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Parenting for Literacy Development and Educational Success: An Examination of the Parent Education Profile¹

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Key Findings

The Parent Education Profile (PEP) is an instrument that rates parents' support for children's literacy development. This study examined how the PEP portrays the ideal parent, its assumptions about parenting and education, and the values and ideals it promotes. In sum, many aspects of the PEP evaluate parents by the mainstream (White, middle-class) parenting style. To support this model the PEP uses the language of scientific research, yet presents no information about reliability or validity. The PEP tends to assume that a single set of parenting practices best supports children's literacy development, without fully considering cultural and economic differences. It also implies that parents, particularly mothers, are mainly responsible for children's academic success. In order to follow some of the PEP practices, parents need access to resources often unavailable to poor families; yet, the PEP does not seem to encourage recognition of mitigating circumstances (e.g., poverty) that might lower parents' ratings. Finally, while the PEP encourages staff to ask for parents' perspectives, it gives parents little say in assessing themselves. In conclusion, caution and cultural sensitivity are needed when using instruments that prescribe, monitor, and rate parental support for education and literacy.

Key Implications

The PEP should be tested with economically and culturally diverse parents for reliability and validity and class, cultural, and gender bias, and then revised to mitigate any biases. Until then, states should reconsider mandating the PEP or using it as a program performance indicator. The PEP supplementary materials could frame literacy development as a complex process influenced by numerous factors, including but not limited to parental beliefs and practices. When using the PEP, professionals should always tell parents they are being observed and rated and obtain their consent.

Additionally, staff should identify their own beliefs about childrearing and literacy, especially if they do not share participants' social class or racial/ethnic background. It would also be useful to discuss with parents extenuating circumstances that may prevent them from engaging in specific PEP activities. Programs can involve parents in assessing themselves, discussing their views of parenting and literacy, and deciding which parenting practices they wish to maintain or change. If a specific parenting or literacy practice is inconsistent with parents' cultural norms, alternative strategies can be identified to achieve the desired outcome.

Introduction

This study explored the role of the Parent Education Profile (PEP) in evaluating parents in family literacy programs. With increased program accountability, family literacy and adult education programs must demonstrate gains on standardized measures. To assess growth in parenting skills many states have adopted the PEP, an instrument that classifies parenting practices on a scale of one to five, from "least supportive of literacy outcomes" to "most supportive." It includes four scales and 15 subscales:

1. Support for Children's Learning in the Home Environment (e.g., Use of Literacy Materials)
2. Parent's Role in Interactive Literacy Activities (e.g., Reading with Children)
3. Parent's Role in Supporting Child's Learning in Formal Education Settings (e.g., Parent-School Communications)
4. Taking on the Parent Role (e.g., Choices, Rules, and Limits).

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At least 11 states require family literacy programs to use the PEP, while at least 12 others use it as a program performance indicator or for general assessment purposes.

It is important to examine evaluation instruments like the PEP because they convey implicit messages to policy makers, professionals, and learners, advocating certain views of parental roles and more or less desirable literacy and parenting practices. For example, by aligning education in the home and at school, the PEP reinforces the parent involvement discourse—a set of beliefs and policies which holds that parents are mainly responsible for children’s literacy and educational achievement (Nakagawa, 2000).

In turn, messages promoted by curricula and assessment tools become taken for granted, shaping how educators view parents, how parents view themselves, and how they relate to each other. Accordingly, this study examined how the PEP portrays the ideal parent, its assumptions about parenting and education, and the values and ideals it promotes.

The characteristics of family literacy participants call for deeper understanding of how the PEP views parenting and literacy. Most family literacy participants are mothers without a high school diploma or who speak English as a second language. In 2000-01, 84% of the families in Even Start had incomes at or below the federal poverty level, and 70% were racial/ethnic minorities (U.S. Department of Education, 2006). As such, these families are marginalized in multiple ways, placing them in a vulnerable position in relation to state agencies (e.g., welfare), educators, and policy makers.

Our theoretical framework incorporates literature showing that commonly accepted ideas about parenting, literacy, and family-school relationships may appear natural but are in fact socially constructed, meaning they shift over time and differ by social class, culture, and race/ethnicity (Lareau, 1987, 2003; Panofsky, 2000). As such, the practices recommended by professionals and assessment tools are always situated in a specific historical and cultural moment.

Secondly, research shows that many of the prescribed PEP practices, such as authoritative parenting style and joint book reading, are related to literacy development and school success, especially for White, middle-class children (e.g., Bus et al., 1995). However, the effects of parenting practices and literacy activities on academic outcomes differ significantly by race/ethnicity, socio-economic status, sociocultural setting, and other factors (e.g., García Coll & Pachter, 2002; Kao, 2004). Therefore, we “cannot assume that what works for

one group of families will necessarily work for another group” (Okagaki & Frensch, 1998, p. 142). Rather, there are multiple pathways to literacy and academic success for culturally diverse families.

Research Methods

We used Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to examine how language was used in the scales and instruction manual. This close examination of language and linguistic forms is a useful way to examine a text’s underlying meanings and messages, for example, which parenting practices are promoted or discouraged. The study answered the following questions: How does the PEP portray the ideal parent? What assumptions about parenting and education are evident in the PEP? What are the ideological effects of these assumptions?

Analysis included the entire 2003 document (Preface, Introduction, Parent Education Profile Structure, PEP Scales, Examples of Ratings, Support Materials, and Content Framework for Parenting Education in Even Start). We focused on the Scales because they define and categorize more or less desirable literacy-related parenting behaviors, and on the Support Materials because they express how the authors want professionals and parents to use and interpret the PEP. The Support Materials also clarify the PEP’s underlying assumptions and the way it describes professionals’ and participants’ intended roles in assessment.

To analyze the PEP’s views of parenting, we drew on Lareau’s (2003) distinction between two cultural models of childrearing based mainly on social class (see Table 1). (While variation exists within groups, this typology helps identify general tendencies.) Both models are viable ways of raising children and engaging in literacy, but the concerted cultivation (middle-class) model is widely considered the ideal, especially by parenting experts. We compared these models to descriptors for ideal (Level 4 and 5) and non-ideal (Level 1 and 2) parenting practices in the PEP. We then linked these ideals and assumptions to wider social practices (van Dijk, 2001) such as policies shifting responsibility for children’s education from schools to parents.

Findings

Ideal parenting practices

We found that the PEP’s ideal (Level 4 and 5) parent tends to align with the mainstream parenting model, while the non-ideal (Level 1 and 2) parent shares some similarities with the non-mainstream model. Thus, the PEP upholds specific aspects of the middle-class, predominantly White parenting style as a normative ideal (e.g., asking questions rather than giving directives, regular, intensive involvement

TABLE 1. CULTURAL MODELS OF CHILDCARE²

	Mainstream (middle- and upper-class, White) “concerted cultivation”	Non-mainstream (poor and working-class, immigrants, minorities) “accomplishment of natural growth”
<i>Key Elements</i>	“Parent actively fosters and assesses child’s talents, opinions, and skills”	“Parent cares for child and allows child to grow”
<i>Parent Involvement in Literacy Activities</i>	Abundance of books and literacy materials Emphasis on school-based literacies Focus on vocabulary and meaning development	Few or inaccessible literacy materials Collaborative community literacy activities Focus on phonics or discrete aspects of literacy
<i>Language Use</i>	Reasoning and directives Child contestation of adult statements Extended negotiations	Directives Rare for child to question or challenge adults Child generally accepts directives
<i>Parent Involvement in School</i>	Home as extension of school Parents responsible for physical and moral upbringing and cognitive development Comfortable relationship with teachers Intervenes in school on child’s behalf	Separation between home and school Parents responsible for physical and moral upbringing; teachers responsible for teaching academics Formal relationship with teachers Sense of powerlessness and frustration

in school, giving children choices, abundant literacy materials). By locating these qualities at the highest levels of parental development, the instrument suggests they are more valued and desirable than others (Gee, 1999).

Conversely, the PEP portrays the non-ideal parent as one who, for instance, uses commands, does not engage in regular book reading or focus on developing children’s school-based literacies, rarely contacts teachers, and does not have extensive knowledge of school expectations. We do not believe these attributes *inherently* indicate poor parenting skills or lack of support for education, capacities which may be expressed in multiple ways. However, the use of evaluative language and ratings effectively labels parents as more or less proficient. For instance, the use of negative terms (e.g., *nothing, not aware, does not know, no role, negative*) to describe Level 1 and 2 practices implies these parents lack awareness, knowledge, understanding, or ability. Educators do not *intend* to send these messages, making it all the more important to examine the underlying assumptions of assessment tools.

Use of scientific language

Textual analysis revealed that a particular form of language, scientific discourse (e.g., *scale, reliability, validity, evidence*) was used to establish the instrument’s authority and legitimacy and to validate the prescribed parenting practices. Despite this language, there is no avail-

able research showing that the 2003 PEP has been tested for reliability or validity. Further, the instrument makes several causal inferences—for example, prescribing a parenting practice based on the assumption that it *causes* academic success when the factors may only be *correlated*. Until the instrument’s reliability and validity is established, practitioners and policy makers should be cautious about basing decisions on PEP results.

Cultural variation in literacy-related parenting practices

Since the recommended practices are not negotiable, the PEP appears to promote a “one way is best” idea of parenting and literacy development. Specifically, the instrument presumes there is a universal model of how parents of all cultures should interact with their children to promote literacy and academic success. The concern is that these practices may not be equally appropriate or beneficial for all families and that alternative pathways to literacy development (Szalacha et al., 2005) may be overlooked.

The PEP notes that parents hold distinct cultural views of parenting and education and that parents may therefore be uncomfortable with some PEP behaviors. Yet it still suggests all parents should adopt the recommended practices. Thus, staff are told they “may need to work extra hard to help parents understand the desired behaviors and reasons for their importance” (p. 59). In this way, the PEP seems to support cultural assimilation. Further, it does not suggest that par-

ents may have good reasons for not engaging in certain practices or that educators could help identify alternate ways to support school success, as Powell and colleagues (2004) recommend. The administration instructions do not advise professionals to help parents weigh the benefits and disadvantages of replacing their beliefs and practices with those of the dominant culture and then to decide which practices they want to change.

Parents' (mothers') responsibility for academic success

The PEP implies that parents—specifically, mothers—are primarily responsible for children's literacy development and academic success, a message that subtly shifts responsibility away from government and schools for providing adequate education for all children. For example, the "Message to Parents" tells parents that they have a "big job to do" and that they should change how they "talk and work" with their child so that s/he will do well in school. The implication is that parents are potentially part of the problem and the solution, a common theme in parent involvement policies. Further, the text states, "The higher levels you reach on PEP, the more likely your child will do well in school" (p. 62). However, to date no published research has shown a causal (or correlational) relationship between PEP scores and children's academic achievement. The Message to Parents implies that parents need only change their behavior to ensure children's literacy development and academic success, yet the PEP supporting materials do not mention that factors outside the family profoundly influence academic outcomes (e.g., racially and economically segregated schools, teacher quality, teachers' perceptions of students).

Despite frequent references to "parent(s)," the pictures, sample documentation of parent ratings, and underlying assumptions reveal that mothers or female caretakers are the PEP's main audience. For example, none of the 11 photos depict men and 75% of the 128 document ratings mention mothers while 2% mention fathers. Thus, the PEP tacitly supports the view that caretaking and children's education are women's work.

Resources needed to attain higher ratings

The PEP assumes that the recommended practices are equally attainable by all families. However, some of the Level 4 and 5 practices require access to material, cultural, and social resources more readily available to wealthier families. For example, to have a variety of literacy materials, initiate family learning opportunities (e.g., field trips), participate in school activities 4-6 times per year, and improve children's health and safety, parents need resources such as

free time, disposable income, affordable transportation, flexible work schedules, affordable child and health care, and a safe neighborhood. These resources are unavailable to most poor and working-class families.

Because the ratings are based on observed behaviors and living environment, the PEP does not seem to consider extenuating circumstances such as single-parent families or limited economic resources. Further, the ratings do not distinguish between parents who do not engage in behaviors due to lack of *resources* or due to lack of *awareness*. Instead, Level 1 and 2 practices are attributed mainly to the parent's limited awareness or understanding. In this way, parents may be held accountable for social and economic circumstances over which they have little control.

Parents' role in assessment

Finally, although the PEP encourages staff to include the parent's viewpoint, the instructions for administration give parents little say in assessing themselves. For example, if a parent and staff person disagree about the parents' progress, the PEP implies the professional's assessment should prevail. Staff are also allowed to assign ratings after a parent has left the program. Additionally, parents are described mainly as recipients of professional knowledge who are responsible for adopting new behaviors. A more inclusive approach would involve formal, systematic inclusion of parents' self-assessment in their ratings, and recognition that both parents and professionals might reconsider their perspectives and negotiate the final rating.

Conclusions and Recommendations

This analysis revealed that the PEP scales and supplementary materials in many ways reflect the dominant parenting model that views parents as adjunct teachers and encourages school-like activities in the home. Further, the image of the ideal parent, combined with the rating system, implicitly labels as deficient parents who do not or cannot engage, for whatever reason, in PEP practices. Thus, parents who hold different cultural beliefs or face economic constraints may be assigned lower ratings. Most educators would surely disagree with these messages, but as they are present in the text they are likely to influence practice in unconscious ways. Specifically, these messages may unintentionally undermine educators' efforts to recognize families' strengths, respect their cultural identities, and include them in important decisions.

Family support for children's literacy development is crucial. We need to recognize, however, that literacy development is a complex proc-

ess influenced not only by parental beliefs and practices, but also by school conditions and community settings. Moreover, research and assessment tools may serve to “naturalize and normalize the cultural practices of some while stigmatizing and marginalizing the cultural practices of less-powerful others” (Panofsky, 2000, p. 195). We suggest that parenting and literacy practices must be understood in their socioeconomic, cultural, and historical contexts and that assessment should be a process of mutual learning and negotiation. In sum, we need to exercise caution and cultural sensitivity when using instruments that prescribe, monitor, and rate parental support for education and literacy.

Suggestions for using the PEP in a collaborative, culturally responsive manner are as follows:

- Test the PEP with economically and culturally diverse parents for (a) reliability and validity and (b) class, cultural, and gender bias, and then revise to mitigate any biases.
- Reconsider mandating the PEP or using it as a program performance indicator until validity and reliability and cross-cultural appropriateness have been established.
- Describe literacy development (in the supplementary materials) as a complex process influenced by multiple factors, including but not limited to parental beliefs and practices.
- Always tell parents they are being observed and rated and obtain their consent.
- Professionals should identify their own beliefs and assumptions about childrearing and literacy, especially if they do not share parents’ social class or race/ethnicity.
- Discuss with parents extenuating circumstances that may prevent them from engaging in specific PEP activities and note these in documentation ratings.
- If a specific parenting or literacy practice is inconsistent with parents’ cultural norms, identify alternative strategies to achieve the desired outcome (see Powell et al., 2004).
- Use the PEP as a springboard for mutual learning by involving parents in assessments, discussing their views of parenting and literacy, and deciding which aspects of ethnic- or class-based parenting they wish to maintain or change.

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¹ This brief is drawn from the authors’ forthcoming article in the *American Educational Research Journal*.

² Adapted from Lareau (2002).