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An Interactive Model for Fostering Family Literacy

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Children whose homes are filled with books, whose parents read to them, and who have begun to understand the reading process have higher levels of reading skills and knowledge when they enter kindergarten than children who do not have such rich literacy experiences before entering school (Livingston & Wirt 2003). Across the nation, kindergarten teachers strive to support the learning of children who enter school with and without the experiences with books and other literacy materials necessary for school success (Boyer 1991; Neuman & Roskos 1993; Berger 1995; Neuman 1997; Lonigan & Whitehurst 1998). Schools that value parents as educators and homes as learning environments have great potential for encouraging children's progress (Berger 1995; Barbour 1998; Dever 2001; Darling 2005). Yet many parents feel they do not have the skills and knowledge of the reading process needed to work with their children at home (Brock & Dodd 1994).

This article describes a family literacy project developed and funded by a state university, the state office of education, and a large, urban school district. The project integrates an early childhood literacy program with a strong focus on education for parents who may not know how to create a rich literacy environment at home. The objectives of the program were (1) to engage parents and children in reading, discussing, and participating in reading-related activities together and (2) to emphasize parent education by providing explicit instruction in effective ways to read and interact with children during reading.

Reading at home

Engaging in frequent book readings is an important tool for helping children develop the skills eventually needed to become successful readers (Dickinson & Smith 1994; Bus, Van Ijsendoorn, & Pellegrini 1995; Adams 1999; Darling 2005). Reading-related discussions and activities also are important because they focus attention on letters, sounds, and story sense (Snow, Burns, & Griffin 1998), and positive reading interactions can motivate children to read (Sonnenschein & Munsterman 2002). Literacy skills in their home language support English-

language learners as they gain literacy skills in English (Au 1993; Byrnes & Cortez 1996; Hancock 2002).

Reading achievement in young children is closely related to children's home literacy environments (Cook-Cottone 2004). When schools and families partner to support reading achievement, children considered at risk for experiencing challenges in language development show definite gains in later reading achievement. For example, teachers and schools reported that reading scores of children in grades 3–5 with high levels of early parental outreach were 50 percent higher than the scores for children who experienced low levels of early parent outreach (Darling 2005).

High-quality family literacy programs provide necessary scaffolding, or support of literacy learning, for parents to pass on literacy knowledge and become literacy mentors for their children (Cook-Cottone 2004). Through such programs, parents and other family members (like grandparents, older siblings, guardians) learn to connect literacy activities to a child's prior experiences (Cook-Cottone 2004). They learn effective strategies for supporting reading development, including reading aloud, acting out stories, reading books from a variety of genres, and discussing the illustrations, characters, and plot (Darling 2005).

Certain innovations increase home book reading (Robinson, Larsen, & Haupt 1995, 1996) and interest in books (Ortiz, Stowe, & Arnold 2001). For example, in one home reading project, kindergartners took home bags containing high-quality children's books with a shared theme and suggestions for reading-related activities. The project engendered mutual family-school support, promoted parental interest, and involved families directly in their children's learning (Barbour 1998).

A similar book project was implemented by 65 teachers in all of one city's kindergarten classrooms and in three rural school districts (Dever & Burts 2002a,b). Most of the participating families were middle class and about seven percent were native Spanish speakers. They learned ways to make family book reading interactive and how to discuss the books with their children. Families used the bags at home extensively. Hispanic families appreciated culturally relevant books and having the books and materials available in Spanish as well as English (Dever 2001; Dever & Burts 2002a,b).

Involving parents in literacy learning

Implementing family involvement programs presents challenges that can be overcome with organization, planning, and training. When the program participants are English-language learners, such as immigrant, migrant, or refugee families, planners should take into account language and cultural similarities and differences, parents' educational levels, diversity of family-school environments, and teacher perceptions (Swick, Boutte, & Van Scoy 1995). Although parents with limited English skills may feel uncomfortable in schools, communicating through interpreters and a welcoming atmosphere will help to facilitate their understanding of the school environment. In some cultures, education is considered the job of the school, and parents may not be used to reading with their children (Espinosa 1995; Handel 1999). Other parents may want to help their children with school tasks but may not know how (Handel 1999). Encouraging

parents to explore the family assets that they can contribute to their children's literacy learning will create an environment of trust. These assets could include such things as storytelling, songs, rhymes, table conversations, family legends, cultural traditions, and family history. In addition, sharing the customs and traditions of their culture places value on the richness of their heritage.

In some instances, education level can inhibit parental involvement. In a study of homeless children, Nunez and Collignon (1997) identified the reading levels of average homeless parents to be at or below the sixth grade level. Such parents often feel alienated from the school and may lack the skills or knowledge needed to reinforce school lessons with their children. Research findings suggest that parents with lower literacy levels place more importance on providing literacy tools such as flashcards, coloring books, and posters, while those with higher levels of literacy place more importance on modeling literate behaviors, like reading to and with children (Coleman & Churchill 1997; Purcell-Gates 2000). Strong programs would involve a combination of hands-on activities with activities that model reading behaviors, thus providing for various parent literacy levels.

Teacher perceptions are crucial in the success or failure of family literacy involvement among populations who are learning English. For example, some teachers struggle as they work with families whose home language is other than English, often assuming that the families are not literate (Patton, Silva, & Myers 1999). Many teachers have not been trained in methods of involving families, especially in creating connections between home and school. Not enough programs link family literacy to teacher preparation (Patton, Silva, & Myers 1999). However, as teacher preparation programs include links to family literacy as part of their preservice training, parent involvement efforts will be strengthened.

Powell (1998) suggests some ways to establish and maintain meaningful connections between early childhood professionals and families. First, teachers must recognize and appreciate the characteristics and circumstances of the children and families (such as the education level of parents and their culture and language). Second, when planning family events, teachers need to consider parents' schedules and work responsibilities, adjusting the time of activities to benefit these schedules. Third, barriers such as transportation and child care must be addressed. Finally, as teachers help families understand how their culture and traditions contribute to family literacy through storytelling, conversations, singing songs, mealtime discussions, listening to children, and talking together, meaningful connections can be established between parents and schools.

Description of a family literacy project

A project involving family literacy bags, which had been implemented previously in four rural school districts (Dever & Burts 2002b), was adapted for use in an urban school district. For the expanded project, two new parent education components—a parent introductory night and a family reading program—were added.

Preparing family literacy bags

Each family literacy bag contained two high-quality children's books on a common theme (for example, change, friendship, or movement), some activities, and a parent guidebook with

information about ways to read and discuss the books with children. The guidebook reminded parents to be seated comfortably with their child, positioned so the child can see the text and illustrations. It also encouraged parents to reread the books at the child's request. Questions were included to guide discussion about the theme and the books.

To better meet the needs of the families in the program, many of whom were native Spanish speakers, about half of the bags contained books and guidebooks in both English and Spanish. Particular books were selected for their cultural relevance for Hispanic families (for example, several of the *Carlos* books by Jan Stevens, *Days of the Dead/Dias de los Muertos* by George Rivera, and *Calling the Doves/El Canto de las Palomas* by Juan Herrera). In addition, small tape recorders were inserted into about half of the bags, along with tape recordings of each book. The average cost of a bag was about $40 (for the books in both Spanish and English and the tapes and tape recorders).

Three kindergarten teachers and the children and families in their classrooms participated in the project. The classes were half-day kindergartens in schools within low-income or lower middle-class communities.

Working with families

Parent Introductory Night, funded by the school district for parent training on literacy development, shared ideas for literacy activities families could do at home at minimal cost.

The Family Reading Program was funded through a grant from the state office of education as part of a statewide initiative on parent involvement in literacy development. The program's objective was to engage parents in literacy activities they could do in the context of their daily lives. The grant covered a stipend for the literacy trainers, refreshments for each session, books for families to take home, and supplies. It also provided for custodial help during the evening sessions and stipends for teachers who worked with the children while their parents were attending the parent session. Workshop presenters assisted parents with carpool arrangements if transportation was a problem.

Parent Introductory Night

The families and their children came to school for two hours. Interpreters were available as needed. During the first hour, parents learned about the program while their children participated in literacy, music, and art activities in a kindergarten classroom. Parents learned how to use the family literacy bags and did a literacy activity using a variety of free or low-cost materials found in most homes (for example, store ads, coupons, sales flyers, junk mail, and newspapers). In one activity, parents learned to involve their children by using the pictures and print found in store ads to make grocery lists or plan meals.

At the beginning of the second hour, the children joined their parents, who engaged them in the literacy activities they had just learned.

Family Reading Program

This program, adapted from a state office of education initiative, was taught by specially trained teachers during a series of two-hour sessions held over a four-week period. Each session, held in school media centers, gave parents and children literacy experiences. Interpreters were on hand.

Session 1: Importance of Early Literacy. During small-group discussions, parents shared their attitudes about reading and writing, and teachers explained literacy development and how reading to young children supports the development of literacy skills. Using age-appropriate books, the teacher modeled techniques for reading aloud.

Meanwhile, children participated in small-group activities such as big book reading, lap reading, and activities using alphabet letters. As a whole group, they sang songs, did finger plays, and participated in movement activities.

In the joint parent-child time, parents read aloud with their children, then selected a book to take home and keep. The teacher asked the families to bring to the next session pictures, magazine cutouts, or stories that represented the child.

Session 2: Reading and Writing Connections in Early Literacy. Small groups of parents talked about home reading with the books in the bags and other books. They noted their experiences on chart paper and discussed how reading and writing are related. Teachers shared strategies for promoting fine motor development.

At the same time, children participated in activities designed to develop fine motor coordination. They manipulated objects such as marbles, beans, buttons, and lacing cards, and they also enjoyed big books and movement activities.

Together, during the second hour, parents and children created a "Me" book using the items brought from home and additional materials provided. They also made a phonics bingo game for home play.

Session 3: Making Learning Fun. After small-group debriefings of home activities, parents discussed family television-viewing habits and why it is important to spend more time reading and talking. They learned literacy games such as charades (acting out book characters) or making words that begin with letters pulled from a hat, such as *R* for *rabbit*, *S* for *snake*, *L* for *lion*.

In another room, children listened to big books and stories on tape. Small groups did movement and magnetic letter activities.

Parents and children together used recipes to cook. The leader encouraged the families to practice reading strategies they had learned. Parents were asked to bring a favorite children's book to share at the final session.

Session 4: Reading Roundup, A Celebration of Literacy. Workshop facilitators first shared their favorite children's books, and the parents then shared their favorites. A full-group discussion of school readiness skills followed, emphasizing that children develop at

different rates and in different time frames. Parents learned about services at local libraries, and each got a library card application.

Meanwhile, the children listened to stories, sang songs, and engaged in culturally relevant movement activities on a common theme.

In the second hour, children and parents held a final celebration and enjoyed a storyteller and puppeteer. Families discussed their book bag experiences and the parent-education activities, and each received a certificate of participation and a refrigerator-magnet reminder to read daily with their children. A follow-up meeting was scheduled for parents and children.

Parent response to the project

At the close of each session and at the conclusion of the four-week training, parents evaluated their experiences. Their responses indicated that adults and children alike benefited from participation in the family reading program. One enthusiast said her children liked the literacy class better than their dancing lessons. Parents reported that their families were watching television less and reading and interacting more.

Meeting in a library setting (the media center), parents said, encouraged them to regularly visit the public library with their children. One father, who had initially been hesitant to participate in the parent nights, noted, “I want to do this. This is the first time my child and I have ever been in a library together.”

Parents expressed delight in the activities and games offered in session two. One said, “I would like more of these simple games to make for my children. They are easy and fun to play.”

A highlight of the program appeared to be the free books given to parents at each session. One young mother, an English-language learner, expressed, “This is the first real book that I have had for my kids.” Another parent reported, “I read every night to my boys since we have been taking these classes, and now I have some books to read to them.”

“Will the district keep offering classes like this?” one parent wanted to know. “They have been so much fun.” Another said, “We have really enjoyed this workshop. My kids now consider reading books before bedtime as routine. Thank you.”

The dearth of negative comments might reflect families’ reluctance to be critical of schools. Only a few parents indicated that they did not learn anything particularly new. One father refused to participate in the parent activities but did take part when his child joined him for the second hour.

Evaluation forms (Likert-type scale questions answered by the parents after book bags were used) indicated that the families enjoyed the books, read them more than once, enjoyed the suggested activities, and found the information in the guidebook helpful.

Parents also were asked open-ended questions to find out what they did and did not like about the book bags. Responses indicated that parents found the book bags informative and

interesting. They noted that the books were fun and the discussions "thought provoking." Several indicated they liked the variety of books provided.

The guidebooks proved helpful, and most parents said they appreciated the suggestions for engaging in two-way discussions with their children. One parent pointed out that the questions promoted critical thinking. Another said, "My child gave very good answers, and I was pleased to see he understood it on a higher thinking level."

Many parents learned valuable things about their children during the project. One noticed that her child "practices memorizing words by [using] pictures on the page." Another enjoyed watching his son "get so excited when he recognized a word." Others realized that children look at pictures as they learn to read. "My daughter reads better than I thought," said one mother who was impressed with her daughter's comprehension and ability to answer questions. Another parent said he realized "how much kids learn to use language as a result of reading."

On the book bag themes, one parent noted that her family "enjoyed the moral of the stories." Another said his child learned that bad days are "a part of life." After using a bag with a multicultural theme, a mother noted, "We have family members of different races, so it was good to be able to talk about how we are different and why skin color is different."

Families also appreciated the tapes that were included in some of the bags. One parent pointed out the convenience of the taped stories: "My child could listen to the tapes whenever he wanted. He likes the story/tape combo."

There were some things that parents did not like. A few said the books were too long or not very interesting. Some criticism was directed at particular books. For example, one parent complained that the character in *Carlos and the Corn Field* was not confronted with the consequences of lying.

Conclusion

Like Barbour (1998) and Dever and Burts (2002a,b), we found in this project that families enjoyed using the book bags and that parents became directly involved in their child's literacy learning. The family literacy project engendered mutual family-school support. In learning creative ways to foster literacy in the home, the parents also learned more about how their children learn in general.

To better meet the needs of our families, many of whom were eager to create a rich literacy home environment, we expanded the parent education portion beyond the text materials used by Dever and Burts (2002a,b). We also addressed transportation and child care needs. As Powell (1988) says, parents' needs must be considered when planning such events.

We encourage other programs to implement similar projects. The family literacy project can easily be adapted for implementation in other settings and at relatively low cost. Possible sources of funding include federal initiatives such as Title I, Reading First, and No Child Left Behind; other sources include state offices of education and local businesses and education foundations.

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Lessons Learned about Implementing a Family Literacy Program

• Use nylon bags, which are more durable and easier to clean than cotton.

• Enlist a parent or community volunteer to check in and check out family literacy bags once a week. The volunteer can check the inventory in each bag, track which bags children have already had, and call parents if books or materials are missing.

• Check the bags in and out midweek so families will have them over the weekend. Many families find more time for reading over a weekend.

• Involve parents in the planning for family literacy events. For example, parents might share stories and songs from their cultures or handle the marketing for an event.

• Use your knowledge about the families in your classroom to provide activities that are culturally relevant for them.

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