoted entirely to implementing RAR in a specific geographic area. These affiliates have both the staff time and resources necessary for conducting intensive data collection and analysis. At the other end of the spectrum are many small social service agencies that coordinate several different programs, RAR among them. For these RAR affiliates, few staff and resources are devoted to the coordination of their RAR programs. Thus, their capacity to thoroughly monitor and evaluate their RAR programs is limited. The shared measurement strategy is therefore intended not only to standardize, but also build the capacity of many affiliates to engage in, routine data collection and analysis activities to inform and strengthen their programming.
Step 2: Identification and Assessment of Candidate Performance Measurement Software

After achieving consensus on a shared vision, the next step involved the selection of a performance measurement software to facilitate data collection and reporting. An increasing variety of software packages are available to help nonprofit organizations track program management data and outcomes measures across multiple users (Harris, 2004). Table 2 provides a sampling of the performance measurement software considered based on RAR’s shared measurement needs and includes a description of the key features of each application. These were identified through web searches and discussions with nonprofits with needs similar to RAR. The search focused on packaged solutions that could be customized rather than building a new system which, although potentially a useful alternative for agencies with truly unique needs, may be an expensive, lengthy, and risky endeavor (Leslie et al., 2011).

Table 2

Sampling of Candidate Performance Measurement Software Packages Considered*

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<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Company</th>
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<tr>
<td>Apricot by CTK</td>
<td>Outcomes achievement software specialized for small- to mid-sized non-profit organizations. Key features include: outcomes management, impact reporting, and donor and volunteer tracking.</td>
<td>Community TechKnowledge, Inc. <a href="http://www.communitytech.net/apricot">www.communitytech.net/apricot</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Efforts to Outcomes (ETO)</td>
<td>Data collection and management system typically used for case management. Key features include: tracking and analyzing extensive participant demographic and outcome data; referral management; monitoring and assessment of program and staff effectiveness.</td>
<td>Social Solutions <a href="http://www.socialsolutions.com">www.socialsolutions.com</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>iResult</td>
<td>Comprehensive user-friendly data management and reporting tool designed for school districts and student support services. Key features include: performance reporting based on goals; dashboard design with red and green color coding of critical data points; social networking tools to share best practices and communicate data results.</td>
<td>iResult, LLC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Results Scorecard 2.0</td>
<td>Strategic management software tool that connects stakeholders in a single network to share population- and program level data using a scorecard format. Key features</td>
<td>Results Leadership Group <a href="http://www.resultsleadershipgroup.org">www.resultsleadershipgroup.org</a></td>
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Table 3 describes seven key criteria that were used to assess each candidate performance measurement software including: accessibility; ease of use; cost; training and technical assistance; system capacity; reliability and accuracy; and data security. For example, all of the software packages considered are hosted entirely online and are accessible through web browsers. In this model, organizations pay a software vendor to provide online access and all software and data are stored on the vendor’s servers. The benefits of this model include no requirements for purchasing hardware, software updates and data back-ups are handled exclusively by the vendor, and the system may be accessed from any location that has an Internet connection. Accessibility was a high priority for RAR because affiliates are located all across the country. Given the wide variation in affiliates’ capacity to implement evaluation activities, the basic functionality of the new system also needed to be relatively easy to learn and remember. At the same time, ideally it would also be sophisticated and flexible enough to allow more advanced users to further expand and customize their site templates and reports. Costs for most hosted systems typically include an initial set-up and configuration fees to customize and migrate data to the application, followed by an annual fee that is often scaled to usage (Leslie et al., 2011). RAR successfully obtained funding from W.K. Kellogg Foundation to cover the design and piloting of the performance measurement system, but ongoing maintenance costs will need to be absorbed by the annual program operating budget without too great an additional financial burden on affiliates.

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Software</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Website</th>
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<tr>
<td>SalesForce CRM Nonprofit Starter Pack</td>
<td>Customer relationship management system traditionally used by businesses to manage interactions with customers, clients, and sales prospects. Key features include: manage complex individual relationships; track households with individuals; manage fundraising and donation tracking.</td>
<td><a href="http://www.salesforcefoundation.org">www.salesforcefoundation.org</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TraxSolutions Outcome Measurement Toolkit</td>
<td>Outcome measurement software for non-profit and community-based organizations. Key features include: logic model development; shared data for longitudinal, quantitative, and qualitative analysis; and automated or ad hoc reports and charts.</td>
<td>nFocus Solutions <a href="http://www.nfocus.com/our-solutions/outcome-measurement-toolkit">www.nfocus.com/our-solutions/outcome-measurement-toolkit</a></td>
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*Note: No endorsement of any of these products is implied*
### Table 3.

**Criteria Used to Assess Candidate Performance Measurement Software** (adapted from Promise Neighborhoods Institute at PolicyLink, 2011)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Criteria</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>1. Accessibility</strong>&lt;br&gt;• Accessible from different locations via the web in real time&lt;br&gt;• Accessible to affiliates who have a range of experience levels in managing data&lt;br&gt;• Allows for tiered access to data.</td>
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<td><strong>2. Ease of Use</strong>&lt;br&gt;• Ability to upload existing data&lt;br&gt;• Ability to download data into statistical analysis programs such as Excel and SPSS&lt;br&gt;• Easily add new data fields to data collection forms as necessary&lt;br&gt;• Ability to track, analyze, and monitor changes to different types of data (e.g., annual affiliate survey, parent surveys, child outcome measures)&lt;br&gt;• Easily collect and aggregate data from all RAR affiliates who use a variety of data collection systems, while at the same time minimizing data collection burden&lt;br&gt;• Ability to create a variety of customized reports&lt;br&gt;• Ability to “drill down” on data presented in summary reports&lt;br&gt;• Ability to integrate with calendar and e-mail applications to track deadlines and send reminders&lt;br&gt;• Requires minimal IT staffing and support to maintain and oversee the system</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>3. Cost</strong>&lt;br&gt;• Determine whether costs are based on the number of records, users, computers, or sites&lt;br&gt;• Consider potential costs associated with the following:&lt;br&gt;  ○ Initial set-up and monthly fees&lt;br&gt;  ○ Staff training&lt;br&gt;  ○ Technical assistance (ongoing or as needed)&lt;br&gt;  ○ Access to different levels of technical support&lt;br&gt;  ○ New features not yet developed by the vendor</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>4. Training and Technical Assistance</strong>&lt;br&gt;• Types of training included with the software package&lt;br&gt;• Duration and frequency of training(s)&lt;br&gt;  ○ Number and level of staff required to attend (e.g., IT staff, program staff)&lt;br&gt;  ○ Training format (e.g., in-person, online)&lt;br&gt;  ○ Specific content delivered during training&lt;br&gt;  ○ Availability of customized trainings&lt;br&gt;• Types of technical assistance available&lt;br&gt;  ○ Typical time frame for meeting requests for assistance&lt;br&gt;  ○ Direct access to technical assistance available to RAR affiliates</td>
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Strategies used to identify and assess the strengths and weaknesses of each candidate performance measurement software included: Internet research, in-person and phone conversations with vendors, participation in software demonstrations, and discussions with current users whose needs are similar to those of RAR. The latter two were particularly useful. As good as the software specifications might look, one can quickly determine in a demo if the application is usable. It is also an opportunity to provide the vendor more insight into one’s needs. Likewise, getting feedback from current users, who are not sales representatives from a software company trying to position their product in its best light, revealed one front-runner candidate to be less flexible, more time-intensive, and not as well-liked by local nonprofits as RAR initially believed.

**Step 3: Finalizing Vendor Selection, Negotiating a Contract and Developing a System**

An evaluation consultant who knows the market and is familiar with how the performance measurement systems are working for other nonprofits can save research time, and can direct an organization to systems more likely to meet true needs. Although a consultant may be more expensive than doing it on one’s own, money spent up front on the selection and planning phases is likely to be recouped through lower costs and greater efficiency down the road. Sociometrics had complementary skills to RAR National Office staff -- experience building systems similar to RAR’s earlier data entry and analysis database, conducting empowerment evaluation consultation with other nonprofits, and investigating varied technological solutions (in large federal grants) that enhance, track, and provide training around social science interventions, yet require easy interfacing with educators. As such, they shared a common language but also understood additional kinds of questions to ask of RAR and potential vendors that clarified goals definition and more. They also created a strong working rapport, via meetings, email communications, multiple revisions of deliverables, and more, in which candid discussions about goals, needs and wishes related to the system were welcome. Additionally, the feedback received from Sociometrics informed further conversations between RAR and the final candidates in which RAR was able to push the vendors to show how their software would address the specific needs of RAR. For example, one of the software packages is designed mainly for case management and would require the software maker to adapt and simplify the package to meet RAR’s needs.
After much discussion and deliberation, RAR is close to choosing a performance measurement software vendor. A key point in making the selection is that the top candidate is well-established, diminishing the risk in making both monetary and time investments in a cloud-based system that could potentially disappear. Also, one of RAR’s most sophisticated affiliates in terms of program evaluation is already using the top candidate’s platform. This situation will both inform the creation of the National platform as well as allow this affiliate to seemlessly adopt the new system. Another consideration is that adopting the more established top candidate will provide RAR with access to this firm’s national network of users, thus potentially increasing RAR’s visibility which could, in turn, aid in RAR’s expansion goals and its ability to integrate with complex anti-poverty initiatives.

**Next Steps**

Typically, the next steps for developing a shared measurement strategy include: refinement and testing of the software platform and tools; learning forums and continuous improvement; ongoing infrastructure support; and improvement to the system based on pilot, review, refinement, and ongoing evaluation of usability and impact (Hanleybrown et al., 2011). Once the selection is finalized, RAR will work with the vendor to customize the software to meet RAR’s specific needs. The first step will be to share with the vendor the evaluation tools that RAR has created so far, including the parent survey, the annual check in and the affiliate feedback cards. RAR will also share the raw data collected thus far to give the vendor an idea of the scope of the data analysis needs at present. Over the next six months, as the vendor works to customize the software, an RAR staff liaison will work closely with the vendor to provide ongoing feedback regarding modifications. Once the software package is complete, RAR will conduct a pilot in collaboration with several affiliates, including both highly sophisticated partners and those that require more support. Finally, as RAR roles out the evaluation system with all affiliates, they could look to potentially engage Sociometrics again to support ongoing data analysis.

**Implications**

Increasingly, the nonprofit community has come to understand that data collection and evaluation are critical activities to support effective practice and improve program delivery and outcomes. Performance measurement systems can be an effective way to: (1) provide constant feedback on the extent to which programs are achieving their goals; (2) improve program design; (3) motivate staff; (4) encourage innovation; and (5) improve communication among all stakeholders. Nonprofits should be engaged in performance measurement, not because a funder requires it, but because it is an important way to achieve continuous service/program improvement and deliver improved outcomes to clients and the community.

This research-practice partnership to lay RAR’s foundation for measuring and improving program outcomes offers several implications for other family literacy organizations. First, the organization must carefully attend to lessons learned from evaluation and monitoring efforts thus far, both in terms of process and outcomes. Second, selecting a research firm with complementary expertise, in RAR’s case, with technological, evaluation, and substantive knowledge, and with the rapport necessary to tackle challenging questions together, was critical. Third, much time was devoted to the development of shared goals, metrics, and data collection approaches - shared not just between the research and practice organizations, but also among constituent organizations (in
our case, affiliate agencies). Finally, RAR’s national office invested heavily in time and expertise to select a well-matched online performance measurement software to meet their own and affiliates’ needs, and is laying out our final development and implementation steps carefully. With much forethought and a little luck, RAR’s epilogue, and that of similarly invested literacy organizations, will be one of positive impact for children and families, and one of organizational sustainability at the national and local level.

References


Multiple Perspectives on Family Literacy Programs: Convergence, Controversy and Next Steps

Patricia A. Edwards, Michigan State University

Abstract: One of the most powerful supports for children’s learning and development is family involvement both in and out of school. Over 40 years of steadily accumulating evidence show that family involvement is one of the strongest predictors of children’s school success. While there appears to be little or no controversy within the research community when it comes to engaging parents in their children’s learning, there is an intense controversy within the research community concerning family literacy programs. This paper highlights these controversies by drawing on three research-based courses of actions—accommodation, incorporation, and adaptation (Wiley, 1996). Each framework is described within the context of working with parents. The author delineates the usefulness, or lack of, each framework for family literacy programs. Lastly, she describes why and how she developed an adaptive program to orient parents to mainstream literacy practices.

Key Words: family literacy, programs, diversity

One of the most powerful supports for children’s learning and development is family involvement both in and out of school. Over 40 years of steadily accumulating evidence show that family involvement is one of the strongest predictors of children’s school success. "When schools, families, and community groups work together to support learning, children tend to do better in school, stay in school longer, and like school more." That's the conclusion of A New Wave of Evidence, a report from Southwest Educational Development Laboratory (2002). Surprisingly, there appears to be little or no controversy within the research community when it comes to engaging parents in their children’s learning. As a scholar in family literacy, what I find so intriguing is that there is an intense controversy within the research community concerning family literacy programs.

Educators have heard so many conflicting messages about how to work with families, especially as it relates to family literacy programs. Nearly twenty years ago, Gadsden (1994) summarized some of the tensions surrounding family literacy. Gadsden (1994) summarized the disagreement and dissension that characterizes the work in family literacy as emerging from two seriously conflicting premises: one that perceives the family’s lack of school-like literacy as a barrier to learning, and the other that sees the home literacy practices that are already present—however different they may be from school-based literacy—as a bridge to new learning. Rather than choosing sides in the debate, however, Gadsden argues that both premises may be useful. She suggests that educators might adopt a reciprocal approach predicated on an understanding that teachers need to instruct parents in school-based literacy and also seek to learn about and integrate parents’ existing knowledge and resources into school curricula. Paratore (2001) summarized the tensions in the field of family literacy “[as] a complex and muddy arena—one in which there is wide disagreement about the goals, purposes, and potential effects on the lives of those the programs are intended to serve” (p. 100).

While Gadsden and Paratore outlined many of the tensions in the field of family literacy, I believe it is necessary to highlight some of the frameworks that researchers have proposed in regards to working with families. I have found three research-based courses of actions, which I
have categorized by drawing upon the framework of Wiley (1996)—accommodation, incorporation, and adaptation.

Accommodation requires teachers, supervisors, personnel officers and gatekeepers to have a better understanding of the communicative styles and literacy practices of their students (Wiley, 1996, p. 148).

Incorporation requires researchers to study community practices that have not been valued previously by the schools, and to incorporate them into the curriculum. It also means surrendering a privileged position by acknowledging that something can be learned from other ethnic groups (Wiley, 1996, p. 148-149).

Adaptation involves the expectation that children and adults who are held to have substandard knowledge and skills will acculturate or learn to match or measure up to the norms of those who control the schools, institutions and workplace (Wiley, 1996, p. 147).

As one would expect, there is strong research support for each of these courses of action. Supporters of accommodation argue that “literacy learning begins in the home, not the school, and that instruction should build on the foundation for literacy learning established in the home” (Au, 1993, p. 35). Research has shown that even in conditions of extreme poverty, homes can be rich in print and family members may engage in literacy activities of many kinds on a daily basis (Heath, 1983; Teale, 1986; Purcell-Gates, 1996).

In my opinion, the accommodation course of action seems extremely one-sided—it offers few resources to parents and seems to be built upon the naïve assumption that culturally sensitized teachers will be able to make up for learning experiences, opportunities and resources that may be missing in the lives of some children. This may lead to early disillusionment for many new and experienced teachers, when they realize that, despite their sensitivity, their students still don’t achieve at the level of middle-class counterparts.

The second course of action, incorporation, has been well supported by the research community. It is argued, for example, that “teachers and parents need to understand the way each defines, values and uses literacy as part of cultural practices. Such mutual understanding offers the potential for schooling to be adjusted to meet the needs of families” (Cairney, 1997, p. 70). It also has been advocated that

…as educators we must not assume that we can only teach the families how to do school, but that we can learn valuable lessons by coming to know the families, and by taking the time to establish the social relationships necessary to create personal links between households and classrooms. (Moll, 1999, p. xiii)

According to Wiley (1996), “surrendering a privileged position by acknowledging that something can be learned from other groups need not be taken as a retreat from high standards nor as imposing a hardship on the children of the middle-class” (p. 149). However, he warns, “In order for incorporation to occur, teachers need knowledge of the language, communication styles, and literacy practices of their students” (p. 149). He admits that “incorporation obviously poses logistical problems for schools and classroom practice” (p. 149) and that Heath’s (1983) suggestion of turning teachers into learners and students into ethnographers “is no simple task; Heath’s own efforts involved years of community and school ethnographic work” (p. 150). While schools and classroom teachers might agree that it would be beneficial to have knowledge of the language,
communication styles and literacy practices of all their students, in reality it would be nearly impossible to gain this much needed knowledge during a nine-month school year. As has already been noted, it takes years to develop ethnography skills.

From the last course of action, adaptation, has emerged controversy and conflict concerning how families should be involved in their children’s literacy development and what they need to know to be effective partners in literacy. Supporters of adaptation claim that many poor, minority, and immigrant parents want to give their children linguistic, social, and cultural capital to deal in the marketplace of schools (Gallimore, Weisner, Kaufman, & Bernheimer, 1989; Super & Harkness, 1986). They also have suggested that “when schools fail to provide parents with factual, empowering information and strategies for supporting their child’s learning, the parents are even more likely to feel ambivalence as educators [of their own children]” (Clark, 1988, p. 95).

Supporters of the adaptation approach recognize that there are multiple activities in addition to reading aloud that help children become better readers and successful students; telling stories and singing songs also may encourage the acquisition of literacy skills (National Education Goals Panel, 1997; Moss & Fawcett, 1995; Glazer, 1989). Key adaptation studies, however, have focused on ways of showing parents how to read to their children or assist them with school-like literacy events (Edwards, 1993; Darling & Hayes, 1989; Rodriguez-Brown, Li & Albom, 1999). This group of researchers recognizes that while the importance of parent-child book reading has been chronicled in reading research (Huey, 1908; Teale, 1981; Anderson, Hiebert, Scott, & Wilkinson, 1985), an extensive body of research also exists describing the difficulties lower socioeconomic status parents have in sharing books with their young children (Ninio, 1980; Heath, 1982; Snow & Ninio, 1986).

What I found in my 1989 study titled “Supporting Lower SES Mothers’ Attempts to Provide Scaffolding for Book Reading” is that book reading is a very simple teacher directive, but a very complex and difficult task for some parents (see Edwards, 1989). I put forth the argument that to simply inform parents of the importance of reading to their children is not sufficient. Instead we must go beyond telling to showing lower socioeconomic parents how to participate in parent-child book-reading interactions with their children and support their attempts to do.

The adaptation approach has led to the creation of family literacy programs that “train” parents how to read to their children, while creating controversy over the nature of that training. Some researchers have warned that the danger of this approach leads to “blaming the victim” (Nieto, 1992; Shockley, 1994; Street, 1995). Another claim is that this approach communicates a deficit-model of learning development and ignores that literacy is embedded in home life (Anderson and Stokes, 1984; Erickson, 1989). It also has been suggested that family literacy educational programs imply that the homes of poor, minority, and immigrant children are lacking in literacy (Auerbach, 1989; Erickson, 1989; Delgado-Gaitan, 1987; Anderson & Stokes, 1984), or that these programs fail to recognize that “literacy is not something which can be pasted on to family life, it is deeply embedded within it” (McLeod, 1996, p. 130). Another criticism is that parent training programs “have perpetuated the ‘we know, you don’t know’ dichotomy” (Shockley, 1994, p. 500).

As an African American scholar who developed a family literacy program embedded within an adaptation perspective, and who has “trained” parents to read to their children, I question the criticisms raised by these researchers. Specifically, I asked:

Where have researchers’ fears, doubts, reservations come from? What do researchers think these parents are being “forced” to read? Does evidence exist where researchers have interviewed parents who have attended these family literacy programs? Is it fair for researchers to insert their own personal feelings about parents participating in family literacy
programs without highlighting parents’ voices, perceptions, and evaluations? Are researchers’ fears, doubts, and reservations justified? (Edwards, 1995, p. 562)

Further, I would argue that these criticisms are not justified because children have to understand how to function within the “culture of power” in order to do well in school (Delpit, 1988). Auerbach, (1989) agrees that “authority is vested in those belonging to the mainstream culture, the literacy practices of the mainstream become the norm and have higher status in school contexts” (p. 173). Children in academic families are familiar with cultural capital and the culture of literacy, making it easier for them to adapt to the literacy environment of school:

They already know, or acquire implicitly as they develop, the varying registers of written language with the accompanying “ways of meaning” and “ways of saying,” the vocabulary, the syntax, the intentionality. This makes learning the “new” so much easier. (Purcell-Gates, 1996, pp. 182-183)

Purcell-Gates also describes in passionate detail what happens to those children who do not grow up in academic families:

Their social and cultural lives do not support this effort but rather exist separately and often compete with it. From the beginning they are challenged to learn a code that some of them may not even have realized existed before…The language and purposes for print encountered through formal education are foreign. The vocabulary is too hard and removed from their daily lives; the conventional syntax of exposition and complex fiction is unfathomable. Without a great deal of support and motivation, their level of literacy skill attainment is bound to be low compared with that of their peers who are natives of the educated literate world. (1996, p. 183)

I recognize that elementary and secondary education alone cannot solve the problems of educating the nation’s youngsters for the 21st century. Also, I recognize that the critical role of the home and family must be addressed to break the cycle of illiteracy and improve economic circumstances for youngsters. At the 1996 annual meeting of the International Reading Association, former U. S. Secretary of Education Richard W. Riley echoed my thoughts when he issued this challenge:

My friends, it’s time to get serious. The dumbing down of American education must end. If children need extra help to measure up, they should get it. Let’s provide tutors, and call in the families, or keep the schools open late and open in the summer, too, if we must. But whatever we do, let’s end this tyranny of low expectation once and for all. Illiteracy is the ball and chain that ties us to poverty. We must smash it forever.

My answer to smashing illiteracy was to develop two family literacy programs: Parents as Partners in Reading: A Family Literacy Training Program (see Edwards, 1990; 1993) and Talking Your Way to Literacy: A Program to Help Nonreading Parents Prepare Their Children for Reading (see Edwards, 1990). I had no idea, however, that my work—which exposed poor parents and children to trade books as well as school-like interaction styles, such as labeling pictures and labeling letters—would receive such a strong reaction from the research community. In short,
because my work took a decidedly adaptive approach, I was criticized for implying that something was wrong, or deficient, with the ways in which parents socialize their children (Pellegrini, 1991).

African Americans have historically wanted “to ensure that school provides their children with discourse patterns, interactional styles, and spoken and written languages codes that will allow them success in the larger society” (Delpit, 1995, p. 29).

I argue that Delpit’s comments have implications for helping African American families to participate in school-like literacy events. Her message also has implications for other ethnic minorities who want their children to succeed in mainstream schools (Jimenez, Moll, Rodriguez-Brown, & Barrera, 1999; Purcell-Gates, 1996). The research and practitioner communities need to be sensitive to this perspective.

References


Technology as a Family Literacy Intervention: Perspectives From the Field

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Abstract: The integration of technology into family literacy instruction has led to a wealth of new and interesting methods for engaging students with literacy curriculum. The role of family literacy teachers in implementing, and successfully, utilizing technology to teach literacy is critical to understanding how technology is perceived as a teaching tool. The study explored the perceptions family literacy teachers held about using technology as a teaching tool and the benefits and barriers they encountered along the way. A qualitative case study methodology was used and the findings pointed to benefits to using technology which included a) technology for everyday living, b) technology enhances learning, c) parents and children using technology together, while the barriers included a) varying levels of experience, b) focusing too much on technology, and c) inadequate opportunities for training. Implications for research and practice are discussed.

Keywords: family literacy, technology, teacher practice

The notion of family literacy frequently stirs up images of children and parents engaging in reading activities and similar forms of learning with text. We often picture the use of print materials such as books, magazines, and other sources we find in our daily routines (Britto & Brooks-Gunn, 2001; Caspe, 2003; Handel, 1999). However, the upward trend towards a technology rich society where television, computers and the latest technological gadgets are showing up in a variety of settings, technology has become an increased focus of literacy research. Children, parents and teachers are frequently asked to engage in the use of technology as part of the educational setting in addition to the personal arenas where literacy skills are also being developed. The interaction of traditional literacy program elements and technology has become an important area of study for the future of literacy organizations. The methods that family literacy teachers utilize to engage students in the use of technology in the classroom provides a distinctive point of evaluation for scholars and practitioners. The purpose of this study is to grasp a deeper understanding about the perceptions and methods that family literacy teachers encountered as they integrated technology into literacy instruction.

Literature Review

Many family literacy organizations have already implemented literacy interventions that contain a technology component as part of the delivery medium and researchers have offered opinions about how to best construct a technology based learning environment (Kim, 2009; Labbo, 2006). The methods for integrating technology can vary greatly based on types of equipment, teacher preferences, student learning needs and targeted academic objectives. In one empirical study aimed at the assessment of fifth and eighth grade students’ technology literacy and associated academic gains or losses, the researcher found that some students’ language arts scores on a standardized assessment increased as their technology literacy increased (Judson, 2010). However,
the findings also suggested that some students’ gains in technology literacy did not align with gains in other academic areas which could have been due to a variety of factors (Judson, 2010). Contrastingly, a study of ninety-five Dutch kindergarten students and their four teachers who engaged in the use of a technology heavy literacy curriculum were shown to have significant gains in literacy when compared to the control student group who did not receive the technology based curriculum (Cviko, McKenney, & Voogt, 2012). The researchers also found that teacher perceptions about using technology were aligned with an overall positive outlook on the use of technology as an instructional tool (Cviko et al., 2012).

The aforementioned studies have given primary focus to the measured learning outcomes of students with a minimal focus on the perceptions of literacy teachers, but additional research targeted at the reflections of teachers who use technology could add significantly to the literature. The integration of technology into family literacy programs requires teachers and program facilitators to understand the proper uses of technological tools and strategies to recognize its effectiveness as a learning tool. Often, the first observations about a literacy intervention will come in the form of informal feedback from the teacher. The teacher as a first point of contact can provide a wealth of information regarding the use of technology strategies in family literacy programs. This learning can then be redirected and shared with the organization as a whole (Confessore & Kops, 1998). The success of literacy interventions are normally monitored using formal quantitative modes of data collection specific to literacy instruction. However, the teachers’ perceived effectiveness of using technology to deliver family literacy programs needs to be further understood to determine how technology is helping or hindering the outcomes of each program.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework used to guide the direction of the study was Kearsely and Shneiderman’s (1998) engagement theory, which specifically encompasses the higher level learning, interaction and connections that are made when technology is used as an instructional tool. According to Kearsely and Shneiderman (1998), individuals who use technology in a learning setting become intertwined with the curriculum, other learners, and technological equipment itself at a much more in depth level than with more traditional curriculum. Family literacy teachers are presenting curriculum using technology in order to create learning situations where students are able to connect with the material through a variety of deeply engaged activities. Engagement theory was an appropriate model to guide the study because the use of technology to teach family literacy elevates the learning environment to new heights and takes students relationships with the material to expanded levels.

Methodology

According to Creswell (2003), researchers utilize a qualitative methodology in order to gain access to information about a phenomenon at a level of depth that may not be possible through the use of another methodology. Similarly, Merriam (1998) argued that a qualitative methodology provides a framework for research participants to give open-ended responses to questions that give insight into their innermost thoughts about the research topic. The use of a qualitative methodology does not lead to research findings that would be described as absolute truth as would be defined in a positivistic paradigm (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Instead, a qualitative methodology focuses on the perceptions, explained meanings, and often contradictory nature of reality (Erlandson, Harris,
The use of a qualitative methodology was most appropriate for the study because the reflections and perceptions of the research participants are confined to the time and space of the study and to the connections made by the researcher.

Methods

The method employed for the study was a case study design, which Yin (2009) described as a method which “allows investigators to retain the holistic and meaningful characteristics of real-life events – such as individual life cycles, small group behavior, organizational and managerial processes, neighborhood change, school performance, international relations, and the maturation of industries” (p. 4). The case study method in this study allowed for a small group of family literacy teachers to be interviewed about their perceptions and experiences with the use of technology as an instructional method. The case was constricted to the eight participants who were interviewed for the study.

In order to participate in the study, participants were required to have experience teaching family literacy with the use of technology either previously or currently. Additionally, each participant was required to currently be employed as a family literacy teacher or be currently volunteering as a family literacy teacher. Potential participants were initially contacted through the use of an on-line database that identified literacy organizations, which included a variety of site types such as schools, non-profit organizations and state organizations. E-mails were sent to contacts of selected organizations with requests to forward included information about the study to family literacy teachers associated with the organization. In all, eight participants were identified which included six women and two men. Cynthia, Christina, Eva, Michael, Norma and Paula were Hispanic, Ashley was African American, and John was white. The participants’ responses and identities are represented by pseudonyms in the study in order to keep their actual names confidential. A brief description of each participant is as follows:

**Ashley:** Ashley was the Early Childhood specialist and worked with children from the ages of eight years old to less than one year old. Her program served a predominantly Hispanic population and participants were required to be zoned to the local elementary school and Ashley had been teaching with the program for nearly one year at the time of the interview.

**Christina:** Christina worked as the literacy teacher for the children that attended her family literacy program. Her program served a predominantly Hispanic population and students lived in the nearby area and in the surrounding suburbs.

**Cynthia:** Cynthia worked as the Civics teacher as part of a family literacy program. Her focus included the literacy component for the ESL (English Second Language) students. The program served a predominantly Hispanic population as well as a few families from Pakistan and India. The building where her program was taught was central to the population of families that attended the program in a large metropolitan city.

**Eva:** Eva served as the Program Coordinator of a family literacy program that functioned in coordination with a local public school. Her role included managing staff members, recruiting, budgeting, grant writing, and other related program needs. The population of families that her program served was predominantly Hispanic and eligibility was contingent upon having at least one child enrolled in the associated school.
John: John was a volunteer teacher that was responsible for delivering the ESL classes to the adults in his family literacy program and had been working in that capacity for over six years. The family literacy program was run in connection with a local library system and the population of students included adults who were Southeast Asian, Vietnamese, Korean, Chinese, Columbian, Venezuelan, Chilean, and Iranian.

Michael: Michael was the Adult Education ESL teacher within his family literacy organization that existed in connection with a school district grant funded program. Michael was in his first year as a family literacy teacher with the program and planned to continue on for the next academic year. The student population served by the program was from El Salvador and Mexico and both represented approximately fifty percent of the students.

Norma: Norma was the Parent Educator/Home Visitor within her family literacy organization which allowed her to see families in the school and home environment. The student population she served was predominantly Hispanic and they were required to be zoned to the local elementary school.

Paula: Paula worked as the literacy teacher for the children in her family literacy program and her primary responsibilities included the ESL component for the children. She also co-taught lessons with the parents and children together. The population of students was predominantly Hispanic and resided in various locations across the city and surrounding suburbs.

The participants were each scheduled for an interview with one of the researchers, which included questions that focused on the general types of technology they used and how they perceived the positive and negative outcomes of using technology in their instruction. The interviews were semi-structured which included a consistent set of interview questions that each participant answered as well as any additional questions needed for clarification during individual interviews (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Yin, 2009).

Data Analysis

The data analysis process began by compiling researchers’ notes and observations along with the interview transcriptions for each participant. Because the interviews were voice recorded (except for one participant who declined the recording option), each interview tape was transcribed into print form. The interview that was not voice recorded was transcribed using the researchers’ notes from the interview session. The participants received a copy of their transcript by e-mail, which served as the “member check” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 236), and they could make changes or clarify ideas in the text. After this step, the process of content analysis was used to break down the data into the smallest portions of content that still contained meaning, called units (Erlandson et al., 1993). The units were arranged in groups that shared similar meaning called themes (Erlandson et al., 1993). The themes were then connected to the research questions aimed understanding how family literacy teachers perceive the use of technology as an instructional tool. The findings emerged from the sorted data and associated themes.

Findings

The findings that emerged from the data analysis were categorized into two main areas which included benefits of technology and barriers to using technology, which have been
The data pointed to the following benefits of using technology: a) technology for everyday living, b) technology enhances learning, and c) parents and children using technology together. The everyday uses of technology could range from a variety of needs which included the use of e-mail to contact their child’s teacher, accessing on-line banking features.

### Table 1

**Summarized Findings**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Participant Reflections</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Benefits of Technology</strong></td>
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| Technology for everyday living             | • Teaching technology at school supports outside technology learning needs  
                                         • Technology is often used in multiple settings for personal needs such as e-mail, on-line search engines, transportation, and banking.  
                                         • Children will be prepared to use technology as they move forward academically  
                                         • Access to technology through program if not available at home |
| Technology enhances learning               | • Engagement for parents and children is increased when technology is used for instruction  
                                         • Children enjoy the SMART Board due to the new medium and variety in activities available  
                                         • Visual aspect of using technology also aids in student engagement |
| Parents and children using technology together | • Children often teach their parents how to use the computer  
                                           • Parents want to learn skills they can then teach to their children using technology |
| **Barriers to Using Technology**           |                         |
| Varying levels of experience              | • Parents and children often experience a wide range of computer skills  
                                         • Teachers had to change lesson plans to reflect the variety of technology knowledge  
                                         • Lack of equipment sometimes required teachers to pair parents with higher technology skills with parents who were largely unfamiliar with technology |
| Focusing too much on technology           | • Technology was often regarded as an excellent teaching tool, but that it should not serve as a complete replacement for traditional literacy activities  
                                         • Overreliance on technology can waste valuable instructional time if equipment is not working  
                                         • Parents sometimes spend less time practicing literacy skills in lieu of using the computer or other technology for personal needs |
| Inadequate opportunities for training      | • Training opportunities would enhance the ability for teachers to maximize tools such as the SMART Board |
to eliminate paper billing, and general access to technology that helped prepare parents and students for daily technology interactions. Technology was noted to enhance learning by channeling a deeper engagement with the literacy materials for both children and their parents and by providing an additional teaching mechanism geared towards a variety of learning styles. Parents and children using technology together created the benefit of reciprocal and shared learning experiences.

The data also suggested that the barriers to using technology to teach family literacy included: a) varying levels of experience, b) focusing too much on technology, and c) inadequate opportunities for training. Varying levels of experience posed a challenge for participants because not all of the children and parents had equivalent technology skills and they frequently had to make changes to their instructional plans to accommodate different levels. Focusing too much on technology could result in a loss of instructional time if equipment failed and technology was noted as a good supplement, rather than replacement, to traditional literacy activities. Inadequate training opportunities created challenges for participants who desired to use technological equipment to the fullest potential because they lacked in-depth training opportunities.

**Discussion & Implications**

Family literacy teachers are an important group of stakeholders when considering the impact of family literacy instruction. Their role as educators positions them to provide insightful feedback about using technology in their classrooms. The perceptions and observations they made regarding technology usage can help the field of family literacy make important decisions for the future. By considering the responses provided by the participants during the research process, technology can be further considered as a tool for successful family literacy instruction.

The benefits of using technology to teach family literacy classes were a frequent topic discussed by the participants. The participants’ organizations often served as entry points to technology education for many of their students. While some students had access to a computer and the internet at home, the families who did not have their own computer received instruction through their family literacy classes. Because technology has become increasingly necessary for many job roles, in educational settings, and for personal use, becoming technologically savvy is an important skill for students to learn. The students who receive literacy instruction that contained a technology component are at an advantage when compared to students who have not previously been exposed to technology.

The participants also expressed that technology helped to engage students in the learning process at an increased level when compared to their experiences where no technology was available. Salomon (1990) discussed that technology and the student come together to create a unique learning circumstance for understanding new learning and information. The images, sounds, and ability to manipulate text using certain equipment grasped the attention of the students in new ways. Several of the participants noted that their students expressed excitement when they had the opportunity to work on the computer and were disappointed if anything disrupted their allotted time. The use of technology also provided learning experiences for students where the parent and child could work together on literacy activities. In a foundational study, Tizzard, Schofield and Hewison (1982) found that literacy improvement could happen even when the relationship of parent and child was one of similar literacy learning needs. For example, the parent was not required to be the contributor with the best reading skills (Tizzard et. al, 1982; Anderson et. al, 2007). This dynamic appeared through the creation of a reciprocal learning situation with the parent and child teaching each other what they had learned on the computer.
While the participants overwhelmingly believed technology to be a positive addition to family literacy instruction, they also noted some of the challenges they faced with using various equipment and programs. Some participants experienced a shortage in equipment, which caused a decrease in the time spent interacting with technology. The equipment also occasionally did not work properly and participants would have to change their lesson plans to a more traditional teaching method. Another challenge to using technology for literacy instruction is that students possess varying levels of experience with technology. This caused some of the participants to have problems presenting a lesson because not all of the students were comfortable with the technology instructions. The theme of focusing too much on technology provided insight into the risk of becoming overly reliant on one approach to literacy instruction. Finally, staff training for certain pieces of equipment was a challenge that some of the participants faced when trying to integrate technology into their lessons. These findings suggest that technology should not be the only tool for instruction and should, instead, be considered as a relevant and useful tool for teaching and learning. Additionally, when technology use is possible for family literacy teachers extra opportunities for training and professional development may prove useful to increase the overall effectiveness of technology as a method of instruction in the family literacy classroom.

The benefits and challenges that participants experienced as a result of technology provided insightful information about some of the potential outcomes that may appear in a family literacy classroom. While the results of the study are contained to a specific case example, the findings may offer other family literacy teachers new ideas to consider as they plan how to effectively implement technology usage into their curriculum. Additionally, through participant reflections about the barriers they experienced, family literacy organizations and providers can use these as a starting point for proactively integrating technology with specific attention to the possible pitfalls. The numerous benefits gained through the use of technology as an instructional tool suggests that family literacy programs without access to technology, or access on a consistent basis, may be at a disadvantage when considering programmatic outcomes. While the financial and time resources needed to implement technology are considerable, policy makers and practitioners may find that the concept requires additional attention in regards to program structure and funding efforts. As noted by several participants, the need to understand and be able to correctly use technology spans far wider than the family literacy classroom. Future research on technology usage in family literacy classrooms could explore the reflections of parents who are using technology and other studies that explore more deeply the learning outcomes associated with a technology rich curriculum.

References


The Family and Child Education Program (FACE): Unpacking the Effects of Preschool on School Readiness

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Abstract: This paper provides (1) a description of the Bureau of Indian Education's Family and Child Education (FACE) program as it has evolved over more than 20 years of implementation; (2) findings of the effects of the FACE home visiting component and preschool attendance on school readiness; and (3) results of an ongoing investigation of the differential impacts of specific types of preschool experiences (e.g., FACE, Head Start, other preschool experiences) on school readiness. Structural equation modeling is used to test the influence of a set of background characteristics relative to manipulable environmental factors such as preschool attendance and home literacy activity in predicting children's readiness for school. Further model investigations examine the length of preschool attendance and the type of preschool attended (i.e., the FACE preschool or Head Start) for their impacts on school readiness.

Keywords: School readiness, structural equations, American Indian

Theoretical Framework

Theory-driven approaches to evaluation require empirical testing of conceptual models that seek to reveal the mechanisms through which programs achieve their goals. Limited largely to large-scale evaluations, few applications to nonexperimental program evaluation designs or limited data sets exist in the literature (Adedokun, Childress, & Burgess, 2011.) In these situations, structural equation modeling can be used to test various program models and the mechanisms through which they produce their effects.

This study employs structural equation modeling (1) to confirm or better understand theoretical expectations posited in the FACE program logic model of relationships among characteristics of study participants, program characteristics, and program outcomes; (2) to explore and test alternative program models, particularly in terms of investigating the mediating effects of type and length of preschool participation; and (3) to identify possible problems and caveats in data collection strategies. Several strategies for establishing evidence of causality are used. Data was collected that has an established temporal order, the program’s logic model was used to identify the intervening mechanisms by which the FACE program intends to promote kindergarten readiness, dose/response relationships were measured (e.g., intensity of program participation and preschool attendance), and control techniques for background characteristic (e.g., age, gender, mother's educational level) were made explicit (Johnson, 2001).

The Evolution of the Family And Child Education Program (FACE)

The FACE program is a pre-birth to kindergarten family education program operating on some of the most isolated and neediest rural American Indian (AI) reservations in the United States.
Designed in the late 1970s, subsequent to the publication of a report citing the critical need for parent-focused early childhood education programs for AI children (U.S. Bureau of Indian Affairs, 1976), this program did not receive funding until 1991 and has now been operating for more than 20 years. Expansion within the Bureau of Indian Education (BIE) schools occurred slowly over time. In the 2011-12 school year, 44 FACE programs operate in BIE or tribally-operate schools in nine states.

The FACE program was designed to address the common characteristics of low-achieving AI children; namely, poverty, low levels of parental education, high levels of teen pregnancy, single parent status, the fact that the language of the larger culture may not be spoken at home, the presence of speech and learning disabilities, low frequency of reading to children, few books in the home, and lower participation in and quality of preschools and schools (Demmert & Grissmer, 2005). The FACE program is based on two national models: the Parents as Teachers (PAT) program, which provides home-based services for pre-birth to age 5 children and their parents; and the National Center for Family Literacy (NCFL), which provides center-based preschool and adult education programs. Parent education and parent-child interaction time are provided in both home- and center-based settings. Both models were continually modified over time in ways that explicitly integrated the language and culture of the tribal communities through processes that have been found effective, including ongoing communication with parents and the community about teaching within a culturally relevant context; building a sense of belongingness and community through ritual and cultural events; and respecting children, families, and community (Gilliard & Moore, 2007; Romero-Little, 2010).

The major goal of the FACE program is to support the indigenous understanding that parents are their child’s first and most influential teacher. Additional goals are to increase family literacy, to strengthen family-school-community connections, to promote the early identification of children with special needs, to increase parent participation in their child’s learning and expectations for academic achievement, to promote lifelong learning and facilitate transitions throughout the lifespan, and to support and celebrate the cultural and linguistic diversity of each AI community served by the program.

Working with its partner organizations, the BIE pursued continual program improvement efforts during its 20 plus years of implementation to meet the community contexts in which the FACE program operates. These included intensive efforts:

- to better support language and culture;
- to expand the focus to include all special needs children and to serve them in an inclusive environment;
- to enhance the focus on children’s expressive language through the use of dialogic reading;
- to integrate national and state standards for preschool to promote school readiness;
- to expand home-based services to 4-5 year olds;
- to continue the focus on professional development and expand regional and site-based technical assistance;
- to promote teamwork at the school/program level to better integrate pre-kindergarten programs with K-12 education,
- to improve transitions for children and parents (e.g., preschool to kindergarten entry);
- to increase the number of children's books in the home; and
- to continually use annual implementation and outcome data for program improvement.
One of the first and foremost efforts of the FACE program was to integrate language and culture into the program by providing opportunities for families to interact with Native home-based parent educators, teachers and elders. In the early years of FACE implementation, few AI applicants had the skills or educational background required by the national models for the roles of early childhood teacher, co-teacher, and parent educator. The FACE program focused on the credentialing of AI staff members, who were often identified from among program participants. After 10 years of development and training (and in all subsequent years), approximately 60% of early childhood and adult education teachers, and almost all center-based early childhood co-teachers and home-visiting parent educators, are AI (Yarnell, Pfannenstiel, Lambson, & Treffeisen, 2002).

Data Sources

The data for this study is from the FACE Impact Study conducted from fall 2004 through summer 2006 and previously published as a BIE report (Pfannenstiel, Yarnell, Stromberg-Kettelhake, 2006) and in an article published by the Journal of American Indian Education (Pfannenstiel & Lente-Jojola, 2011). The data was collected in 31 FACE programs which had been implemented for a sufficient number of years to have children of school age. All children who entered kindergarten in the 31 FACE program locations were included in the data collection effort. Approximately one-third of entering kindergartners had participated in the FACE program prior to school entry.

School Readiness

A number of indicators were used to measure school readiness for the evaluation that provided data for this study, including The Stanford Early School Achievement Test (SESAT), 10th Edition. Administration of a direct assessment with a nationally-normed standardized achievement test was required by the study funders. Among the reasons for this requirement was the funder’s interest in nationally normed outcome data to assess the size of the achievement gap for AI children, as well as the belief that direct assessments better represent children’s achievement than do teacher observational assessments, a belief which has been the subject of much discussion. Thus, because of the anticipated problems in administering such an assessment to AI kindergartners who had not attended preschool or had not engaged in paper and pencil test-like experiences in a group situation, school readiness was also measured with teacher observational ratings.

Meisel’s Work Sampling System (WSS) provided a second measure of kindergarten readiness. The WSS employs teacher observational rating checklists completed during six weeks of observation at the beginning of the kindergarten year on domains that include language and literacy. A third measure of kindergarten readiness was a composite teacher rating of each child as having below average, average, or above average preparation for school.

Background Characteristics and Home Literacy

Parents were surveyed to provide information on their child’s background characteristics and pre-kindergarten experiences. Almost 70% of the parents of the 1114 entering kindergartners (n= 766 parents) responded to the survey. The survey, completed by parents at the beginning of the school year, consisted of questions about children's background characteristics, preschool
attendance, the receipt of special education services prior to kindergarten entry, and the frequency of home literacy activities.

Background characteristics included gender (scored 0 for females and 1 for males), age at school entry, mother's educational level at child's birth (scored 0 for less than a high school education and 1 for at least a high school education or GED), and whether the tribal language is used in the home (0 = English only households and 1 = dual languages spoken in the home).

A home literacy factor was constructed, comprised of the frequency that a child is read to at home (1 = rarely or never, 2 = monthly, 3 = weekly, 4 = almost daily, and 5 = daily or several times a day), times the number of children’s books in the home, times achievement expectations for the child (1 = complete 8th grade, 2 = complete high school, 3 = attend college, and 4 = complete a college degree).

Parents reported whether, and for how long, children had participated in a number of preschool experiences: early childhood special education, Early Head Start, Head Start, public preschool, and private preschool. For the 86% of children who participated in preschool, participation patterns were quite complex (see Table 1).

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Preschools Attended</th>
<th>Did Not Participate in ECSPED</th>
<th>Participated in ECSPED</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>All</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Preschool</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FACE Preschool</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Head Start</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public or Private Preschool</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FACE + Head Start</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FACE + Head Start + Public Preschool</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FACE + Public Preschool</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Head Start + Public or Private Preschool</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(766)</td>
<td>(648)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Fifteen percent of kindergartners had participated in Early Childhood Special Education prior to school entry. One-half of these children had participated in the FACE program. The FACE preschool was the only preschool attended by 20% of entering kindergartners at FACE schools. Head Start was the only preschool attended by 40% of entering kindergartners. Six percent of entering kindergartners attended only public or private preschools. Twenty percent of entering kindergartners attended combinations of these preschools.

Analysis

Structural equation models were employed to empirically test the direct and indirect ways that background characteristics (i.e., mother’s educational level at child’s birth, child’s age at school entry, use of Native language in the home, and gender), participation in the FACE program, frequency of home literacy and achievement expectations, and length and type of preschool attendance predict school readiness as measured by the WSS language and literacy scale raw score. The model was estimated using the Statistical Analysis System (SAS) CALIS procedure for structural equation models. Goodness of fit of the model was assessed through multiple means: examination of the residuals, significance of the chi square for the overall model, and a number of fit indices (Bentler & Bonett, 1980). A non-significant chi-square test, fit indices that approximate 1.0 or greater, and an RMSEA estimate <.05 are indicators of good model fit. Structural paths <.05 in magnitude are considered trivial and meaningless, even if they are statistically significant (Hatcher, L., 1994).

Findings

Prior studies have found that the Parents as Teachers model, the basis of the FACE home visiting component, impacts school readiness through two intervening variables—length of preschool attendance and frequency of home literacy activity (Pfannenstiel, Seitz, & Zigler, 2002; Pfannenstiel & Lente-Jojola, 2011). As will be discussed in the following sections, the methodological approach for measuring school readiness generates disparate findings of the impacts of preschool attendance on school readiness.

Particularly problematic in the prior published model of how background characteristics, FACE participation, home literacy activity, and preschool attendance combine to predict school readiness was the finding that length of preschool attendance significantly and negatively predicted school readiness as measured by the SESAT Total Reading NCE, a finding that contrasts with prior empirical findings and contrary to theoretical expectations outlined by the FACE logic model and theory-driven evaluation. Further analysis found that when teacher ratings of children's literacy skills are used as the dependent variable in the assessment of school readiness, the relationship with length of preschool attendance proves to be significant and positive (Pfannenstiel & Lente-Jojola, 2011). However, a smaller proportion of the variation on school readiness was explained by the model based on the WSS language and literacy raw score (14%) than was explained by the model based on the SESAT standardized achievement test (17%). Similarly, when teacher observational ratings rather than direct assessment is used as the measure of school readiness, the importance of gender in predicting school readiness, a zero-order correlation that is well-established in past empirical findings, becomes almost meaningless.

Because of these issues, this study is designed to address school readiness from a measurement perspective that employs teacher observational ratings of language and literacy skills
as measured with the WSS, testing structural models using various measures of the preschool intervening variable and/or different subpopulations of preschoolers.

This study investigated whether the type of preschool attended altered the published explanatory model of how school readiness is impacted by length of preschool attendance. Of particular interest was whether the prediction of school readiness differed if children participated in the FACE preschool versus Head Start. To eliminate the complexity that identification for special services brings to a study of school readiness, children who had been identified for Early Childhood Special Education participation were excluded from the sub-analyses. The subsample for this analysis was comprised of children who had attended the FACE preschool for at least one year and those children who attended preschool, but never the FACE preschool (N = 396). For this analysis, the length of preschool attendance variable was replaced by the type of preschool attended—primarily the FACE preschool (coded "1") or primarily Head Start (coded "0"). The structural model failed when the length of preschool attendance was replaced by type of preschool attended.

A second analysis then reverted to the use of the length of preschool as the intervening variable but conducted the analysis separately for two subsamples, the first of which consisted of children who had participated in Head Start or combinations of attendance that included Head Start. This subsample also included a comparison group of children, comprised of kindergartners who had not attended any preschool or participated in FACE home visits prior to school entry, essentially a FACE non-treatment group (N = 333). The second subsample consisted of children who had participated in the FACE preschool, and also included the comparison group of children who had not participated in any home visits or any preschool (N = 229). Tables 2 and 3 contain descriptive statistics and goodness of fit indices for the FACE preschool model.

Table 2

**Means, Standard Deviations, and Intercorrelations of Variables in the Model**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>sd</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>7</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. WSS Language &amp; Literacy</td>
<td>28.30</td>
<td>9.99</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Receipt of FACE home visits</td>
<td>.51</td>
<td>.50</td>
<td>.10</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Gender</td>
<td>.49</td>
<td>.50</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>-.02</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Age</td>
<td>5.48</td>
<td>.47</td>
<td>.31</td>
<td>-.03</td>
<td>.10</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Mother’s education at child’s birth (years completed)</td>
<td>11.86</td>
<td>1.76</td>
<td>.13</td>
<td>-.08</td>
<td>.11</td>
<td>-.04</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. English only or native language use at home</td>
<td>.57</td>
<td>.50</td>
<td>-.01</td>
<td>.29</td>
<td>-.01</td>
<td>-.11</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Length of preschool participation</td>
<td>1.38</td>
<td>1.30</td>
<td>.18</td>
<td>.64</td>
<td>-.02</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>-.01</td>
<td>.24</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Home literacy and achievement expectations factor</td>
<td>316.16</td>
<td>187.95</td>
<td>.28</td>
<td>.25</td>
<td>.11</td>
<td>-.04</td>
<td>.33</td>
<td>.19</td>
<td>.21</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: N=229
Table 3

Goodness of Fit Indices for Tested Model

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Model</th>
<th>Null Model $X^2$</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>Model $X^2$</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>P</th>
<th>NFI</th>
<th>NNFI</th>
<th>CFI</th>
<th>RMSEA</th>
<th>$R^2$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>WSS Literacy</td>
<td>259.65</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>2.62</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>.96</td>
<td>.99</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>.0</td>
<td>&lt;.0001</td>
<td>.20</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The results for the two subpopulations differed in some important ways, the first of which is the proportion of the variance on school readiness explained by the model. Seventeen percent of the variation on school readiness was explained by the model that included Head Start as the preschool attended and a somewhat larger 20% of the variation was explained by the model that included FACE as the preschool attended. Although these percentages of explained variation do not on first encounter appear sizable, the large percentages of variation that are often explained by educational achievement in school-age models include a pretest score, which accounts for a large percentage of the variation on the post-test. Pretest scores are not generally available for entering kindergartners.

The model that includes FACE preschoolers also explains a larger proportion of the variation on the major mediating variables, the frequency of home literacy activity, and the length of preschool attendance (see Figure 1).

The prior published model explained 12% of the variation on the frequency of home literacy activity whether the SESAT score was dependent or the WSS language and literacy score was dependent. The model of FACE preschoolers, however, explains 20% of the variation on home literacy activity compared with 14% explained by the Head Start model.

The structural path from participation in FACE home visits (V4) to length of preschool attendance (V3) is quite strong at .63 for the model that includes FACE preschoolers compared with a .15 path when Head Start is the preschool attended. Thus, higher participation in FACE home visits is much more likely to result in preschool attendance—and longer lengths of preschool attendance—if the FACE preschool rather than Head Start is the preschool attended.

The structural path from length of preschool attendance (V3) to school readiness (V1) demonstrates a .13 coefficient for the model that includes FACE preschoolers, more than twice the magnitude of the almost meaningless .05 path for the model that includes Head Start.

In the original published model, a sizable (-.15) and significant negative path from the use of the Native language in the home (V6) to school readiness (V1) was found when school readiness was measured through the direct assessment method; the magnitude of the coefficient was lower (-.10) when teacher observational ratings were used as the measure of school readiness. Because one of the goals of the FACE program is to preserve Native language and culture, this finding was disturbing but not unanticipated, since prior research findings have indicated that the use of dual languages in the home, at least in the early years, can result in lower proficiency in the English language. For the subpopulation that included Head Start preschoolers, this negative path increased in magnitude to -.17. For the subpopulation that included FACE preschoolers, however, a trivial and almost meaningless -.06 path coefficient was obtained. This should be reassuring to the FACE program, whose goals to support Native language and culture are sometimes viewed as
diminishing attempts to level the playing field at school entry (at least in terms of English language usage) for AI children.

In order to obtain better model fit for the subpopulation analyses, the LaGrange multiplier test required the addition of a path from the use of the Native language in the home (V6) to the frequency of home literacy activity (V2). Parents who use their Native language in the home (1) participate more frequently in FACE home visits, and thereby indirectly increase the frequency of home literacy activity; and (2) directly increase their home literacy activity as well (path V6-V2).

Figure 1. Structural Model of Predictors of Kindergarten Readiness Measured with WSS Language and Literacy Raw Score
The final background characteristic in the model is the structural paths from mother’s educational level at child’s birth. Mothers with low educational levels participate significantly more frequently in FACE home visits, and this heightened participation predicts an increased frequency of home literacy activity (path coefficient of .25), which in turn predicts school readiness. For the model that included Head Start preschoolers, the magnitude of the coefficient predicting school readiness increased (.15), but for the model that included FACE preschoolers, the direct impact of mother’s educational level on school readiness is quite small and almost meaningless (.06).

**Breaking the Cycle of Intergenerational Low Literacy**

These empirical findings demonstrate the ways the FACE home visiting component and FACE preschool attendance interact with background characteristics and home literacy activity to predict school readiness and aids us in understanding how the cycle of intergenerational low literacy can be broken. FACE AI children whose mothers did not have a high school diploma were found to enter school with average preparation for kindergarten, as rated by kindergarten teachers. Non-FACE AI children whose mothers did not have a high school diploma entered school with below average preparation. Since below average preparation corresponded to a WSS scale performance that is 1.5 standard deviations lower than average performance, this is a sizable gap at school entry that presents a formidable challenge for early elementary education.

Overall, 30% of entering AI kindergartners in FACE schools is rated as having below average preparation for school entry. For children who did not attend preschool, 37% are rated as having below average preparation. The literacy environment in the homes of children with below average preparation differs in important ways that could be altered to improve the school readiness of these children. For instance, parents report a significantly lower frequency of home literacy activity for children whose teachers assessed them as having below average preparation.

These children read or look at books significantly less frequently—30 hours less per year than the 130 hours reported by those with average or above average preparation. They have significantly fewer children’s books in their homes—67% have fewer than 20 books. They spend significantly more time watching TV—20 minutes per day more than children with average or above average preparation. These children enter school scoring at the 26th compared with the 46th NCE that children with at least average preparation score (Pfannenstiel, Yarnell, Stromberg-Kettelhake, & Lambson, 2006).

**Discussion and Implications**

The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) has recently weighed in on the development of state assessment systems that include the assessment of kindergarten readiness. “Assessment results are only one data element in analyses of program effectiveness and on their own do little to clarify the relative roles of specific programs, prior life events, and other factors that correlate with school readiness” (Snow, 2011, p. 24). Thus, simply examining performance data, without consideration of the interaction of background characteristics, home and community contexts, and opportunities for learning, provides little data that is useful for research, evaluation, or policy purposes. Although this study is limited by a number of methodological issues, including its non-experimental design, limited sample size, and relatively large number of explanatory variables, it is intended to demonstrate the model
complexity required to map important pre-kindergarten experiences of children and how they combine to predict school readiness.

Still, a number of theoretically important variables are not addressed by this study. For example, no quantitative or qualitative measures of alternate child care are included. And, despite the fact that findings for the FACE preschoolers meet theoretical expectations outlined in the program's logic model, no measures of the quality of the preschool experience are measured in this study. Further study is required to better measure and test the model to identify the qualities of the Head Start and FACE preschool experience in AI communities and how those qualities are empirically linked to school achievement.

Despite the limitations of this study, the possibility that the FACE program can support both an early focus on AI language and culture while simultaneously allowing AI children to enter school on a level playing field is welcoming.

References


“I Don’t Feel Alone Anymore”:
Social Support and Mental Health for Women in Family Literacy

Esther Prins, Jean Camberg, Maricela Carrera, Brendaly Drayton, Ramazan Gungor, Faith Miller and Tom Spencer, The Pennsylvania State University

Abstract: This paper presents qualitative data (interviews, focus group, observations) from a mixed-methods study that examined how low-income women use adult education and family literacy (AEFL) programs to construct supportive social networks, and, in turn, how these influence their mental health. The study included 44 women in seven programs. First, we found that many participants had current or past experience with traumatic or stressful situations such as abuse, as well as mental health concerns, chiefly depression. Second, attending classes together did not guarantee that women became friends or created a support system. Programmatic differences in friendship formation were shaped by organizational structures, educator practices, and participant preferences and personalities. Third, the degree of social support varied widely across programs. Overall, though, the programs offered access to an array of material, informational, and emotional support. Finally, most participants reported one or more mental health benefits, primarily enhanced self-esteem and self-confidence, sense of purpose or direction, and ability to cope with problems. The findings suggest that AEFL programs offer opportunities to establish friendships and to access social support, thereby alleviating psychological distress arising from poverty, caregiving, and other stressors. However, intentional efforts to cultivate social ties and support systems among adult learners are needed.

Keywords: family literacy, mental health, social support, women learners

Introduction

Women with limited income and educational attainment are more likely than their higher-socioeconomic status (SES) counterparts to have smaller, less supportive social networks and to experience mental health problems such as depression (Belle & Doucet, 2003). For instance, approximately nine million U.S. adults experience both limited literacy and depression (Weiss, Francis, Senf, Heist, & Hargraves, 2006). Poverty, single parenthood, raising young children, and use of public assistance are all known to erode social support, thus predisposing women to higher rates of depression (Belle & Doucet, 2003; Brown & Moran, 1997; Lennon, Blome, & English, 2002). Depression rates for women and low-SES population are approximately twice those of men and higher-SES groups, respectively (Lennon et al., 2002).

1 Note: This study was funded by a grant from the Spencer Foundation. An earlier version of this paper was published in the 2011 Proceedings of the 52nd National Conference of the Adult Education Research Conference (AERC) and the 30th National Conference of the Canadian Association for the Study of Adult Education (CASAE) (pp. 543-549).
In addition, although women comprise the majority of adult education and family literacy (AEFL) learners, we know little about the psychosocial aspects of their educational experiences. Instead, research has primarily focused on educational and economic outcomes. This paper examines how such women use AEFL programs to construct supportive social networks, and, in turn, how these influence their psychosocial well-being.

**Theoretical Framework**

We conceptualize AEFL programs as “resource brokers” (Small, 2009) that facilitate access to information, emotional aid, material goods, and other resources, chiefly by providing informal opportunities for social interaction and by connecting members to other organizations’ resources. “Independent of their own intentions,” participants in organizations such as childcare centers and AEFL programs “are more likely to form ties when they have opportunities to interact, when they do so frequently, when they are focused on some activity, when they are not competitors, and when they have reason to cooperate” (Small, 2009, p. 15).

These opportunities to interact are crucial because social and organizational ties structure people’s capacity to flourish by providing access to social support (Kawachi & Berkman, 2001). This study employed an emotional, informational, and material support typology. Emotional support, or “the expression of positive affect, empathetic understanding, and the encouragement of expressions of feelings” (Sherbourne & Stewart, 1991, p. 707), includes caring/concern, understanding/empathy, sympathy, encouragement, and affirmation/validation (Bambina, 2007). Informational support encompasses “advice, information, guidance or feedback” (Sherbourne & Stewart, 1991, p. 707). Material support includes “offers to provide needed goods and services” (Cutrona & Suhr, 1992, p. 155) such as money, books, babysitting, transportation, or housework. Informational and material support help someone “solve or eliminate” a problem, whereas emotional support is meant solely to “comfort and console” (Cutrona & Suhr, 1992, p. 155).

A wealth of research shows that social support reduces anxiety and depression and enhances self-esteem, sense of control, and the ability to survive with scarce resources (Belle, 1982; Edin & Lein, 1997). Scholars have proposed two main ways that social support engenders these outcomes (Cohen & Wills, 1985; Kawachi & Berkman, 2001). The “main effect” model posits that “Integration in a social network may…directly produce positive psychological states, including a sense of purpose, belonging, and security, as well as recognition of self-worth,” and provide access to resources such as money or information needed to resolve stressful situations (Kawachi & Berman, 2001, p. 459). The “stress buffering” model suggests that supportive social networks change our cognitive, emotional, and physical responses to stress by helping us to (a) manage the situation, (b) change its meaning, or (c) change how we cope with it (Cohen & Wills, 1985; Cutrona & Suhr, 1992; Kawachi & Berkman, 2001; Pearl, Mullan, Semple, & Skaff, 1990). Importantly, “the perceived availability of social support in the face of a stressful event may lead to a more benign appraisal of the situation, thereby preventing a cascade of ensuing negative emotional and behavioral responses” (Kawachi & Berkman, 2001, p. 460). That is, we feel better knowing a safety net will catch us if we fall.

Social ties, however, are not inherently beneficial. Unsupportive, insular, or unequal social ties, where one person gives more support than they receive, can limit access to social resources (Edin & Lein, 1997); exacerbate stress, anxiety, and isolation (Belle & Doucet, 2003); and exact emotional and material costs (Kawachi & Berkman, 2001). Even in close relationships,
“stress contagion” occurs when people feel emotionally burdened by others’ problems (Kawachi & Berkman, 2001, p. 462).

Prior research suggests that women learners use AEFL programs to make friends, share advice, and meet psychosocial needs (e.g., Clegg & McNulty, 2002; Horsman, 1990; Prins, Toso, & Schafft, 2009), activities that can enhance mental health. In fact, experimental studies show that literacy education significantly reduced depression (Poresky & Daniels, 2001; Weiss et al., 2006). In sum, our theoretical lens situates AEFL programs as sites that can offer women in poverty opportunities to form friendships and to access emotional, informational, and material support, thereby alleviating psychological distress.

Research Methods

This paper utilizes selected data from a three-year, mixed-methods study to address the following questions: How do women use adult education and family literacy programs to construct social support networks? What kinds of social support are exchanged in these programs, and by whom? What mental health benefits, if any, do women attribute to their program participation? A mixed-methods research design (surveys, interviews, observations, focus group, and daily interaction records) was chosen because it promised to “provide the most informative, complete, balanced, and useful research results” (Johnson, Onwuegbuzie, & Turner, 2007, p. 129).

The research sites include five family literacy (FL) programs and two health services (HS) programs in Pennsylvania. Programs were chosen using convenience and purposeful sampling (i.e., program size and racial/ethnic diversity). Five programs were located in small towns (1,000 and 3,000 inhabitants) and medium-sized towns (29,000 and 46,000 inhabitants) in rural counties. Two programs were located in metropolitan counties. All newly enrolled women who could communicate in English were invited to participate in the study.

Program size ranged from six to 52 participants (average=23); women comprised 79% to 100% of all program participants (average=89%). The study included 44 women aged 19 to 57 (24 White, 9 Black, 7 Latina, 2 bi/multi-racial, 2 Native American), 53% of whom had less than a high school education. Their average monthly household income was approximately $1430.

Twenty-six women completed surveys and interviews in three waves of four to five month intervals, both in person and by phone. These women were enrolled in the five programs where we conducted observations (110 observations totaling 246 hours). Eighteen other women completed only the survey, also in three waves, for a total of 99 surveys.

Data sources for this paper include:

1) 66 interviews (1 to 3 person);
2) one survey item concerning perceived stress (n=69; the other quantitative data have not yet been analyzed);
3) observations of program activities;
4) one focus group with 11 additional learners from one FL program; and
5) two interviews with two teachers from the same program.

Data collection and analysis focused on social interactions and exchange of social support among learners and between learners and teachers, participants’ social networks and support systems outside the program, and the implications of both for mental health. Directed content
analysis, which combines deductive and inductive coding (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005), was used to analyze fieldnotes and transcripts.

Findings

Life Events and Life Conditions

Participants’ life histories and current stressors are important for understanding their friendship and support networks and their psychosocial well-being. Some of the HS participants and many of the FL participants had experienced or were experiencing traumatic or stressful life events or conditions (Makosky, 1982). Of the 26 interviewees, eight discussed past or current emotional, physical, and/or sexual abuse; seven were raising children with developmental and/or behavioral disorders such as ADHD (attention deficit hyperactivity disorder) or ODD (oppositional defiance disorder); and four had lived in foster homes. These and other stressors help explain survey respondents’ (n=99) average reported stress level of 6.2 on a 10-point scale, compared to the national average of 5.4 (American Psychological Association [APA], 2010). One-third of the surveys indicated a stress level of 8, 9, or 10, compared to 28% of women nationally (APA, 2010).

Twenty-one participants reported past or present mental health concerns, chiefly depression, as well as others such as bi-polar disorder and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Participants dealt with these mental health concerns mainly through counseling or therapy (n=14) and psychiatric medications (n=12). Three participants had been hospitalized for mental health reasons and three participants had contemplated and/or attempted suicide, including two mothers who reported suicidal thoughts during the study.

Such traumatic experiences are widespread among women learners (Horsman, 2000). We were especially interested in how these stressors shape social interactions among learners. One manifestation was wariness about trusting and befriending people, a viewpoint articulated by Jasmine: “The more people you know, the more they can stab you in the back.” Annie’s case illustrates how stressful life events can produce isolation and competing desires for companionship and privacy. Annie rarely left the house due to PTSD resulting from her ex-partner’s abuse. She stated, “I’d like to make new friends, ‘cause this past year I haven’t really had anybody to talk to.” She felt safe at the program, confided in a teacher, and made several unsuccessful attempts to socialize with learners outside of class, but she did not discuss personal matters with them in order to maintain her privacy. Our findings suggest, however, that when learners do let down their guard, they may discover common problems and assist each other in coping with them.

Relationship Formation Among Learners

The preliminary findings indicate that attending classes together does not guarantee that women will become friends or create a strong support system. Although learners in each program reported meeting people and receiving some kind of social support there were marked differences across programs.

Relationships can be categorized as weak, compartmental, or strong (Small, 2009). Though superficial, weak ties are beneficial, as in the case of HS students who helped each other understand class material. Compartmental ties, or relationships that stay within the program setting and related conversational topics (e.g., parenting), were also common. Characterized by
mutual confiding and closeness, strong ties were most evident in the “Johnsonville” program, which had the strongest support system. For instance, Starlett and Mariah visited each other’s homes, socialized outside of class, and confided in each other.

We attribute programmatic differences to organizational structures, educator practices, and participant preferences and personalities. First, program goals and practices shaped the social environment and opportunities for building social networks (Small, 2009). For instance, a 7-week health studies course focused on transmission of copious information during the weekly 3-hour class session—with no breaks or small group work. By contrast, the FL programs included components, such as interactive literacy activities and celebratory events, that focused on parents’ and children’s academic and social development. With more opportunities for regular interaction, learners were more likely to form social ties. For example, the Johnsonville program offered the most interactive activities and demonstrated the strongest support network.

In addition, participants across all programs identified social events and group projects as the primary conduit for establishing friendships, or attested that such activities would have helped them make friends. Indeed, it was often during class breaks, field trips, and other informal settings that learners struck up conversations, discovered commonalities such as raising children with ADHD, and shared advice and encouragement. Similarly, focus group participants affirmed that meeting other students’ family members during special events helped them grow closer.

The staff also played a crucial role in nurturing social networks. Nearly every study participant noted the kindness and helpfulness of the staff, particularly when they were newly enrolled. Educators fostered a sense of openness and belonging by introducing new students, encouraging students to share their experiences and perceptions during group discussions, and asking students to fulfill program-related responsibilities. As the Johnsonville teacher explained,

I will go around the room where I say, ‘This is a new student. We are so happy to have you.’…I try to be very close to the new student physically because they have met me, but I am the only familiar face….Then I will just ask them [other students] to go around the room and say their name [and] who their children are, because children are great connector.

By contrast, the data suggest the health services teacher made little effort to encourage social interaction—not even student introductions.

Third, participants believed their personal characteristics influenced friendship formation. Factors such as lack of trust, shyness, preference for those in similar circumstances, and perception of the program’s social atmosphere shaped the kinds of social ties women developed. Nevertheless, participants also identified the length of time they had known other students, the frequency of interaction, and a supportive program environment as crucial elements in building and strengthening relationships with other learners.

**Social Support**

Like friendship formation, the degree of social support across the sites varied considerably, with the HS students reporting far fewer instances and types of support than FL students, particularly in the Johnsonville program. Overall, program-participant informational support was most common, especially information and/or advice about free or inexpensive resources (e.g., heating assistance), children’s education and development (e.g., Head Start), and parenting (e.g., discipline). These were also the most common informational support topics
among learners, with the addition of health (e.g., smoking cessation). In the FL programs, educators intentionally provided information about community resources and helped learners resolve personal and academic problems, since they saw these activities as central to the program’s purpose. Moreover, FL teachers tended to position themselves—and were viewed by learners—as people who had “been there” and would help learners access information and resources. As one educator stated, “I don’t have all the answers, but sometimes it helps just talking to someone to find some other answers that might help.” In one program, a monthly discussion time encouraged learners to solicit teachers’ and students’ advice about parenting issues and other struggles.

The most frequent material support was the refreshments that programs often provided at activities and the snacks that learners shared with each other. This resource should not be trivialized, since 43% of poor U.S. families experience food insecurity (United States Department of Agriculture, 2010). FL programs also provided incentives and door prizes (e.g., $10 grocery cards), curricular materials (e.g., children’s books), free items (e.g., tomatoes from teacher’s garden), gifts of recognition (e.g., framed photo), transportation or transportation subsidy for program attendance, and educational materials for short-term use (e.g., children’s activities). Two programs provided a box or table for participants to share unwanted items such as clothing or coupons. FL teachers also assisted learners with matters such as deciphering children’s school documents or locating community resources.

Aside from sharing food, participants exchanged several other kinds of material support, primarily in the Johnsonville program. They donated items for others’ personal use (e.g., clothing, magazines); lent, gave, or traded small items (e.g., plants, novels); shared rides; showed or taught others how to do something (e.g., computer skills, knitting); donated items for program activities (e.g., baskets); and babysat, among others. During the focus group, a Latina immigrant cried as she thanked a White, U.S.-born participant for “always being there” when she needed her: “When I have an appointment and I don’t have a car, I call her and she takes me….And if I can’t do something because it’s in English, she does it for me” (author translation). Her comments illustrate the emotional significance of receiving material support such as transportation and translation.

In the Johnsonville program, learners suggested mechanisms for the program to meet material needs. According to a teacher, learners recognized each other’s economic difficulties and recommended starting a monthly raffle, with the basket of household goods such as laundry detergent donated by the program and students. The classroom also had a box for trading clothes and cans for collecting box tops and soup labels to raise money for children’s schools.

Emotional support from teachers to learners mainly consisted of affirmation—especially compliments on skills, abilities, and performance, both as students and parents—and validation of participant viewpoints or emotional responses, for instance, that it is normal to feel intimidated by school professionals. Teachers also provided reassurance and encouragement, particularly regarding academic progress; empathy (e.g., the difficulty of parenting); and caring and concern for students’ well-being. Most FL participants said they could confide in and had discussed personal issues with a teacher. This is crucial because having at least one confidant enhances mental health (Belle, 1982).

The few examples of emotional support among HS students included academic encouragement and compliments on appearance, illustrating these learners’ predominantly weak, compartmental ties. Emotional support among FL participants included understanding/empathy concerning personal and academic matters. Some women, like Mariah, took comfort in finding
others facing comparable difficulties: “I don’t feel alone any more. I don’t feel like I am the only one that has this child [with] these [behavioral] disorders….It is awesome to know that there are other parents out there going through what I am going through.” This illustrates how “social comparison” (Hodges & Dibb, 2010) can help learners cope with problems. Learners offered the same types of affirmation/validation as teachers, as well as encouragement and concern/caring. For instance, when a learner’s husband was having serious health problems, another learner called her every night with a “pep talk.”

The paradigmatic example of emotional support was Mariah’s request for teachers’ and classmates’ help in coping with her father’s new relationship, scarcely a year after her mother’s death. In addition to listening to Mariah vent, the group showered her with concern, stories of similar experiences, gentle advice, and a hug and affectionate touch. Some months later, a teacher told us, Mariah attended class after being beaten by her boyfriend. At the students’ urging, she left the relationship and pressed charges. This incident illustrates the vital importance of having people to listen, counsel, and help learners when they are most vulnerable. This and the preceding examples illustrate how, to varying degrees, learners used programs to create multi-stranded safety nets.

Mental Health Benefits

Of the 22 participants with whom we conducted post-interviews, seven identified no changes in mental health due to program participation. That three of these were health services students underscores the differences between their classroom experiences and those of many FL participants. Of the other 15 women, nine reported enhanced self-esteem and self-confidence. For instance, Annie said, “I have more faith in myself that I can accomplish what I need to and learn more.” In particular, teachers’ encouragement and praise boosted learners’ confidence. Nine women attested that attending classes provided a sense of purpose or direction, and offered something to look forward to in the short- and long-term—a sense that they were “moving forward” to reach their dreams and goals. Six women felt better able to cope with the problems they encountered. Candy, for example, credited her teachers, who “encourage you to talk about it if you have any problems.” According to five women, attending family literacy classes improved their mood by breaking up “the monotony of your day,” putting them in “a whole ‘nother frame of mind,” and distracting them from personal problems and other worries.

Other mental health benefits included a sense of accomplishment (n=4, all HS participants); comfort from knowing others face similar problems (n=4); a greater sense of control over one’s life (n=3); alleviation of emotional burdens (n=2); acceptance and belonging (n=2); and reprieve from a stressful situation (n=2). Women tended to attribute these changes to their academic accomplishments and/or support from teachers and students, suggesting that academic and psychosocial well-being may be mutually reinforcing. However, even among women who reported mental health benefits, some continued to struggle with depression, anxiety, and related problems due to stressful situations outside the classroom.

Conclusion

The preliminary findings elucidate how adult education and family literacy involvement can equip poor women to cope with stressors they encounter. The formation of friendship and support networks was chiefly “a by-product of the pursuit of another aim” (Small, 2009, pp. 11-12) such as obtaining a job or GED diploma. Teachers may not see their role as fostering student
friendships, and learners may not enroll in a program to make friends or find support. Nevertheless, to the extent that these “unanticipated gains” (Small, 2009) occur, they arise because AEFL programs provide opportunities for regular, cooperative interaction and connections to an array of organizational resources.

Educators can be purposeful about cultivating interaction, openness, and supportive behaviors. Our data suggest that intentionality is crucial in organizations where social interaction and support are less likely to arise naturally, namely those with large classes, open enrollment, or a narrow focus (e.g., test preparation). For example, educators should consider how to incorporate new learners, foster informal interaction, and encourage open discussion while also respecting learners’ privacy. The social ties and safety nets created through such activities not only alleviate stress arising from poverty, caregiving, and other aspects of women’s lives, but can also aid their persistence and academic progress.

References


Life After the Family Literacy Program:
Student Achievement and Parent Engagement Years Later¹

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Abstract: This paper examines long-term outcomes for families who participated in a comprehensive four-component family literacy program by conducting follow-up studies of both children and their parents. A survey of 208 alumni parents showed that, years after their participation in the program, parents continued practices at home to support their children’s learning (skills that were emphasized in the family literacy programs), and they were involved in their children’s elementary schools at high levels. In addition, analysis of elementary school student records for 483 children who had participated in family literacy programs with their parents showed that these children outperformed their demographically matched peers who did not participate in family literacy programs on measures of English language arts and math proficiency in grades 2–5. Students who had participated in family literacy programs also had higher rates of school attendance in kindergarten through fifth grade than the comparison group.

Key words: Family literacy, evaluation, parent engagement, child outcomes.

With more than nine million families living in poverty (DeNavas-Walt, Proctor, & Smith, 2011), two-thirds of all fourth-grade students unable to read at proficient levels (National Center for Education Statistics, 2011), nearly a third of all high school students failing to graduate (EPE Research Center, 2010), and a competitive job market with an increasing demand for higher education, there is a clear need for an intervention model that can successfully break the cycle of poverty and illiteracy in the U.S. Children with two or more of the following risk factors—having parents who did not complete high school, living in poverty, living with only a single parent, or having parents who speak a language other than English at home—are about three times more likely than those with no risk factors to score in the bottom quartile on reading assessments in kindergarten (Zill & West, 2001). Research has shown that these same risk factors are associated with low achievement through elementary and secondary school, grade repetition, higher numbers of suspensions or expulsions, and lower graduation rates (Entwisle & Alexander, 1995; Rumberger & Larson, 1998; West & Brick, 1991; Zill, 1996a; Zill 1996b), and achievement gaps persist (National Center for Education Statistics, 2005, 2009).

Intervening early in children’s lives and coordinating children’s services with services for families are two essential principles for programs that aim to change the odds for disadvantaged children (Neuman, 2008). Providing parents with the tools they need to support their children’s learning is critical for ensuring children’s school success, as parent involvement in early elementary school has been linked to self-regulated learning (Xu, Kushner Benson, Murdex-

¹ This research was funded, without endorsement, by First 5 LA.
positive social skills (Izzo, Weissberg, Kasprow, & Fendrich, 1999), motivation (Morrow & Young, 1997), and school performance (Chen & Siegler, 2000; Eccles, 1999).

Family literacy programs endeavor to improve children’s odds of success by providing comprehensive services to the family, including: 1) adult education to increase parents’ self-sufficiency, which may include giving them language skills needed to be active participants in their children’s education; 2) parenting education and 3) parent/child interactive literacy activity time to give parents the tools they need to support their children’s learning; and 4) early childhood education for children to help prepare them to enter school ready to succeed.

Research has shown some positive results for children and parents participating in four-component family literacy programs. Findings from the eight-year evaluation of the family literacy program described in this study have shown significant growth in language and literacy skills among children and parents participating in these programs, and consistent increases in parents’ use of home literacy practices with their children while over the course of their participation (Quick et al., 2011). The national evaluations of the federal Even Start family literacy program have produced mixed results, including short-term skill gains for children and some relationships between parent participation and child outcomes, but no clear long-term benefits or differences from comparison groups (St. Pierre, Swartz, Murray, & Deck, 1996; St. Pierre et al, 2003).

There is a paucity of results demonstrating the relationships between family literacy participation and longer term outcomes—and it is these later outcomes that are necessary for “breaking the cycle.” The critical question to address is whether family literacy programs provide a foundation for ongoing parent involvement and children’s success in school. This paper examines the longer term outcomes for families participating in family literacy programs by exploring two primary research questions:

1. To what extent do parents who participated in family literacy programs continue to demonstrate parenting behaviors that support children’s learning once their children enter elementary school?
2. How do children who participated in family literacy programs perform on measures of school participation and achievement relative to children who did not participate in family literacy program activities?

Family literacy programs provide children learning opportunities to prepare them for school, and also prepare parents to support their children’s learning through increased language and literacy skills, home literacy activities, and greater comfort with the school environment. Improved parent knowledge and skills in this area are hypothesized to lead to both higher parent involvement once their children enter school and, ultimately, higher scores for children on assessments in elementary school. School participation is also hypothesized to be greater for students who have participated in family literacy programs because their parents have learned to place a high value on education. These hypothesized pathways are illustrated in Figure 1. The outcomes in red boxes are the focus of this paper.

The research team conducted two follow-up studies to examine outcomes for children and families participating in a four-component family literacy initiative in a major metropolitan region on the West Coast. The first study consisted of a survey of alumni parents; the second was an analysis of elementary school student record data for children from the family literacy programs. Each of these studies is described below.
To learn how parents continue to support their child’s learning after leaving the program (Research Question 1), 208 alumni parents who participated in family literacy programs between 2003 and 2007 were surveyed by phone in the spring of 2009. To be eligible to participate in the phone survey, parents who had left the program had to have participated in all four components of the family literacy program with their child (i.e., adult education, parenting education, parent-child interactive literacy activities, and early childhood education) and completed a parent survey while enrolled in the program.

Parents participating in the alumni phone survey had attended a family literacy program one to five years earlier, with the average time since exit being two and a half years. A large majority of alumni parents surveyed were Hispanic (95%), spoke a language other than English at home (86%), were married or living with a partner (87%), were low income (63% had annual household incomes below $20,000), and had low education levels (only 17% had at least a high school diploma or GED). Overall, characteristics of survey respondents were similar to the population of all eligible alumni parents with two exceptions: they had slightly higher incomes on average and were somewhat less likely to speak English as their primary language at home.
No differences were observed between respondents and nonrespondents on outcome measures captured while parents were enrolled in the program.

The survey asked about parents’ use of practices to support their children’s learning at home as well as their involvement in their children’s schools. Many of the items asked of alumni parents paralleled questions that parents were asked on surveys they completed upon enrollment in the program and again at the end of each year of participation. The research team used *t*-tests to compare mean responses on the “initial survey” at enrollment, the “final survey prior to exit,” and the “alumni survey” one to five years after program exit. This allowed the study to assess the stability of parent learning over time.

**Follow-Up of Children in Elementary School**

To evaluate post-program outcomes for children (Research Question 2), the research team worked with a large urban school district to locate family literacy program children in the district’s student record files, and also to obtain a pool of potential comparison students who had not participated in family literacy. In total, 423 family literacy program children who entered kindergarten in school years 2004–05 (cohort 1, *n* = 111), 2005–06 (cohort 2, *n* = 151), and 2006–07 (cohort 3, *n* = 161) were identified in the district’s student record files and had complete demographic data needed for inclusion in the analysis. Attendance records and achievement test scores were obtained for all grades available for these students (grades K–5 for cohort 1, grades K–4 for cohort 2, and grades K–3 for cohort 3).

Comparable data were obtained from the district for children who participated in another preschool program provided by the district, which served as the comparison group. It was not possible to compare family literacy program children to children with no preschool experience, as these children could not be identified in the data. As an alternative, the district was able to provide data on the largest preschool program offered through the district, so that outcomes for family literacy children could be compared against a pool of children who received a common and well-defined set of early childhood services.

The comparison sample participated in a preschool program that stressed oral language development for 4-year olds for 10 hours per week. This program also provided a 10-week parent education component that included monthly meetings with the child’s teacher and monthly volunteering in the classroom. On the whole, family literacy programs were more intensive than the comparison group programs. Family literacy programs served children from birth through age 5, and, on average, family literacy children received 15 hours of early childhood education plus 2–3 hours of parent-child interaction time each week. Parents received 10–12 hours of adult education and 2–3 hours of parenting education each week.

To ensure that comparisons made between students in the family literacy programs and the comparison group were valid, a sample of students was drawn from the comparison preschool program to match the demographics in the treatment group. To create the comparison sample, the study team used propensity score matching. The following variables were included in the matching: gender; race/ethnicity; primary language (English, Spanish, or other); free or reduced-price lunch status; parent education; special education status; migrant education status; and English language learner test status. The school where the student attended kindergarten was also included as a matching variable so that comparison students could be drawn from the same neighborhoods and schools. As expected, *t*-tests comparing the demographics of the family
literacy participants and their counterparts in the comparison sample before and after matching showed that propensity score matching substantially improved the similarity of the groups.

The research team used regression analysis to compare outcomes for children who participated in family literacy programs with those who did not, controlling for demographic characteristics. Groups were compared on absence rates for all grades (K–5), English language development level at kindergarten enrollment, and test scores in English language arts and mathematics in grades 2–5. Regression-adjusted means are presented.

Results

Results from the alumni survey are presented below, followed by a discussion of the elementary school follow-up study findings.

Parents’ Use of Home Literacy Practices After the Program

A primary goal of family literacy programs is to help parents understand the value of creating a home environment rich with language and literacy opportunities to support their children’s educational success. Indeed, findings from the alumni survey indicate that parents continue to engage in supportive home literacy practices with their children after they leave family literacy programs.

First, survey findings reveal positive trends in reports of the frequency of library visits and reading practices among alumni compared to when the same parents began the program (see Figure 2). For example, 55% reported visiting the library at least monthly when they first enrolled in the program, and 82% reported doing so at the end of their participation in the program—a statistically significant increase. This increased use of the library remained stable after parents exited the program, with 84% of parents reporting visiting the library monthly as alumni.

Figure 2. Percentage of Alumni Parents Reporting the Use of Various Home Literacy Practices

Note. Arrows pointing from one bar to another indicate a statistically significant change ($p<.05$) from one time point to the other.
A slight (but statistically significant) decrease in reading practices was observed among alumni parents—91% of parents reported reading to their children at least three times per week in their final parent survey prior to exit, compared with 85% of alumni. However, the percentage of alumni parents who reported reading frequently to their children after leaving the program (85%) was still a statistically significant improvement over the percentage who reported frequent reading to their children when they began the program (70%). This suggests that although there is some decline post-program, parents are still practicing what they learned from the family literacy programs one to five years later.

Telling stories to their children appears to be somewhat less common among alumni parents. Although there was a statistically significant increase from program entry to exit in the percentage of parents reporting telling their children stories at least three times per week, there was no statistically significant difference between alumni responses and responses at program entry, suggesting this was not a practice that parents consistently maintained after leaving the program.

School Involvement Among Alumni Parents

To ensure that parents are able to support their children’s learning and success in school, parents in family literacy programs are encouraged to become active participants in their children’s classrooms and schools. There are statistically significant increases in parent reports of their involvement in their children’s school and program activities at the end of the program compared with program entry. Alumni survey results also indicate that parents maintained or even increased their level of involvement in school activities once they left the program and their children entered elementary school (see Figure 3).

Figure 3. Percentage of Alumni Parents Reporting Engaging in Various School Involvement Activities

![Figure 3](image-url)

Note. Arrows pointing from one bar to another indicate a statistically significant change (p<.05) from one time point to the other.
For example, 78% of alumni parents reported volunteering in their child’s classroom, a statistically significant increase over the 45% who reported volunteering at program entry. In addition, 96% of alumni parents reported attending school events in which their child was participating, and 90% reported participating in parent committee meetings such as the PTA, parent advisory committees, or school governing boards. This not only represents a statistically significant increase over their responses at program entry, but a statistically significant increase over their responses at program exit as well.

**Elementary School Attendance**

Turning to outcomes for children who participated in family literacy programs, results reveal positive trends as well. A comparison of elementary school attendance rates shows that students who participated in family literacy programs had statistically higher attendance in elementary school than comparison students, on average. Figure 4 shows that family literacy students had lower absence rates than the matched comparison sample at grades 1 (2.8% vs. 3.6%), 2 (2.5% vs. 3.0%), 3 (2.2% vs. 3.1%), and 4 (2.2% vs. 3.4%). These differences in absence rates are relatively small (they translate into a day or two more of school per year for family literacy children); however, attendance differences are statistically significant.

*Figure 4. Mean Absence Rates for Family Literacy Students and Matched Comparison Students in Grades K–5, Controlling for Demographics*
English Language Skills at Kindergarten Entry

Overall, children from family literacy programs and the comparison group entered kindergarten with similar English language skills. Figure 5 shows that English language development scores—as measured by the California English Language Development Test (CELDT) at kindergarten entry—were statistically equivalent for the demographically matched family literacy and comparison students. On average, family literacy students scored 430.0 points and their comparison group peers scored 424.1 points out of a possible score of 600. Both of these scores are in the Intermediate range.

Figure 5. Mean CELDT Scale Score for Family Literacy Students and Matched Comparison Students at Initial Assessment in Kindergarten, Controlling for Demographics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>Family Literacy</th>
<th>Comparison</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>K</td>
<td>430.0</td>
<td>424.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Numbers in parentheses

Achievement Test Scores

Although English language skills at kindergarten entry were comparable for family literacy and comparison students, students who participated in family literacy programs performed better than their comparison group peers on California Standards Test (CST) exams in both English language arts (ELA) and mathematics. Figures 6 and 7 present z-scores (or standard deviations above or below the mean for the study population) for family literacy and comparison students on the ELA and mathematics CST, respectively.

For grades 2 through 5 combined, family literacy students outperformed comparison group students on the ELA assessment by a small, but statistically significant, margin, scoring .06 standard deviations above the average for the study population, compared to the 0.03 standard deviations below the average for the population that comparison students scored on average. Group differences were only significant for the combined group of grades 2–5; however, differences between the two groups at individual grade levels (where sample sizes were smaller) were not statistically significant.
Figure 6. Mean CST English Language Arts Z-Scores for Family Literacy Students and Matched Comparison Students in Grades 2–5, Controlling for Demographics

Figure 7. Mean CST Mathematics Z-Scores for Family Literacy Students and Matched Comparison Students in Grades 2–5, Controlling for Demographics
Similarly, for the math assessment, family literacy students in grades 2 through 5 combined scored .09 standard deviations above the average for the study population, and the matched comparison students scored 0.04 standard deviations below the average for the population—a modest, but statistically significant, difference. Although differences between the two groups at grades 2, 4, and 5 were not statistically significant, the difference at grade 3 (with family literacy students performing .11 standard deviations above and comparison students scoring .02 standard deviations below the population average) was marginally significant.

**Discussion**

Overall, the two studies described in this paper find evidence of positive outcomes for children and families participating in family literacy programs.

Throughout parents’ participation in the First 5 LA Family Literacy Initiative, consistent growth has been observed in parent reports of their home literacy practices and other parenting behaviors that support children’s learning and development. Results from a survey of alumni parents presented in this paper suggest that many parents also continued to engage in parenting practices that support their children’s learning and educational success as many as five years after graduating from family literacy programs. Parents continued to engage their children in some, though not all, interactive literacy activities after leaving family literacy programs. Parents also appeared to maintain, or even increase, their level of participation in their child’s school after leaving family literacy programs.

In addition, the elementary school follow-up component of this research found that children who had attended family literacy programs and demographically matched children who had attended an alternative preschool program entered kindergarten with similar English language skills. However, family literacy students had higher attendance rates and performed better on the CST English language arts and math assessments (for grades 2 through 5 combined) in elementary school.

It is important to note several limitations of these two studies. First, data on alumni parent behaviors come from parent self-report, so responses may be influenced by parents’ desire to present the “right” or most socially desirable answer. In addition, in the absence of the random assignment of families to participate in a family literacy program or not, changes in parent reports of their behaviors over time cannot be causally attributed to their participation in the program; other unmeasured factors could be triggering these changes.

Second, the pool of family literacy children located in the district’s student record data represents a relatively small proportion (40%) of the children who were attending family literacy programs within the district’s catchment area. Student mobility rates are high among the population of families who commonly attend family literacy programs, which may contribute to this low inclusion rate; slight differences in the spelling of names or errors in birthdates preventing accurate matches could also be to blame. In addition, although this analysis uses a demographically matched comparison group as a benchmark to assess family literacy student performance, it was not possible to match students on academic achievement prior to participating in family literacy or the comparison program, nor was it possible to randomly assign students to treatment and control conditions. Therefore, it cannot be ruled out that family literacy students differed in an important but unmeasurable way from comparison students at preschool enrollment, and outcome differences cannot be attributed directly to program participation.
Despite these limitations, results presented here suggest that family literacy participants—both children and their parents—continued to show positive outcomes long after their family literacy program experiences. For children, these outcomes included behavioral as well as academic outcomes and extended well into elementary school. Although performance differences between family literacy children and the comparison group were generally modest, the fact that results consistently showed family literacy children outperforming their peers should encourage further attention to this comprehensive parent-and-child program model by policymakers and program developers.

References


Adult Education Teachers Explore the Complexities of Critical Literacy Teaching

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Abstract: While there have been steady calls for critical literacy instruction in adult education, there are still a limited number of portraits of teachers practicing critical literacy. The following questions guided our research: What instructional beliefs and practices, specific to critical literacy education, do exemplary adult education teachers hold? What can the “wisdom of practice” garnered from adult education teachers tell us about teacher preparation and professional development? The study took place in the St. Louis Public Schools Adult Education and Literacy program, the largest program in the state. We conducted in-depth interviews and classroom observations of teachers who were nominated as exemplary teachers about their literacy practices. Our analysis was inductive and aimed at uncovering the adult educators’ tacit theories about literacy practices. Teachers in this study identified three approaches to critical literacy education: social justice, multiple literacies and genre approaches. We display our findings through “telling examples” (Mitchell, 1984) that represent each approach to critical literacy, highlighting the range and variability of practices. Conceptualizing multiple entry points into critical literacy education provides opportunities for professional development and growth.

Keywords: Critical literacy, adult literacy education, professional development

The Complexity of Critical Literacy Education

Critical literacy refers to approaches to literacy instruction whose emphasis is on helping adults develop agency so that they can accomplish goals they deem important and resist the coercive effects of literacy (Dozier, Johnston & Rogers, 2005; Freire, 1973; Janks, 2002; Luke, 2012; Rogers, Mosley, Kramer & LSJTRG, 2009). Critical literacy teachers use analysis, cultural critique and social action to dismantle unjust practices and construct agentic narratives (Rogers, Mosley & Folkes, 2009).

We know what critical literacy instruction sounds like in theory but there are a limited number of portraits of teachers practicing critical literacy (e.g., Auerbach, 2001; Purcell-Gates & Waterman, 2000; Shor & Freire, 1987; St. Clair & Sandlin, 2004). Further, there have been steady calls for critical literacy instruction in adult education (e.g. Brookfield, 2005; Degener, 2001; Demetrion, 2005; Heaney, 1992). Degener (2001) complicates the call for critical instruction, arguing for the importance of recognizing multiple kinds of critical practices. She writes,

Critical theorists are elegant and prolific in their criticisms of traditional, non-critical adult education programs. Unfortunately, their criticisms have resulted in an “us versus them” mentality that often puts noncritical programs on the defensive rather than open to the idea of change….Dividing adult education programs into two categories is too
simplistic and does not adequately represent the field. In reality, some programs may be noncritical but may also have the potential to evolve – that is, they may be making program changes that reflect a shift toward critical pedagogy. (pp. 29)

We side with Degener and think it is more productive to think of a range of critical literacy practices, rather than a simple dichotomy of critical or non-critical. The following questions guided our research: What instructional beliefs and practices, specific to critical literacy education, do exemplary adult education teachers hold? What can the “wisdom of practice” garnered from adult education teachers tell us about teacher preparation and professional development? To foreshadow our findings, the teachers in this study identified three approaches to critical literacy education: social justice, multiple literacies and genre approaches.

**Methods**

**Context of the Study**

The study took place in the St. Louis Public Schools Adult Education and Literacy program, the largest program in the state. The city of St. Louis is characterized as having a history of racial division between African Americans and European Americans. There are inequities along education, housing, and employment lines despite reform attempts such as school desegregation (Stuart-Wells & Crain, 1999). In Missouri, adult education teachers must be certified, hold a Bachelor’s degree and participate in 20 hours of professional development annually.

**Data Collection**

We drew on what Ladson-Billings (1994) referred to as the “wisdom of practice” of respected teachers and designed a survey and nomination form to solicit nominations. We used what Foster (1997) has referred to as the process of “community nomination” where we asked adult education community members to nominate exemplary teachers. This nomination form was distributed to AEL sites in the metro area. We interviewed 14 teachers and focused on the 9 teachers who spoke extensively about their literacy practices versus content area learning. We used an interview protocol designed for exemplary elementary teachers (Allington & Johnston, 2001) but modified for adult education teachers (see Rogers & Kramer, 2008). The interviews were semi-structured and lasted from 60 to 180 minutes (Rubin & Rubin, 1995). We videotaped examples of the teachers’ self-defined “best practices” in their classrooms and collected students’ achievement and retention rates.

**Analysis**

Our analysis was inductive and aimed at uncovering the adult educators’ theories about literacy practices. We read through each interview multiple times and developed open codes that answered our research questions (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Miles & Huberman, 1995). We then went about category construction where we collapsed our descriptive codes into themes that reflected the teachers’ literacy practices. Using a constant comparative method, we developed conceptual links between different approaches to critical literacy (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). We developed a visual heuristic of a constantly shifting continuum to help us understand the practices. At one end of the continuum were practices that were oriented toward social justice.
and action. At the other end were practices that were more textual oriented and oriented toward multiple perspectives. From here, we developed case studies of each of the teachers (Mitchell, 1984).

Findings

We found that the teachers drew on three major approaches to critical literacy education – social justice, multiple literacies and genre approaches. We display our findings through “telling examples” (Mitchell, 1984) that represent each approach to critical literacy, highlighting the range of practices. According to Mitchell (1984), a telling case is one in which the “particular circumstances surrounding a case serve to make previously obscure theoretical relationships suddenly apparent” (p. 239). Regardless of the approach, the teachers had many practices in common. They all respected and nurtured students’ voices, built community in their classroom, valued an inquiry approach and integrated multiple literacy experiences into their classrooms. They sought to build dynamic literacy repertoires at the same time they support progress toward more traditionally defined metrics of achievement. The teachers merged accelerative literacy practices (e.g. comprehension strategies, writer’s workshop, guided reading, word study) within their approach to critical literacy.

Social Justice Approaches

A social justice approach is characterized by a “problem-posing, problem-solving” model of education that is rooted in dialogue between the teacher and learners. This approach seeks to move from critical analysis and critique to social action (Freire, 1973; Purcell-Gates & Waterman, 2000). Adults use texts to accomplish the changes they seek in their worlds. Some of the issues that the teachers worked on with their students included: Sexual harassment, housing discrimination, advocacy for children, environmental issues, among others.

Holiday is an African American poet and a social worker who brings many experiences with social activism into her classroom. Holiday’s undergraduate background in African American and Women’s Studies can be seen in the design of her classroom. She states,

I definitely want my students to reach tangible goals like employment or get into a higher educational institution because a lot of them are in poverty…I want them to have a higher sense of empowerment and knowledge of social issues, specifically along the lines of race, poverty and gender.

Her classroom was located in an adult education center that piloted a critical literacy lab so teachers at the site could experiment with critical literacy practices. This lab generated a sense of community amongst the teachers at the center. And, Holiday facilitated community amongst her diverse students who ranged in age from 18 to 80 years old, primarily African American. This sense of community was visible during literacy lessons as well as in the kinds of out-of-school events that the group planned. Holiday used a range of literacy materials – literature with social issues, songs, newspaper articles, poetry, and traditional GED preparatory materials. She also used multiple approaches to literacy instruction including book clubs, language experience stories, read alouds, individual reading. She worked one-on-one with students and also flexibly grouped students based on interest and ability, often designing-units of study such as an eight-week African American literature series.
The students in Holiday’s classroom often cycled through the problem-posing-problem-solving process as they discussed critical social issues. One day, students at the adult education center arrived to find an oversized “For Sale” sign placed in front of the center. They were concerned because, for many of them, this was their neighborhood school. They asked Holiday why their school was for sale. As much of a learner about this as they were, Holiday invited the adults in her class to pursue more information about this situation. The next day Holiday brought a real estate listing, a newspaper article and a report on the financial status of the school district. The class analyzed the newspaper article that listed the sale of the center. They were concerned that the building was cited as “unused.” Holiday engaged them in discussion about how they might respond to the inaccuracies in this article. The class generated a list of actions they could take, including writing a letter to the editor to clarify that the building was fully in use. Holiday encouraged them to learn more about how the building was used so they could support their statements with evidence. They learned how many staff and teachers worked at the site and how many students attended classes at the center. Holiday encouraged each student to write a letter including their reasons why the building should not be sold. A few students gathered these responses and wrote a letter to editor of the local newspaper. Their actions resulted in a member of the Board of Education visiting the site and learning about the educational activities that occur there. The school building was not sold and was removed from the list of buildings to be sold.

What is evident in this example is the way that Holiday integrates opportunities for literacy learning within the context of problems that impact the adult’s daily lives. Holiday believes in the experience that adults bring to the classroom. She states, “There is already an intrinsic knowledge in people…Our goal is to pull out what is already there and have them walk out of the classroom more enlightened than when they came in.” Her beliefs echo the sentiments of Freire (1973), who points out the goal of the educator is to follow the adult’s interests and desires to make a change in the world as they are learning to read and write. Holiday was conscious about different kinds of social activism. She stated, “social change is not necessarily a march on city hall but the ongoing little thing that you never really hear about, which is the proactive side of activism.”

**Multiple Literacies Approaches**

Teachers who embrace a multiple literacies approach begin by inquiring into the literacies that exist in an adult’s life and find ways to integrate these literacies into the curriculum (Moll & Gonzalez, 1994). Teachers using this approach also find ways to critique the production and interpretation of such texts. This is important because as Luke, O’Brien and Comber (1994) stated, “left uninterrupted, everyday texts play major parts in building and reproducing social structures” (pp. 113).

Sister Martha, the teacher we chose to represent this approach, is European American and has a Master’s degree in education and has taught for over 40 years in K-12 and adult education. She is guided by her spiritual beliefs and structures her class to honor relationships and compassion. She uses a combination of methods and materials. There are reading materials of all varieties throughout the classroom: a bulletin board with current events, brochures and flyers, a shelf of multileveled, multicultural texts; magazines in the bathroom; and current newspapers and magazines on top of bookcases.

She teaches in an adult education classroom housed in a social service center that provides assistance to local families in a multicultural neighborhood. Her class is composed of American- and foreign-born students focused on basic skill development, preparation for the
General Educational Development Test (GED), and learning English. Sister Martha has participated in social justice initiatives that impact this community such as efforts for affordable housing. Her class has fifteen to twenty students, ranging from basic to advanced levels.

Sister Martha’s instruction is characterized by her commitment to respecting student diversity and designing literacy experiences that are inclusive. Her class is diverse and, consequently, adults come to the class with many literacy experiences and needs. They participate in different communities: neighborhoods, social-class groups, online groups, families, religious institutions, organizations, etc. Each community is defined by social practices and mediated through texts. She models her own experiences reading and writing for a purpose – for example, she shared a letter she wrote to her Congressperson.

A routine part of Sister Martha’s literacy instruction is writer’s workshop. She provides adults with opportunities to integrate their expertise into their writing. Seated around a table were seven students (five African American and two European Americans ranging in age from teenagers to older adults), situated so they could hear and see each other as well as Sister Martha. She planned to walk them through the writing process – 10 minutes for brainstorming both the content and genre of their writing – 30 minutes for writing and revision and 10 minutes for sharing. Sister Martha recorded their ideas on a flipchart as they discussed topics: children’s education; church; finding a job and HipHop. She then conducted a mini-lesson about the different genres of writing (e.g. poems, diary entries, songs, persuasive essays). Collectively they decided they would write about the topic of HipHop. There were varied opinions about the value of HipHop: some thought it was offensive and should be kept away from youth; others thought it was an important tool for expressing oppression and agency. Several students chose to write essays about HipHop. One student in the group chose to write a HipHop song.

As Sister Martha circulated around the room, she pointed out that Shawn, one of the adults in the writer’s group, was a songwriter. During the writer’s workshop, he wrote a complete song that he later shared with the group. The chorus line went like this: “I’ve been patiently waitin’ to make it, now that I’ve made it, they hate it.” The group discussed what the lyrics meant to African Americans growing up in St. Louis, how difficult it was to move ahead and still have the respect of your peer group. Multiple literacies become the site not only of engagement but of cultural analysis, an important part of critical literacy.

Shawn also explained to the group his process of writing songs:

I write HipHop poems with R & B…I brainstorm certain things…that I have been through in my life and I try to explain it in a song. Like most songwriters, I use hooks and chorus lines to bring the song out and make people remember it.

Shawn positioned himself as a writer with agency. He reflected on the difference between writing in and out of school, stating, “when you’re writing at school, you are writing because someone is telling you. But when you write music, you are setting your pace, and you are trying to get your point across.” Sister Martha strives to break down this distinction between writing in and out of school, characteristic of a multiple literacies approach.

**Genre Approach to Critical Literacy**

A genre approach to critical literacy is the third approach we identified in the teachers’ practices. Genre theorists focus on the importance of students acquiring competence in the linguistic structures of dominant discourses through the analysis of the patterns of texts and the
ways these structures carry out social functions. Advocates of this approach argue for explicit instruction and direct access to genres of power (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000; Fairclough, 1992).

Dorothy Walker, the teacher we chose to represent a genre approach to critical literacy, is a lifelong educator. In her eighties when she participated in this research, Ms. Walker is an African American woman who has taught for over thirty years in the St. Louis Public Schools. Her adult education class was part of a families-in-schools program held at a St. Louis City elementary school. Ms. Walker believes that good teaching begins by getting to know her students. She uses a combination of traditional and authentic literacy materials and places priority on reading and writing for a purpose, emphasizing a genre approach to literacy instruction.

Ms. Walker believes in explicitly teaching what Delpit (1996) refers to as the “codes of power” – whether the code of power is standard English, constructing a sermon, or participating in school structures – to her students. As Delpit and Kilgour Dowdy (2002) point out, the fabric of powerful discourses in society are often invisible, and consequently, it is difficult for people of color and women to gain control over them.

A vignette from her teaching illustrates her approach to teaching the “codes of power.” Lance, a 33 year old African American, wanted to become an ordained minister in his church but needed to pass an ordainment test which included a written statement of commitments and writing and delivering a sermon. First, they studied examples of quality sermons, looking at the structure of the text. Next, they read passages from the Bible and Ms. Walker taught him questioning strategies that he could use as he was preparing his sermons.

Once you have read some part of the scripture, say you have read 23rd Psalm, or 34th Psalms where it says, “I will rejoice in the Lord. I will always sing his praises.” So if you took the scripture, and you ask: What did that just say? I will rejoice. In the Lord. What? Always? I will always sing his praises. Why are you rejoicing? Why are you singing his praises? You are developing from that point of view. So usually we will develop three points of whatever it is. So you are explaining whatever you are saying. Then you ask: Who said this? And then you find your way into history. You have to go back to your Bible and find out why David was saying this at the time. Why was David saying this? I will sing his praises always. Why are you singing his praises? And this is how you would develop his sermon. And see, Lance was good, once he began to think about it along those lines, he was good.

Ms. Walker taught Lance to read and write his sermon calling on critical literacy practices. Specifically, she asked Lance to examine multiple and conflicting texts (“you have to go back to your Bible and find out why David was saying this at this time”); to examine the historical and cultural contexts of the texts he was using (“this way you have to do history”); investigate how readers are positioned by the values in texts (“you are developing it from that point of view”); to question the meaning behind statements (“why are you rejoicing? Why are you singing his praises?”); and encourage multiple passes through a text (“you have to go back to the Bible”). As she models critical literacy processes with Lance she is also teaching the genre of the sermon to Lance. As he wrote his own sermon, she reminded him to keep his congregation in mind, emphasizing a central element of the genre approach: social purposes are at the heart of all communication. Ms. Walker is aware that when Lance stands up in front of his congregation, he will be judged based on the quality of his sermon. Delpit (1996) writes,
Teachers do students no service to suggest, even implicitly, that the “product” is not important. In this country, students will be judged on their product regardless of the process they utilized to achieve it. And that product, based as it is on the specific codes of a particular culture, is more readily produced when the directives of how to produce it are made explicit. (pp. 31)

Ms. Walker’s stance to teaching literacy has been articulated by Delpit (1996) who writes, “[students] must be encouraged to understand the value of the code they already possess as well as to understand the power realities of this country. Otherwise, they will not be able to work to change these realities” (pp. 40). As students are taught how textual resources are put together in what is recognized as a genre, they can begin to use and modify the genre based on their interests, and desired outcomes (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000).

Lance was ultimately ordained as a minister in his church.

**Discussion**

In this research we have demonstrated multiple entry points into critical literacy education. Adult education brings people together who share distinctive histories and resources. The teachers in this study realize that the literacy practices that are part of such diverse communities of practice can be powerful routes to learning. Critical literacy approaches question the value of some texts (e.g., literature) over other texts (e.g., newspapers, applications on an iPad) and assumes that adults use a variety of texts for different purposes. This set of perspectives suggests proficiencies with texts range along a continuum and are contextually dependent, with virtually all people having the capacity to make meaning from texts. These understandings undermine the notion of “literate” and “illiterate” as oppositional states. Likewise, this notion of a continuum of critical literacy practices complicates understandings of teachers as either critical or non-critical. Indeed, each of the teachers in the study made sure that their students were accelerating as readers and writers as they learned to critique and change power structures.

Conceptualizing multiple routes to developing critical literacy practices is important for teachers’ professional development because it allows for a closer analysis of the practices that constitute critical literacy education. While multiple literacies, social justice and genre approaches were the most common frameworks for the teachers in this study, many of them designed a hybrid approach that included practices from several frameworks. Teachers teach the way they do because of their culture, experiences and philosophies about education. Just as it is important for adults in their classroom to see their lives reflected in the content of their studies, so too, is it important for teachers to see their practices incorporated into professional development. The teachers in this program were fortunate to have access to organic professional development that included critical literacy education such as a critical literacy study circle or an annual Educating for Change Curriculum Fair that focuses on social justice education. Participation in these selections count toward their annual professional development requirement. Such options are relevant to teachers’ lives and provide opportunities for developing community amongst the teachers. In an era of standardized testing which ignores context, the affordance of multiple literacies and devalues incremental, life-based progress, critical literacy approaches in AEL professional development are increasingly important.
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Home Literacy Practices in Four Punjabi Families in Canada

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Abstract: The purpose of this study was to examine and compare the home literacy beliefs and practices of first- and second-generation Punjabi families living in Toronto, Canada. Four Punjabi families (two first-generation and two second-generation) with young children between the ages of three and five were recruited to participate in this study. Data for the study were collected through participant observations, field notes, informal conversations, semi-structured interviews, and work samples. The findings revealed that all of the families engaged their children in a wide variety of literacy practices (e.g., reading the holy book, watching Bollywood movies, singing Punjabi songs) at home and in the community. However, these home literacy practices are different to those valued in formal educational settings such as schools. The findings of this study have significant implications for educational policy and practice.

Keywords: Punjabi families; home literacy practices; parental beliefs; young children

Statement of the Research Topic

Most of the research on family literacy has focused on the literacy practices that middle-class, white families engage in at home. More recently, however, researchers (e.g., Gregory, Long & Volk, 2004; Li, 2009; Purcell-Gates, 2007) have begun to document the literacy practices of families from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. These studies have provided significant insights into the literacy practices of African American, Hispanic, and Chinese families. However, relatively few studies (Anderson & Mui, 2008; Minns, 1997; Saxena, 1994) have examined Punjabi families’ home literacy beliefs and practices. Furthermore, there have been no comparative studies between first- and second-generation. This study was designed to address this gap by examining the home literacy beliefs and practices of first- and second-generation Punjabi families within a Canadian context.

Theoretical Framework

This study is situated within the broader theoretical framework of literacy as social and cultural practice (Barton & Hamilton, 1998). From this perspective, literacy is defined as “a set of social practices associated with different domains of life that are purposeful and embedded in broader social goals and practices” (Purcell-Gates, Degener, Jacobson, & Soler, 2002, p. 73). That is, the forms and functions of literacy vary considerably across families. However, some literacy practices (e.g., shared storybook reading) are valued more than others (e.g., oral storytelling) in social institutions such as schools. Consequently, those children whose literacy practices are different to those valued in schools are less likely to experience academic success (Blackledge, 2001). This is partly because many families such as Punjabi families are unfamiliar
with the literacy practices that are valued in schools. Thus, it is critical for us to develop a better understanding of families’ beliefs and practices in order to build on children’s prior literacy experiences in the home.

**Literature Review**

There have been very few studies that have examined the literacy beliefs and practices of Punjabi families. For example, a case study conducted by Saxena (1994) explored the literacy practices of a Punjabi-Hindu family living in England. He discovered that their 4-year-old son was exposed to three different languages (English, Punjabi, and Hindi) in his daily life. Based on his findings, Saxena (1994) concluded that the family’s language choices “provide them with multiple identities and freedom to operate in different worlds of literacies to achieve different goals” (p. 200).

Similarly, Minns (1997) explored the literacy practices of a 4-year-old Punjabi boy named Gurdeep. She found that Gurdeep engaged in a wide variety of literacy practices within the context of his home, school, and community. For example, when Gurdeep and his family visited the gurdwara (Sikh temple), he was able to read various signs written in both Punjabi and English. Minns’ (1997) research demonstrates that language is a “medium for transmitting the social and cultural life of the community” (p. 25).

Anderson and Mui (2008) explored the home literacy practices of a four-year-old Punjabi girl named Genna and her extended family. Consistent with previous research (Minns, 1997; Saxena, 1994), the family in this study also engaged in a wide range of literacy practices (e.g., singing songs, reading recipes) with their children. However, storybook reading was not a common literacy practice in Genna’s home.

The researchers also found that Genna’s siblings and cousins played an important role in supporting her literacy development. For example, Genna’s older sister, Olivia, described playing school to help prepare her younger sister for school. Based on their findings, Anderson and Mui (2008) concluded that “it is important to recognize, value, and build on the different ways that families are constituted and the different ways that literacy is learned, practiced, and taught across cultural and linguistic groups” (p. 241).

The findings of the above studies indicate that Punjabi families engage in a wide range of literacy practices with their young children. Although researchers have attempted to examine the home literacy beliefs and practices of Punjabi families (Anderson & Mui, 2008; Minns, 1997; Saxena, 1994), there have been no comparative studies between first- and second-generation. The purpose of this study was to describe and compare the home literacy beliefs and practices of first- and second-generation Punjabi families. The following research questions guided this study: (1) What are the literacy beliefs and practices of first- and second-generation Punjabi families with young children between the ages of three and five? (2) How do the literacy beliefs and practices of first- and second-generation Punjabi families compare?

**Methodology**

**Participants**

Four Punjabi families with at least one child between the ages of three and five were recruited to participate in this study. The families included two first-generation Punjabi families (foreign-born) and two second-generation Punjabi families (Canadian-born with foreign-born
parents). All of the families resided in the Greater Toronto Area, Ontario, Canada. The two first-generation families in this study were the Brar and the Sandhu family and the two second-generation families were the Gill and the Dogra family (all names are pseudonyms).

The Brar family consists of the father (Harman), mother (Amarjit), grandmother (Maji), and two children (Kamalpreet and Zorawar) aged 10 and 3. Harman was born in India and immigrated to Canada in 1991 through the family sponsorship program. Amarjit came to Canada in 1992. Both parents had college diplomas from India. At the time of the study, Harman worked as a fast-food restaurant manager and was the primary financial provider for the family.

The Sandhu family consists of the father (Ranvir), mother (Hardeep), grandfather (Nanaji), and two daughters (Manpreet and Manjit) aged 5 and 1. Hardeep came to Canada from India in 2001 through the family sponsorship program. She worked in a local factory. Ranvir came to Canada in 2002 on a student visa. Both Ranvir and Hardeep completed high school in India. At the time of study, Ranvir was working as a short-haul truck driver while studying to become a financial advisor.

The Gill family consists of the father (Harmeet), mother (Kulwinder), and two sons, (Kasam and Aamir) aged 5 and 8 months. Harmeet’s parents also lived in the same house. Harmeet and Kulwinder were both born and educated in Canada. Harmeet received a bachelor’s and master’s degree in education. He was a vice-principal of a public elementary school. Kulwinder also completed her bachelor’s degree in education. Since then she has worked as a primary school teacher. At the time of the study, Kulwinder was on maternity leave.

The Dogra family consists of the father (Manmohan), mother (Devika), and their two children, (Rita and Ajay) aged 3 and 1 month. Manmohan was born and raised in Canada. He completed his bachelor’s degree in engineering and worked as an electronic engineer. Devika was born and educated in India. After completing her bachelor of commerce degree, she earned a master’s degree in human resources. Devika immigrated to Canada in 2004 shortly after her marriage. Since then she worked as a human resources manager. Devika at the time of the study was on maternity leave.

Data Collection and Analysis

During December 2010 to February 2011, I visited each family once or twice a week (at different times) over a period of three weeks. Each home visit lasted approximately one hour. These visits were arranged with the family in advance over the phone. My data collection began by observing the home environment (e.g., the availability of books, newspapers, magazines), the interactions among the family members (e.g., parents, siblings, grandparents), and the family’s home language use (e.g., Punjabi, Hindi, English). After a few visits, I specifically focused on the literacy practices that the families engaged in with their children (e.g., reading books, telling stories, drawing pictures) inside the home.

My field notes also provided an important source of data for understanding the four families’ literacy beliefs and practices. During home visits, I briefly jotted down key words and/or phrases as I observed the families engage in a wide range of literacy practices with their children. These notes were expanded as soon as possible after the observation period. As data collection progressed, my field notes contained descriptive information about the families’ home literacy practices. When I got home, I typed my handwritten field notes on the computer.

Besides these observations, I had informal conversational interviews with the parents and other extended family members (e.g., grandparents) in order to gain further insights into their literacy beliefs and practices. During home visits, I asked the family members informal questions
about their literacy practices such as: how often do you read Punjabi books with your children? These conversations were conducted in both Punjabi and English. Sometimes I jotted down key words during our conversations in my field notebook.

In addition to these observations and informal conversations, I conducted semi-structured interviews with the parents (mostly mothers) in each family at the end of the three week observational period. After reviewing my data, I developed an interview guide to help me get more specific information about the families’ literacy beliefs and practices. I designed an interview guide that included a list of topics (e.g., oral language, reading activities, writing activities) to be discussed in the interviews with the parents. Under each topic, I wrote questions to help guide me through the interview such as: who is involved in the activity? Where is it done? When is it done? All of the interviews were audio recorded, transcribed, and translated into English.

After transcribing the interviews, I repeatedly read through my field notes to identify key themes and patterns related to literacy beliefs and practices. The interview and observational data were grouped under the two major categories of: (1) family’s literacy beliefs and (2) family’s literacy practices. After this initial coding, the data were further organized into four themes. The four major themes were: (1) literacy resources in the home, (2) language use at home, (3) literacy practices related to religion, and (4) literacy activities observed in the home. Once these themes and categories were identified, data were organized under the appropriate themes. After the data were analyzed, comparisons were made to examine the differences and similarities between the first- and second-generation families in terms of the four themes.

Findings

Literacy Resources in the Home

The findings revealed that the second-generation families tended to have more books and other literacy resources in their homes than the first-generation families. For example, the Gill family had a large collection of storybooks, which were kept neatly on a shelf in Kasam’s bedroom. Harmeet and Kulwinder also purchased Bollywood (Indian film industry) movies, books, and magazines for Kasam (see Figure 1). Similarly, in the Dogra home, I found a wide range of literacy materials including Dora the Explorer books, alphabet books, nursery rhymes, magazines, and Hindu religious texts.

In contrast, the first-generation families had fewer literacy materials in the home. The Brar family, for example, went to the public library to borrow books for their children. Sometimes, Kamalpreet helped Zorawar find books in the library. She reported that Zorawar’s favourite books were those about animals such as Scaredy Squirrel by Melanie Watt. The Sandhu family did not have access to a local public library. So, Hardeep often relied on Manpreet to bring books home from the school library. Other literacy resources found in the Sandhu home included Punjabi newspapers, magnetic letters, drawing tools, brochures about immigration to Canada, and Sikh religious books.

Language Use at Home

There were significant differences between the first- and second-generation families in regards to the use of Punjabi and English in the home. All of the parents in the first-generation families
spoke Punjabi to each other and to their children. The parents felt that it was important for their children to maintain the Punjabi language in order to communicate with grandparents and other extended family members. The Brar family, for example, implemented a Punjabi-only policy inside the home. Sometimes, when Zorawar tried to speak to Kamalpreet in English, she intentionally spoke in Punjabi. The Sandhu family reported that singing was an important literacy practice for maintaining their home language and culture. During home visits, I often observed Manpreet singing boliyan (traditional Punjabi songs) that she had learned from her mother.

The second-generation families, in contrast, spoke mostly English at home. For example, the parents in the Dogra family preferred to speak English among themselves. However, Devika wanted Rita to be fluent in Hindi. So, she exposed Rita to Bollywood films in order to help her learn their home language. My observations revealed that Rita was able to speak a few words of Hindi. Similarly, the Gill family reported that English was the language spoken most often in the home. Kulwinder wanted Kasam to be bilingual in both English and Punjabi, so that he would be able to speak with his grandparents. She tried to speak only Punjabi to Kasam. However, she had not been consistent in her use of Punjabi with Kasam.

**Literacy Practices Related to Religion**

The findings revealed that the first-generation families visited the temple more frequently than the second-generation families. The Brar family, for example, went to the gurdwara at least once a week with their children. Amarjit and Harman believed that it was important to teach their children about their religious beliefs and traditions. Sometimes, Kamalpreet and Zorawar sat beside their mother while she recited passages from the Guru Granth Sahib (holy book of the Sikhs) at home. Amarjit often asked the children to repeat after her as she read each verse of the hymn like ik onkar (God is one). The Sandhu family wanted to enrol Manpreet in Punjabi language classes at the local gurdwara, so that she could learn to read the holy book and other religious texts in Gurmukhi.
The second-generation families went to the temple less often than the first-generation families. The Dogras, for example, went to the gurdwara and mandir (Hindu temple) once or twice a month. Devika and Manmohan wanted to expose their children to both religions (Sikhism and Hinduism). The Gills, on the other hand, did not attend religious services regularly due to their busy schedules. Nevertheless, the parents in both families, particularly the mothers, emphasised the importance of passing down their religious knowledge to their children. Kulwinder, for example, passed on oral stories of Sikh bhagats (holy men) that she had heard as a child. Devika also shared her traditional Hindu beliefs with Rita by reciting daily prayers, reading sacred texts, and watching religious movies.

**Literacy Activities Observed in the Home**

The results of the study seemed to indicate that the literacy beliefs and practices of the first-generation families were very different from those of the second-generation families. The Sandhu family, for example, preferred traditional approaches to literacy learning (e.g., copying texts, repetition) based on their own educational experiences in India. During home visits, I often observed Manpreet copying words (e.g., names of fruit) into her notebook (see Figure 2). Kamalpreet, on the other hand, adopted the strategies (e.g., alphabet charts, flash cards) modeled by her teachers. For example, she played rhyming games with Zorawar to help him become familiar with new words. My observations revealed that Kamalpreet played an important role in her brother’s literacy learning, since she was more familiar with the school curriculum than her parents.

*Figure 2. Manpreet’s work sample*

The second-generation families tended to favour a more non-traditional approach to teaching based on their educational experiences in Canada. For example, the Gill family reported sharing books with their children. Kulwinder believed that storybooks helped Kasam develop his
reading and writing skills. In addition to reading books, Kasam was engaged in many other literacy activities including creating grocery lists, writing journal entries, and making greeting cards. The parents in the Dogra family tended to favour a more play-based approach to teaching and learning. Both Devika and Manmohan participated in family literacy programs with their daughter. Devika often implemented the activities that she had learned through the program at home. For example, she encouraged Rita to form different letters of the alphabet using play dough. Other literacy activities observed included reading books, singing nursery rhymes, and drawing pictures.

**Discussion**

The findings of this study highlighted that there were many differences and similarities across the generations in terms of their literacy beliefs and practices. It seemed that the second-generation families provided a richer environment in terms of literacy resources (e.g., books, games, puzzles) in English than the first-generation families. This is partly because the parents in the second-generation families had more disposable income than the parents in the first-generation families and therefore, could afford to buy books and other materials for their children. In contrast, the parents in the first-generation families mostly relied on the school and public libraries for reading materials. Sometimes, the older daughter, Kamalpreet, read books with her younger brother, Zorawar, in the evenings before going to bed. This finding is consistent with other studies (Anderson & Mui, 2008; Gregory et al., 2004) that have found older siblings to play an important role in their younger siblings’ literacy learning.

The parents also varied considerably across the two groups in terms of their Punjabi-English use in the home. In general, the second-generation families tended to speak more English with their children than the first-generation families. This was largely because all of the parents (except Devika) were educated in Canada. The parents, especially the mothers, in the second-generation families wanted their children to be bilingual. However, the results indicated that the parents had difficulty maintaining their home language. For example, Kasam’s grandfather reported that he wanted his grandson to communicate in Punjabi, so that he could develop a close relationship with him. However, my observations revealed that Kasam had difficulty communicating with his grandfather in Punjabi. As Combs (2005) has noted, “children’s loss or rejection of the mother tongue in these families disrupts the web of intergenerational relationships through which children are raised” (p. 707).

Furthermore, the results of this study indicated that second-generation families tended to engage in less religious practices with their children than the first-generation families. Despite their busy schedules, the mothers attempted to teach their children about their religious beliefs and practices through books, videos, and films. For example, the Dogras had a separate prayer room in their house that contained several religious texts published in both Hindi and English. Every morning, Devika recited verses from the texts. Sometimes, Rita sat beside her mother while she recited her daily prayers. Minns (1997) also, highlighted the significant role of religion in families’ literacy practices.

The mothers also tended to engage their children in literacy activities that were more aligned with mainstream and school activities (e.g., storybook reading, journal writing). This is because the parents in the second-generation families were more familiar with the school curriculum than the parents in the first-generation families. Despite their lack of familiarity with the school system, the first-generation families tried their best to help their children with their
homework. The Brar family, for example, created a daily homework routine for their children. Harman also assigned additional homework such as worksheets for Kamalpreet and Zorawar during the weekends. Similarly, Hardeep reported that she often assisted Manpreet with her homework, even though she was not entirely fluent in English. As Taylor (1997) noted, “even parents who have little education and facility with English often contribute significantly to their children’s literacy development” (p. 75).

**Implications**

The current study revealed that Punjabi families tend to have different values and beliefs regarding their children’s language and literacy learning. Although, the parents in the first-generation families experienced several challenges (e.g., lack of time, money, resources) in their involvement in their children’s literacy development, they expressed a willingness to learn new strategies to help their children succeed in school.

One way teachers can support Punjabi families is to increase the number of first-language and bilingual books sent home. Several researchers (e.g., Kenner, 2000; Sneddon, 2009) have discussed the effectiveness of dual language books for bilingual children. However, teachers must become familiar with children’s language and literacy practices in the home. Blackledge (2000) argues that “it is important that schools are as thorough as possible about gaining accurate information concerning the literacies of the families” (p. 87). This information can be gathered from interviews with the parents in their home. For example, teachers can schedule home visits to learn more about the families’ language and literacy practices. During home visits, teachers can also show families strategies for reading dual language books with their children.

Once teachers have gathered information on children’s backgrounds, they could send home dual language books for parents and children to read together. According to Blackledge (2000), “the best dual language books are often written from the perspective of the home culture and translated into English, rather than vice versa, making them more culturally relevant” (p. 87). Teachers can also encourage families to make their own dual-language books. The work of Schecter and Cummins (2003) has shown that dual language books made by children and their families can become rich literacy resources in the classroom.

Another way for teachers to become familiar with children’s home literacy practices is to learn more about the community. For example, teachers can take a walk around the school neighbourhood to become familiar with the resources available in the community (e.g., books, pictures, artifacts). An example of this is reported by Smythe and Toohey (2009) in which the researchers conducted “walking tours” in a Punjabi-Sikh community in Canada. In addition, teachers can purchase materials such as books, newspapers, and magazines in different languages from the local stores in the community.

Finally, parents and teachers need to understand each others’ beliefs and practices in order to support learning at home and school. It is thus essential that further studies are conducted on the home literacy beliefs and practices of extended family members such as grandparents. My findings revealed that grandparents (such as Manpreet’s grandfather) played an important role in the care of their grandchildren. Longitudinal studies are needed to examine the intergenerational literacy learning between grandparents and their grandchildren as well as the shift in literacy practices and beliefs across generations. Such studies can provide significant insights into the ways in which families use literacy in the context of their homes and communities.
References


The Relationship Between Parents’ Oral and Written Language Skills and their Preschool Children’s Emergent Oral and Written Language Skills

Nicole Taylor, Spelman College, Daphne Greenberg, and Nicole Patton-Terry, Georgia State University

Abstract: Studies have examined the impact of parents’ educational level on their child’s emergent literacy skills and have found positive associations (Korat, 2009). However, a review of the literature indicates that previous studies have not investigated whether parents’ oral and written language skills relate to their child’s emergent oral and written language skills. This is important in light of the fact that parents’ educational level does not provide a complete picture of their academic skills (Greenberg, 1995). The current study examined the relationship between parents’ oral and written language skills and their preschoolers’ oral and written language skills. The participants included 96 parent-child dyads. All participants were assessed on various oral and written language measures. Analyses indicated that most of the parental skills were found to have a relationship with the child skills. This study provides preliminary information about parental factors that may influence preschoolers’ emergent literacy skills.

Keywords: emergent literacy, preschoolers, parents’ literacy skills, oral and written language

According to the 2000 Census, more than 40 million adults, or approximately 21 percent of the adult population in the United States do not have a high school diploma, or a high school equivalence diploma (Lasater & Elliot, 2005). Since researchers have found a strong relationship between parents’ educational levels and their children’s literacy levels, this is important to consider. For example, Hecht, Burgess, Torgesen, Wagner, and Rashotte (2000) annually assessed a group of children from kindergarten through fifth grade on measures of decoding, word identification, reading comprehension, print knowledge, phonological awareness, and naming (letters and digits). Results indicated that a parental composite score of higher grade attainment combined with occupation provided an explanation for a significant portion of growth in the children’s reading and oral language abilities.

Korat’s (2009) study focused on the relationship between mothers’ educational level and emergent literacy skills. Mothers were considered to have a low-educational level if they possessed a high school diploma or less and were considered to have a high-educational level if they possessed a Bachelor’s degree or higher. The children (ages 5 to 6) were assessed on measures of print concept, phonological awareness, receptive vocabulary, emergent word writing, word recognition, and emergent reading. Korat indicated a positive association between mothers’ educational level and children’s oral and written language skills. Children of mothers in the high-education group scored significantly higher than children of mothers in the low-education group in print concept, word recognition, receptive vocabulary, emergent word writing, and emergent book reading, but not phonological awareness. In another study, Magnuson et al. (2009) found a positive relationship between mother’s educational level (highest grade or level of education completed) and preschool children’s emergent oral language skills.
(vocabulary comprehension and expressive language). As maternal educational level increased, the preschooler’s emergent language skills increased.

However, parents’ educational level does not provide a complete picture of their academic ability. For example, Greenberg (1995) found that 24% of her adult participants who read at a third to fifth grade level graduated high school. Another 63% completed up to 11th grade. Therefore, it is important to go beyond parental self report of highest grade completed, and investigate the relationship between adults’ oral and written language skills and their children’s oral and written language skills by not only assessing the children’s skills but by also assessing the parents’ skills. This is important in light of the data that show a prevalence of low adult literacy levels in the United States. Specifically, the 2003 National Assessment of Adult Literacy (NAAL) survey reported approximately 63 million American adults (29% of the adult population) read and understood at a basic level of literacy (National Center for Educational Statistics, n.d). The data indicate that the adults were only able to perform simple everyday literacy tasks (e.g., searching a short pamphlet to find out information). Another 30 million American adults (14% of the adult population) read and understood at a below basic level of literacy, possessing no more than the most simple and concrete literacy skills. These adults exhibited limited literacy capabilities and had difficulty with tasks such as filling out an application, reading news stories, reading labels, or reading instructional materials (National Center for Educational Statistics, n.d). Even though low literate adults are experienced language users with many years of exposure to written and oral language, many struggle with both oral and written language tasks (MacArthur, Greenberg, Mellard, & Sabatini, 2010).

Researchers such as Hecht et al. (2000) and Korat (2009) have found parents’ educational level to have an impact on children’s oral and written language skills. Specifically, the studies have discussed a trend of parents with higher education having children with higher skill levels and parents with lower education having children with lower skills. Therefore, it is important for us to understand the extent of the relationship of adults’ skill levels on their children’s skills especially during the preschool period when young children are developing concepts about oral and written language that may affect their subsequent achievement. The purpose of this study is to expand our understanding of the nature of this relationship. Specifically, this study explores the relationship between parents’ oral (receptive and expressive vocabulary) and written (decoding, word recognition, fluency) language skills and their preschool children’s oral (receptive and expressive vocabulary, phonological awareness) and written (letter knowledge, print awareness) language skills.

**Method**

**Participants**

The participants in this study consisted of 96 primary caregiver-child dyads. The adult participants were 99% African American, 80% were female, and their average age was 32 years old. Mothers were the majority of the primary caregivers who participated in the study (i.e., 75%). The educational levels of the adults varied as 44% had some high school and or graduated high school while 56% had some college or above. The caregivers’ (herein referred to as parent) children (n = 96) were African American, 60% female, and were an average age of four and a half years. All participants were native English speakers.
Measures

Each measure was selected based on its psychometric properties, age range of intended examinees, and relevance to the study’s aims. It is important to mention that this study included struggling adult readers and while each test has excellent psychometric properties for its norm group, none of the norm groups included samples of struggling adult readers.

**Oral and written language assessments.** The following oral and written language assessments were administered to the adult participants:

**Oral receptive vocabulary.** *Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test-PPVT (PPVT; Dunn & Dunn, 1998).* The PPVT assessed the extent of the participants’ knowledge of word meanings. This test was normed on people ages 2 to 90+, with reliability of .97. Designed for use as a measure for receptive vocabulary, this test required participants to look at a template with four pictures, listen to the word orally presented by the examiner, and chose the picture that best represents the word. Testing was discontinued when participants reached a ceiling of eight consecutive errors.

**Oral expressive vocabulary.** *Expressive Vocabulary Test-EVT (EVT; Williams, 2007).* The EVT tested expressive vocabulary and word retrieval. This assessment was normed on people ages 2 to 90+, with a reliability of .97. In this assessment, participants were shown a picture and asked to provide a single word to label a picture (e.g., a picture of a cow and the examinee is asked ‘what do you see?’) or to provide a single word synonym for the target word (e.g., a picture of someone cleaning and the examinee is asked to ‘tell me another word for busy’). Testing was discontinued when participants reached a ceiling of five consecutive incorrect answers.

**Word recognition.** *Woodcock-Johnson III Tests of Achievement- WJ III (Letter-Word Identification; Woodcock, McGrew, & Mather, 2001).* The Letter-Word Identification measured the participant’s word identification skills. This subtest was normed on people ages 5 to 80+, with a reliability of .94. This subtest required participants to identify words of increasing difficulty. A ceiling was reached when the participant responded incorrectly to six consecutive items or when the last test item had been administered.

**Decoding.** *Woodcock-Johnson III Tests of Achievement- WJ III (Word Attack; Woodcock et al., 2001).* The Word Attack subtest measured the adults’ decoding skills. This subtest was normed on people ages 4 to 80+, with a reliability of .87. This subtest required participants to read aloud pseudo words (of increasing difficulty) that are phonetically consistent or regular patterns in English orthography. A ceiling was reached when the participant responded incorrectly to six consecutive items or the last item had been administered.

**Reading fluency.** *Woodcock-Johnson III Tests of Achievement- WJ III (Reading Fluency; Woodcock et al., 2001).* The Fluency subtest was normed on people ages 6 to 80+, with a reliability of .90. This subtest assessed the participants’ reading speed and rate within a 3-minute time limit. The task required the participants to quickly read and comprehend simple sentences. During test administration, the difficulty level of the sentences gradually increased.

**Oral and written language measures.** The following oral and written language measures were administered to the child participants:

**Oral receptive vocabulary.** *Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test-PPVT (PPVT; Dunn & Dunn, 1998).* The PPVT assessed the extent of the participants’ knowledge of word meanings. This test was normed on people ages 2 to 90+, with reliability of .97. Designed for use as a measure for receptive vocabulary, this test required participants to look at a template with four pictures, listen to the word orally presented by the examiner, and chose the picture that best
represents the word. Testing was discontinued when participants reached a ceiling of eight consecutive errors.

**Oral expressive vocabulary.** *Expressive Vocabulary Test-EVT (EVT; Williams, 2007).* The EVT tested expressive vocabulary and word retrieval. This assessment was normed on people ages 2 to 90+, with a reliability of .97. In this assessment, participants were shown a picture and asked to provide a single word to label a picture (e.g., a picture of a cow and the examinee is asked 'what do you see?') or to provide a single word synonym for the target word (e.g., a picture of someone cleaning and the examinee is asked to 'tell me another word for busy'). Testing was discontinued when participants reached a ceiling of five consecutive incorrect answers.

**Phonological awareness.** *Beginning Sounds subtest of Phonological Awareness Literacy Screening (PALS PreK)( PALS PreK; Invernizzi, Sullivan, Meier, & Swank, 2004).* PALS is a criterion referenced instrument that measured preschooler’s developing knowledge of important literacy fundamentals. This assessment was intended for preschoolers, with a reliability of .93. The phonological awareness subtests measured the children’s beginning sound skills. The Beginning Sounds subtest was a 10 item test that required children to orally produce the beginning sounds of words that were first spoken aloud by the examiner.

**Alphabet knowledge.** *Letter Knowledge subtest of the Phonological Awareness Literacy Screening (PALS PreK)(PALS PreK; Invernizzi et al., 2004).* Alphabet knowledge was assessed by the Letter Knowledge subtest. This assessment was designed for preschoolers and no information regarding reliability is available for this subtest. The test administrator asked children to name the 26 upper-case letters of the alphabet presented in random order.

**Print awareness.** *Print and Word Awareness subtest Phonological Awareness Literacy Screening (PALS PreK)(PALS PreK; Invernizzi et al., 2004).* The Print Awareness task included measures of print identification, concepts of print, and concepts of word. This subtest was designed for preschoolers with a reliability of .75. This subtest contained 10 items and mimicked a naturally occurring book reading event. The examiner read a familiar nursery rhyme printed in a book format and asked the child to point to different text components to demonstrate awareness of directionality, and the difference between pictures, letters, and words.

**Demographics.** Parents provided the following demographic information about themselves: age, gender, ethnicity, educational level, language spoken in the home, and caregiver role. Parents also reported demographic information about their child (e.g., gender, age, and ethnicity).

**Procedure**

Parents were assessed by the investigator in a quiet location at their child’s school. The following tasks were administered to the adult participants in the following order: Demographics Survey (administered orally), WJ Letter-Word Identification subtest, WJ Word Attack subtest, WJ Fluency subtest, PPVT, EVT. Testing was completed in one session lasting 25 to 40 minutes, during the months of November to March.

Children were tested individually at the beginning of the school year (September-October) by trained Early Reading First staff at their schools. All testing occurred during the morning school hours, in two or three sessions. Tests were administered in random order and in standardized format according to directions stated in the test manuals.

Since it is unclear whether standard scores are appropriate for struggling adult readers and because one of the child assessments (PALS) does not have standard scores available, raw
scores were used for all the analyses. It is important to note that within this study, reference to phonological awareness only includes beginning sounds since that is the skill that the PALS subtest assessed. In all regression analyses the children’s ages and parents’ educational levels were entered before the parental oral and written language skills. The rationale for entering the children’s ages first is based on the recognized importance of accounting for age differences in children when assessing emergent literacy skills (e.g., Bingham, 2007; Evans, Shaw, & Bell, 2000; Hood, Conlon, & Andrews, 2008). For parents’ educational level the rationale for entering it prior to other variables results from investigations which indicate that parents’ educational level impacts children’s emergent literacy skills (e.g., ALBSU, 2003; Hecht et al., 2000; Korat, 2009).

Results

Relationship Among Parents’ Educational Levels, Their Oral and Written Language Skills and Their Children’s Related Oral and Written Language Skills

Correlational data for the relationships among parents’ educational levels, their oral and written language skills and their children’s oral and written language skills are presented in Table 1. Even though positive correlations are indicated among many of the parent and child variables, the strength of associations are small to moderate ($r = .21$ to $.45$).

Table 1

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<td>.31**</td>
<td>.21*</td>
<td>.37**</td>
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<td>.27**</td>
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<td>.23*</td>
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<td>.82**</td>
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<td>.05</td>
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<td>.41**</td>
<td>.50**</td>
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Note. ** $p < .01$. * $p < .05$
Prediction of Children’s Receptive Vocabulary, Expressive Vocabulary, and Phonological Awareness

To examine the unique contribution of the parents’ oral vocabulary skills on their children’s receptive vocabulary skills, a hierarchical regression analysis was conducted. Child age was entered in the first step, followed by parents’ educational level in the second step, and receptive vocabulary (PPVT) and expressive vocabulary (EVT) in the third step. Parents’ educational level accounted for the largest amount of variance (15%) followed by the child’s age (11%) and parental oral vocabulary skills (5%) (see Table 2).

Table 2

Hierarchical Regression Assessing Prediction of Child Receptive Vocabulary

<table>
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<th>Step and Predictor</th>
<th>F change</th>
<th>$r^2$ change</th>
<th>$\beta$</th>
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<td>2. Parent Educational Level</td>
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<td>.15*</td>
<td>.39*</td>
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<td>Adult EVT</td>
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Note. * $p < .05$

To examine the unique contribution of parents’ oral vocabulary skills on their children’s expressive vocabulary skills, a hierarchical regression analysis was conducted. Child age was entered in the first step, followed by parents’ educational level in the second step, and expressive vocabulary (EVT) and receptive vocabulary (PPVT) in the third step. Child age accounted for the largest amount of variance (20%) followed by parents’ educational level (17%) and parental oral vocabulary skills (6%) (see Table 3).

To examine the unique contribution of parents’ decoding skill on their children’s phonological awareness, a hierarchical regression analysis was conducted. Child age was entered in the first step, followed by parents’ educational level in the second step, and decoding (WJ Word Attack) in the third step. None of the variables were found to account for variance in the regression equation.

Prediction of Children’s Alphabet Knowledge and Print Awareness

To examine the unique contribution of parents’ written language skills on their children’s alphabet knowledge, a hierarchical regression analysis was conducted. The child’s age was
Table 3

Hierarchical Regression Assessing Prediction of Child Expressive Vocabulary (EVT)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Step and Predictor</th>
<th>$F$ change</th>
<th>$r^2$ change</th>
<th>$\beta$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Child Age</td>
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<td>.20*</td>
<td>.45*</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. Parent Educational Level</td>
<td>24.15</td>
<td>.17*</td>
<td>.41*</td>
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<td>3. Adult EVT</td>
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Note. * $p < .05$

Table 4

Hierarchical Regression Assessing Prediction of Child Alphabet Knowledge

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Step and Predictor</th>
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<td></td>
<td>WJ Fluency</td>
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Note. * $p < .05$

entered in the first step, followed by parents’ educational level in the second step, and parental written language skills (word identification, decoding, fluency) in the third step. Parental written language skills accounted for the most variance (14%) followed by parents’ educational level (12%) (see Table 4).

To examine the unique contribution of parents’ written language skills on their children’s print awareness, a hierarchical regression analysis was conducted. The child’s age was entered in
the first step, followed by parents’ educational level in the second step, and parental written language skills (word identification, decoding, fluency) in the third step. None of the variables were found to account for variance in the regression equation.

Discussion

This study’s findings that parents’ educational level on the whole is related to children’s emergent and oral language skills corresponds to findings reported in the literature (e.g., Hecht et al., 2000; Korat, 2009; Magnuson et al., 2009; Tracey & Young, 2002). The exceptions that were found included the lack of a relationship between parents’ educational levels and children’s phonological awareness and print awareness skills. These exceptions may be related to the PALS beginning Sounds and Print and Word Awareness subtests that were used to assess these skills. These subtests are criterion-based and not standardized measures, and may not be sensitive enough to fully capture the children’s skills.

The results that there is a relationship between parents’ oral and written language skills and their children’s oral and written language skills provide information about the specific nature of this relationship. Since this is the first known study to examine this relationship, this study contributes to the field by showing that a relationship exists between specific parental literacy skills and children’s specific literacy skills.

In this study parents’ decoding skills did not account for variance in their children’s phonological skills. Assuming that a child gains his or her phonological skills from someone teaching these skills, it is possible that the parents’ ability to decode may not impact their children’s beginning sound awareness. In other words, parents’ decoding skill levels may not indicate whether or not they actually teach their children phonological skills. It is also important to acknowledge that there are different ways to assess phonological awareness (e.g., tests of beginning sounds, rhymes, elision, segmentation), and therefore other phonological awareness tests may have shown a different pattern of results. Also according to Anthony and Lonigan (2004) children’s performances on phonological tasks may be heavily influenced by aspects such as their other oral language skills (i.e., receptive and expressive vocabulary) and developmental differences in phonological processing abilities as children progress from prereaders to skilled readers. Finally, schooling may have had an impact on our finding since the children were enrolled in a preschool setting that focused on the development of prereading skills including phonological awareness. All of the mentioned factors may be considered as a rationale for why parental decoding skill failed to predict children’s phonological awareness.

This study indicated that parental written language skills failed to predict children’s print awareness skills. Further research is warranted to examine the exact parental variables that influence children’s print awareness. For example, Justice and Ezell (2000) found that parental training in shared book reading facilitated preschool children’s print awareness. Therefore, it may not necessarily be parental skills alone that contribute to children’s print awareness but parental teaching skills that promote print awareness in children.

Conclusions

The results of this study further our understanding of factors involved in parental transmission of literacy skills. While previous research shows the importance of parents’ educational level, this study shows the importance of parental literacy skills as related to their children’s literacy skills. It is important to address these findings in light of intergenerational
transmission of literacy skills from parents to their children (e.g., Bus, van Ijzendoorn, & Pellegrini, 1995; Hecht et al., 2000; Korat, 2009). For example, the sites with higher parental skill levels included children with higher skill levels, whereas the sites with lower parental skill levels included children with lower skill levels.

**Limitations**

There are two limitations in this study. First, the school sites that were chosen were involved in a larger intervention study which stressed the importance of emergent literacy skill development and parental involvement in their preschoolers’ emergent literacy learning. It is possible that these factors may have influenced the parents’ and children’s oral and written language skills.

Second, lack of diversity in the sample may be seen as a possible restriction. Participants were primarily African American from urban preschool programs. Based on the lack of diversity of the sample, the results of this study are only generalizable to this particular population. Future research should investigate if the relationships found in this study are true of other participant samples.

**Future Research**

Even though the present study indicated a positive relationship among parents’ educational level, their oral and written language skills, and most of the children’s emergent literacy skills, more research is warranted to further understand factors involved in parental transmission of literacy skills. Future research may want to look at the possibility that phonological awareness may be mediated by another variable such as letter knowledge (Blaiklock, 2004; Foy & Mann, 2006). It is also possible that this relationship may not be significant until children become older and exhibit more maturity in their reading and other language skills (e.g., Anthony & Lonigan, 2004; Hood et al., 2008). It is necessary to further examine the exact parental variables that influence children’s print awareness. Parent-child language interaction should be studied further as this study found the way parents’ communicate with their children has direct influences on their emergent oral language development. Finally, future research should investigate if the relationships found in this study are true of participant samples that may be more diverse.

**References**


Becoming Literate Subjects: Five Mexican Mothers’ Stories

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Abstract: This paper, based on a qualitative research study, reports the findings from interviews with five Mexican immigrant mothers enrolled in an Even Start program. The findings detail the mother’s commitment to education and the importance of the parent-family literacy practitioner collaboration in supporting meaningful relationships. The language and academic skills acquired while studying in the family literacy program provided mothers with a literate status affording them more power in the home and community. Findings also document the ways in which their learning extended beyond the mother-child dyad; they became literacy brokers as they shared with family, friends and other community members the resources and information, such as mainstream parenting norms and school expectations. Participants in this study reported the important role that family literacy practitioners and programming played in this process.

Keywords: family literacy, immigrant, mothers, literacy brokers

Background

Even Start programs, funded under the Workforce Investment Act (WIA), were to help “parents in obtaining the educational skills necessary to become full partners in the educational development of their children” (Amstutz & Sheared, 2000, p. 155). Given this, Even Start programs aimed to enroll low-income, low-literacy, or limited English language skills adults (U.S. DOE, 2009). Both WIA policy and family literacy curriculum incorporated gendered ideas that conflate parent and mother (Smythe & Isserlis, 2003; Sparks, 2001). Latina women, in fact, were the highest enrolled group in Even Start classes (U.S. DOE, 2004). Additionally, many family literacy programs, intentionally or unintentionally, transmit U.S. mainstream discourses of mothering and literacy. These discourses naturalize particular middle-class parenting and literacy behaviors (Auerbach, 1995; Gadsden, 1996) without regard for participants’ cultural or socio-economic backgrounds.
The inherent mothering ideology maintains that a mother’s role is to focus her attention on her child’s development, putting her own desires to the side (Griffith & Smith, 2005). This includes supporting her child’s academic and literacy development (Griffith & Smith, 2005). The U.S.-based literacy discourse generally conceives of literacy as a set of skills that, once acquired, ensure academic and economic success (Cook-Gumperz, 2006). This view does not consider differences in ethnic or community identities, or other factors, such as work or community setting, and how these factors might impact a learner’s (and mother’s) success (Street, 1984). While these underlying messages can be interpreted as constraining or manipulative (Reyes & Torres, 2007); however, family literacy classes can also assist women in achieving educational goals. Lastly, learning to navigate school systems and support schooled literacy in ways recognized by mainstream institutions (e.g., schools) and society could assist parents to advocate more effectively for their children.

Prevalent discourses regarding Latino parents also shape family literacy practitioners’ beliefs about their jobs and their clientele (Nakagawa, McKimmon, & Hackett, 2001). Latina women describe their role as two-pronged: they must guide their child in becoming good citizens, educación, and literate citizens (Reese, Blazano, Gallimore, & Goldenberg, 1995). Yet, mainstream constructions of Latino persist in reflecting traditional ideologies where the Latino parent perceives her role as moral educator and the teacher as the schooled literacy expert (Reese, et al., 1995). This traditional and deficit view (Suárez-Orozco, Gaytán, & Kim, 2008; Valencia & Black, 2002) presumes that Latino parents need to be educated into appropriate parenting behaviors (Johnson, 2009; Villenas, 2001) instead of as valuable resources for the communities in which they participate.

**Theoretical Framework and Methodology**

The framework drew on post-structural feminist theory. The post-structural theory highlights the regulatory nature of discourses, power, and agency (Butler, 2004; Foucault, 1977). Post-structural feminist theory centralizes how gender is implicated in shaping our roles, behaviors, and desires in daily life (Butler, 2004). This study was designed using a narrative approach (Polkinghorne, 1995) and structured so that each participant was considered a case (Stake, 2005). A Narrative Approach focuses on participant voices, assisting us to understand how they perceive how discourses and interactions shape choices, actions, and well-being (Riessman, 2008).

Agency is defined as the ability to state and fulfill one’s goals and desires (Meyers, 2002). However, a subject’s agency is constrained by socio-cultural, historical, material, and local factors (Ahearn, 2001); identifying agency and assigning value to agentive acts must be done using the actor’s context (Mahmood, 2005). For example, how do local taken-for-granted ideas and community expectations shape a person’s belief system, understanding of success, and sense of belonging, or, what constrains the actor from achieving his or her goals? These types of questions guided me in understanding the five participants’ goals, desires, reported successes, and actions during this study.

**Methodology**

I conducted 24 life history semi-structured dialogic interviews with five Mexican immigrant mothers enrolled in an Even Start program. Other data sources were class observations, staff interviews, video diaries, program documents and materials, and a researcher
journal. Research questions focused on participant enactments of agency and disruptions of prevalent discourses, and the influence of program participation on the previous two ideas. For this paper, my analysis was guided by the following questions: How did participants describe what they learned in Even Start? What role, if any, did family literacy practitioners play in these learning experiences? How did the information they acquire extend beyond the learner, if at all?

Interviews were professionally transcribed; Spanish portions were verified by a native speaker from Mexico. I analyzed texts by repeatedly reading and listening to the interviews. During these readings, narratives of learning were identified using Reissman’s (2008) guiding questions (see p. 11). The narratives were then coded for types of learning (e.g., parenting, literacy teaching), practitioner role, and transmission of learning to others.

Setting and Participants. Participants were selected based on set criteria (e.g., Latina, time in program) and willingness to participate. The Even Start site, located in a Southwestern state in mid-sized Crystal City,¹ was chosen because its geographic location indicated that it would enroll participants meeting the established criteria.

All participants were married and had lived in the U.S. between five and 20 years. Each had had some formal schooling; Carmen had attended school through the sixth grade whereas Guadalupe had attended eighth grade and then three years at vocational school for bookkeeping. Attendance at Even Start varied between 5 months and four years. Even Start attendance, except for Yesmenia, had been interrupted at least once (e.g., birth of a child). The participants were between the ages of 31 and 42. Their children’s ages ranged from four to fifteen; Olivia was caring for relatives’ younger children. Four of the women interviewed in English occasionally using Spanish; Yesmenia chose to be interviewed in Spanish.

Findings

The findings showed that by using mainstream parenting discourses and literacy skills, as promoted by the Even Start program, these mothers made changes in their households, extended their power in the family, and shared what they learned with extended family members and friends, thereby also garnering status in the community. While many of these findings are attributed to each woman’s individual agency; their agency was supported by the family literacy staff. They collaborated with the women by providing practical and relevant content, such as parenting advice and literacy instruction. They also extended class content by offering informal local cultural information on topics such as school systems, gender roles, and health care. Data led to an unanticipated finding; learners informed and assisted other members of their communities by passing along what they learned. Following I describe how their learning was supported by family literacy attendance and benefitted them and members of their family or community.

Children’s Education

Each woman was committed to and actively involved in her child’s school life. Yesmenia kept an eye on her son by volunteering in the lunchroom; Olivia did miscellaneous odd jobs to fundraise for her daughters’ band trip to China; Carmen attended informational fairs to learn more about routes to college; all women attended school conferences and assiduously

¹ All geographic locations and persons have been given pseudonyms.
followed their children’s progress reports. Participants evidenced the role of the family literacy practitioner.

Nelli indirectly attributed the ability to support her children to staff. She stated: “[Family literacy staff tell us] is important to learn more English because we can understand the teachers….We can help our children in school.” In another interview she noted how increased language ability afforded her family more privacy as they could meet with teachers without a translator.

Yesmenia provided insight into how Parent and Child Interactive Literacy Activities (PACILA) influenced the ways she worked with her son. She related:

I sit down with him to study…. I’m telling him words, “Spell them for me, letter by letter.”….Then, he tells me the words and I write them down….I spell them wrong and he grades me. After that I dictate [the words] to him, and he gets two. “Mom, I beat you.” I try to do this to get him interested.

All participants talked about visiting and selecting books from the library, helping their older children with Science projects, and setting homework as an important daily task.

The work they did with their children and their success became an exemplar for other women. Carmen, after being congratulated on Javier’s consistently strong grades in class, reported a mother asking her, “What do you do that he gets these report card?” She also told me about her sister-in-law who “never did that [read]” with her son, Javier; seeing Javier’s success at school, this sister-in-law stated, “Oh, that’s why, when you was with him reading and doing activities, it helped him a lot.” Because of her example, Carmen said her sister-in-law “went to a program to push her son to go to college.” Olivia would tell her friends that they "should read some more" and that she would "buy some books for them [and] for the children especially." These quotes evidence the role participants had in sharing the family literacy message about early literacy and school support to their friends and family.

The Even Start staff influence was salient in these successes. For example, Miss Carol, the Even Start teacher, was instrumental in helping Carmen's son pass the Gifted and Talented Education test. She coached them both as to how to approach the test. Carmen attributed the success to her son, yet she also acknowledged the role that she and Miss Carol had played in reaching this academic goal.

**Structure in the Home**

An arena over which women gained more control was the home; women became more engaged in the decision-making process, in part due to their knowledge of U.S. ideals of parenting and schooling. Mothers monitored computer, video game and television time, transitioned to using timeouts as opposed to yelling or capitulating to their children’s behaviors, and advocated for outside activities. Family literacy staff were key in communicating some of the U.S. norms. Olivia articulated, “I was very strict and demanding of them [daughters]….They [teachers] give me advice. I calmed down a little bit. You know, changed my patterns….I made them be self-independent….I set rules.” Evidence presented here represents the positive side, for example, prestige, of integrating some of these behaviors or being able to speak knowledgeably about recognized mainstream U.S. parenting strategies. This does not erase the complex and thorny discussion surrounding the issue of asking parents to change culturally-relevant parenting behaviors.
Children’s Social Life

Participants also shifted some of their practices regarding their children’s social lives. Each mother recounted wanting to protect their children from the more “liberal” American lifestyle. However, they also wrestled with the idea of raising their children in two cultures. Nelli told me how she attempted to “mezclar [mix]” the Mexican and the U.S. cultures. Even Start staff assisted women in negotiating this “mixing” of cultures. For example, Olivia reported:

My daughters want to go this dance at school and I say, “no.” I talk to Miss Carol [that] I don’t want them to go to the dance…. [Miss Carol said] “Olivia what is going to happen? The school is surrounded by teachers and they don’t let outsiders come.” I let my daughter go because she [Miss Carol] make me feel secure…. So on the way to the school [I] check the school and all the surroundings…. After that, I let them go.

Her experiences and decisions gave other women the opportunity to ask for advice. Olivia explained: “They even ask me, my relatives. ‘Do you think it’s okay, Olivia, if I let my daughter go to the dancing? What do you think, Olivia?’” Even Start practitioners assisted women in negotiating new social settings. Participants stated that they would have liked more formal information on parenting middle school-aged children. They understood the pitfalls of raising bicultural children.

Father Involvement

Participants utilized information from the Even Start program to engage their husbands in family life and children’s homework. For example, Guadalupe told her husband, “You need to be with him [son].” She went on to tell me: “Not because I am not interested [in helping my son], but I am giving him the work…. He needs to be involved with the [children’s] education.” Similarly, Yesmenia used her experiences and learning to involve her husband and to lobby for her own schooling. She explained:

[It is] Simply because he doesn’t dedicate himself to it [doing homework with his son]…. In mathematics I keep up with him [son]. They are teaching it differently. My husband…hasn’t seen it step by step how it is progressing [math]…. I was fixing food, and I tell him, “You help him.” And he saw the paper and said, “But I don’t understand it.”…“How do you understand it?” [And I tell him] “That is why I am going to school, so that I can help him as well.” [translation]

Yesmenia attributed her ability to help her son to her studies, “that is why I am going to school, so that I can help him.” And, that homework support is a shared responsibility as at times she is busy doing other home duties like “fixing food.”

Activities that were taught in classes were brought home to support literacy and family time. The most striking example was the use of board games as “learning games.” Again, Yesmenia offers a salient narrative that supports the Structure in the Home findings and father engagement. She told me:
The boy really like [video] games. But I told him that these games were really separating us as a family….And he wanted to stay there passing time there and I said, “No, look.” I bought him some Mexican games, those kind with dice... Sometimes my husband does not feel like it and he [son says], “Come on, dad, come on, we are going to play!” And then we sit down to play. It has brought us together more. [translation]

Carmen, Guadalupe and Nelli echoed the sentiment about the usefulness of games to bring their families “together more.” The family literacy staff introduced the board games as a fun literacy development activity. Board games were available for check-out and the staff encouraged the women to play them at home. The women used their husbands’ interest in raising academically successful children as a way to involve them in family activities. Furthermore, Carmen reported giving learning games to her friend’s children, thereby possibly extending the reach of the family literacy program.

**Women’s Education**

Participants were also committed to their educational lives. Enrolling in Even Start classes supported the desire for furthering their education. Carmen said:

> I learned a lot of things in Even Start and I don’t imagine how much I want to learn. Because in my country they do not teach us how important is the education. The first thing was the English. Later…I saw very important things in the [Even Start] program.

This statement is not to determine that education is more valued in the U.S., rather that Carmen’s experience was that her father did not support a girl’s education; it was not relevant to “changing diapers.” Olivia and Yesmenia, similarly, reported that their education was cut short due to their gender. All participants reported resistance from their husbands. Guadalupe explained, “[My husband] doesn’t understand my goals. In the beginning [taking classes] was very difficult for me. With time he understands that it is important to me to be somebody.” These women expressed that education was “important to be somebody in life.” The Even Start staff validated and supported the importance of a mother’s education. The program provided a social space for women, alleviating boredom and frustration. Guadalupe reported being less “frustrated” and feeling “better” since learning English and that coming to Even Start “was the therapy.”

These mothers gained confidence as they extended their literacy learning to other family members. Nelli said: “I help my husband… He speaks English but when he has to write, he asks me how to write” and “when she [cousin] is helping her child, she call me and ask me some things in English. I can help my family and help her and her child.” Her statements demonstrate how participants became literacy brokers as a result of participation in adult education classes.

Another way Even Start supported women’s education was staff’s encouragement to do things for themselves. Olivia raised money for her and her two daughters to travel to China. She recounted:

> I was so afraid [to go to China]. Both of them [teachers] encouraged me…. “You can do it.” Oh I am telling you Miss Carol is a great helper…. She encourage me.
“Olivia, you have to study, you have to do it, thinking of yourself, thinking of your future.

Olivia traveled to China and had a wonderful time. Other participants reported similar types of supportive behavior.

**Beyond Parenting and Literacy Education**

Several of the women or their husbands had been diagnosed with diabetes. This topic is not generally included in family literacy curriculum; however, informal interactions in the class brought diabetes to the attention of Miss Carol. She led discussions about healthy diet and exercise. Olivia and Carmen used this information as a starting point to further research diabetes. The family literacy staff also provided valuable information about health insurance to cover medical costs for diabetes treatment or other personal issues. Carmen explained: “Sometimes is personal things we talk about and Miss Carol is good, is very good and she tries to help if she can.” The persistent presence of a staff member who demonstrated interest in the students led to expanded and relevant class content, the ability to seek out information on their behalf, and a place to express concerns about their families’ wellbeing. Participants spoke about increased self-efficacy and the ability to assist friends by sharing what they learned in classes.

**Discussion**

These immigrant mothers enrolled in family literacy classes because this space afforded them the possibility to adhere to their prescribed mothering role and continue their education. They perceived their education as key to supporting their children’s success in the U.S. educational system. The Even Start program transmitted U.S. ideologies of parenting and literacy. Participants employed these ideologies to support their children in recognized ways (Butler, 2004) which lead to prestige and accolades from school personnel, family, and friends. Women became advice givers, helping other parents to also negotiate U.S. educational institutions and activities and became seen as literate subjects (Bartlett, 2005). In other words, women became seen as brokers of knowledge and U.S. culture and institutions (Weinstein-Shr, 1993) by employing what they learned in family literacy classes. This finding identifies the important role adult education can play in adult learners’ lives. Furthermore, these women’s activities and desires disrupt the deficit discourse about Mexican immigrant mothers.

The discourses that were promulgated in the Even Start program can be colonizing and regulating of immigrant mothers (Reyes & Torres, 2007); yet, participants were, in many ways, cognizant of how the U.S. and Mexican mothering discourses conflicted and intertwined—and how they governed their behavior. These mothers exerted agency by making choices about which behaviors they adopted and shared with friends and family, knowing that these strategies might assist them in raising successful children in a U.S. context; the local context of success and belonging shaped their decisions (Ahearn, 2001). Furthermore, they used these discourses to achieve their desires, such as education for women. Family literacy provided a socially acceptable space for learning and self-development. Expansion of the 0-7 year focus on literacy development could be expanded to assist women in negotiating children’s middle years and important family issues.

Family literacy practitioners played an important role in supporting women to achieve their own educational goals. They helped women negotiate new social settings, such as school
dances, and seek out important information about relevant topics, such as health insurance options. Because administrators and practitioners are perceived as trusted and knowledgeable informants they need to be aware of the influence they exert, particularly as incorporating mainstream U.S. behaviors into immigrant families can shift the balance of power or structure of the family (Valdes, 1996). Curriculum might include activities that assist parents in exploring how U.S. parenting strategies and ideologies might conflict with immigrant family structure and belief systems (Blackledge, 2001).

In sum, this paper evidences how a family literacy program can impact the ways in which low-income immigrant families can access relevant information about U.S. parental involvement expectations. Furthermore, findings suggest that enrolled mothers assist other families by sharing the information learned in family literacy programs. Policymakers should expand funding streams for this type of programming.

References


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