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Theory-to-Practice

Intentional Literacy-based Parenting Education: Can Parents with Low Literacy Skill Increase the Academic Achievement of Their Children?

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Abstract

All parents, including those with low literacy levels or limited English proficiency, can be trained in techniques to increase their children's academic achievement. Support and monitoring of these parents can increase confidence in their abilities to teach their children. Greater involvement by parents who teach their children is an additional indicator of children's success in school. This paper reviews the literature that indicates that children make educational gains when their parents are trained to assist them in their literacy development, and discusses how family literacy practitioners can support these parents in their endeavor to teach their children.

Introduction

Parents are their children's first and most important teacher. People who are raising children hear these words frequently. However, although most parents want their children to succeed in school, many are uncertain as to how to proceed as an active and involved participant in their children's education (National Center for Family Literacy, 2004; see also Hoover-Dempsey, Walker, Sandler, et al. 2005; Lopez & Cole, 1999; Powell & D'Angelo, 2000; Schaller, Rocha, & Barshinger, 2006). This paper will review studies that support the belief that family lit-

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eracy programs—teaching parents how to read to and introduce literacy skills to their children, and how to be effectively become involved in their children's schools—will result in children's improved academic achievement (King & McMaster, 2000). It will describe what is meant by parent involvement and why it is important. Even more significant, the paper will focus on research that indicates that even parents with low literacy skills can be taught techniques that, when used with their children, will increase their achievement in school. Finally, this paper will use the research as a basis for describing methods that practitioners can use to apply what has been studied into classroom practice.

The term parent involvement has many different meanings, ranging from Lopez and Cole's (1999) broad definition of activities that allow parents to participate in the education of their children in home or school, to more detailed descriptions. Henderson and Mapp (2002) cite several different studies concerning partnerships that support student achievement. These include parents participating in activities that engage children in learning activities in the home, supervising children's time spent away from school, discussing school with their children, and attending school events (Epstein, as cited in Henderson & Mapp, 2002).

Student achievement, for the purposes of this paper, includes measurable attributes commonly used in educational domains. These could be in the form of test results, grades, promotion of a grade level, and teacher observation of attitudes about schooling (Henderson & Mapp, 2002).

Literacy-based parenting education is a term the author has used frequently to describe the type of parenting education offered by family literacy programs (Powell & D'Angelo, 2000). This refers to any type of parenting education that parents receive that is directly related to helping their children succeed in school. This can include learning techniques to improve their children's vocabulary, teaching their children rhyming skills, or helping their children become better readers. This type of education can also include teaching parents how to interact with the school, what to ask at parent-teacher conferences, and what is expected of a parent volunteer.

This paper discusses each of these terms in more detail as well as providing evidence as to their relationship to each other. A summary of the studies reviewed will indicate how parents with low-literacy levels can become actively involved with their school and the education of their children, supporting the concept that parents are their children's

first and most important teacher, and that their influence can raise the achievement level of their children.

Parent Involvement

Although the purpose of this paper is to determine whether parents with low-level literacy skills can be given interventions to use with their children in order to increase their success in school, it is important to first discuss parent involvement. Practitioners working with parents should know what parent involvement is, and why it is important. Unlike parenting education, a search for literature addressing parent involvement yields numerous empirical studies (Fan & Chen 1999) that show the link between parent involvement and successful child outcomes.

Henderson and Mapp (2002) found that some of the benefits derived from parent involvement include higher grades, better scores on assessments, better attendance, more challenging classes taken resulting in more credits earned, and better behavior and attitude both at home and at school. Parents literacy attitudes and activities can have an effect on the skills of preschooler's acquisition of literacy skills (Bennett, Weigel, & Martin, 2002), and the contribution parents make to their child's reading achievement in kindergarten can still make an impact on their reading abilities in fourth grade (Sénéchal, 2006).

According to Mason, (as cited in Faires, Nichols, & Rickelman, 2000, p. 196), "parents provide the primary foundations for later literacy success." Indeed, this success has not gone unnoticed by teachers. Morrow and Young (1997) found that the teachers involved in their study had not realized the impact that working together with parents and students would have on the literacy developments of children, including greater interest in reading and writing. Cotton and Wikelund (1989) found that school personnel benefited from the improved communication between parents and teachers, as well as from the parents' desire to help schools with special projects such as fundraisers.

The studies researched by this author indicate that parent involvement includes working with children at home, especially with literacy skills: communicating with the school about the children's progress: attending meetings, events and volunteering at the school: and monitoring children's time while not in school. Teachers agree that an involved parent will help a child to achieve success in school. The literature provides an insight as to some of the methods that teachers and school adminis-

trators use to encourage parents to become involved in their children's education.

Encouraging Parent Involvement

The question that is being considered for this paper is whether or not parents with low literacy skills can increase the academic achievement of their children. The author has first chosen to look at studies that simply encourage parents to be involved with their children's literacy development. The methods of encouragement are varied. Some studies ask that parents read certain books with their children, but no instruction is given as to how the reading should be done. The data collected reflects self-reported incidents. Some studies collect data detailing what parents are doing, without requesting that any additional literacy activities be attempted. Other studies describe interventions that include teaching parents how to be involved without actually teaching literacy techniques.

The studies in this article look at parents who are low-income, many of whom have low-literacy levels. These families are most similar to the families that would be served in a family literacy program. By design, family literacy programs serve families in which the parents have an educational need, offering them instruction and support for their own education, as well as parenting instruction to teach them how to support their children's literacy development and education. This literacy–based parenting education is meant to teach parents specific techniques to use with their children in order to increase their children's school achievement (National Center for Family Literacy, 2004; Powell & D'Angelo, 2000).

Dearing, McCartney, Weiss, Kreider, and Simpson (2004) found positive results among the low-income families involved in their study. Parents' activities such as participating in meetings, communicating with the school or other parents, and reading to their children were compared with children's responses concerning their feelings about literacy and their performance on literacy assessments. Their research provided evidence that parent involvement was most important for children whose mothers were less educated. A longitudinal study by Dearing, Kreider, Simpkins and Weiss (2006) found that over time, a child's negative feelings about their literacy performance decreases if families are highly involved in school, and their literacy gains increased as their parents' involvement increased. These positive gains in low-income families with lower educational levels are more likely to occur if schools reach out to

these families and help them overcome their barriers.

Picture book reading is important to the literacy skills of children because of the conversations that can emerge as the children relate the text to their own lives (Torr, 2004). Torr also found that there was a great difference in the types of interactions that mothers who left school early had with their children as compared to the interactions that children had with their teachers. Additionally, the conversations were much richer between children and their mothers who had a higher education. This study suggests that though any opportunity to read books with their children is beneficial, parents with a higher education are more likely to use a greater vocabulary and thus are able to teach their children more during the reading of a picture book.

In their study, Tizard et al. (1982) asked whether illiterate or non-English speaking parents were able to be successfully involved in teaching their children reading. They looked at three groups of children over the course of two years, one control group that had no intervention, a group that got extra help from a teacher in a small group setting and a group in which the children were sent home with books to read to their parents. Although the parents were not given any special training, parents were required to attend meetings to discuss their expectations with regard to the readings and the documentation. Home visits were also carried out by the researchers, who practiced modeling the behavior and also gave the parents advice.

Tizard, et al. (1982) found that not only did the children whose parents were involved in the intervention significantly increase their academic performance, their performance continued at a higher level than the control children after the invention had ceased. Hannon, (1987) also decided to study the effect of having working-class children reading to their parents. He used a method of parent involvement modeled after the one used by Tizard et al. Unfortunately, Hannon's research found that the effects of having the parents involved in listening to their children read were marginal. In spite of these results, there were still positive points derived from the research, including the practicality of having parents involved, the conclusion that parent involvement will not harm children's reading, and the parents perception that it was worthwhile to be involved in the process.

Although Tizard et al. (1982) specifically state that parents were not given any special training in the techniques of tutoring; this author respectfully disagrees with this statement. Home visitors gave brief demonstrations and advice to the parents. During this time, the home visitors

were essentially modeling good reading practice to the parents. According to Powell and D'Angelo (2000), modeling is an instructional strategy that works best in a one-on-one situation that allows time for the parent to try the techniques used by the practitioner. It could be argued that the act of modeling done by the home visitors was a type of training, and this is what made the difference between the results of the study by Tizard et al. and that of Hannon (1987).

Interventions Designed to Involve Parents

This section describes interventions that include teaching specific techniques to parents in order to increase their children's school achievement. Although the question asked by the author indicates an interest in teaching parents with low-literacy skills, most of the studies state that the parents are low-income as opposed to having a low-literacy level. It is possible that the demographics for income are easier to determine than those of literacy level. However, according to Kutner, et al. (2007), the lower the income level, the higher the percentage of persons with Below Basic literacy skills. Using those statistics, one can then extrapolate that if a person has a low-income; it is likely that they also have a low-literacy level.

The studies reviewed have looked at the effects of parents looking at books and reading to their preschool children, and having their school age child read to them. However, if one is to look back at the reviews done by Hoover-Dempsey et al. (2005), parents' efficacy can be affected by their attitudes. If parents are encouraged to become involved and to have a positive attitude towards their children's schooling, will that also help to increase their children's achievement?

Both the study done by Chrispeels and Rivero (2001) and the one done by Schaller, Rocha and Barshinger (2006) have shown positive results when working with Latino parents. Schaller, Rocha and Barshinger found that early childhood practitioners who worked with parents and encouraged involvement helped parents to see how their attitude could affect their children's success in school.

The study done by Chrispeels and Rivero (2001) included an intervention that used workshops to focus on the need for parents to become involved with the school through communication and school activities, and also to become involved with their children's homework. The workshops, presented at two elementary schools, were well-attended, averaging about 100 parents at each location. These parents were from mid- to

low-socioeconomic backgrounds, many with low levels of formal education, and for whom English was not their native language. After completing the eight, 90-minute sessions, eleven families were involved in a qualitative study, and interviewed over the next nine months. They were taught how to encourage their children so that they would be more successful. The American education system was explained to parents so that they would understand what was expected and how to anticipate how they might help their children as they applied to college. The results suggest that after attending these workshops, the parents were more aware of what was needed from them in order to help their children's academic achievement.

While this study does not introduce a teaching technique that parents were to use to increase the reading levels of their children, it does involve an intervention which helped parents increase their involvement in their children's school, as well as their involvement in reading, homework activities, and educational activities in the home. These are important outcomes, because the research indicates that parent involvement is instrumental in a child's success in school (Dearing, McCartney, Weiss, Kreider, & Simpkins, 2004; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Sénéchal, 2006).

Cairney and Munsie (1995) describe a program that was offered to parents with limited literacy living in a poverty stricken area in Australia. The intervention in this instance included training twenty-five parents to interact more effectively with their children, specifically with regards to their reading and writing skills. The training consisted of sixteen, two-hour trainings in a period of eight weeks. Some of these parents were then given additional training so that they could work with other children or act as trainers to other parents in the techniques used in this program. The study found that the abilities of the parents in the program increased. The parents interacted more with their children using new strategies; they learned a lot and grew in confidence and self-esteem. Many of the parents even expressed a desire to continue their own education. In addition, the children's literacy performance levels increased. Parents also reported that their children had a more positive attitude and interest in school. The researchers were encouraged by these results, as this study did not focus on children's outcomes. This study supports the idea that parents' involvement in their children's education can help to increase achievement levels.

A Turkish study developed by Kagitcibasi, Sunar and Bekman (2001) looked at a program very similar to the home instruction program

for preschool youngsters (HIPPY) described by Baker, Piotrkowski and Gunn (1998). This study was actually a two-part study, with part one examining the effects of an intervention based upon the HIPPY program, using similar packets. As in the study by Baker, Piotrkowski and Gunn, this was a two-year program. Once again, a total of 60 packets containing books and activities were given to mothers who were trained how to use them during home visits. Both home visits and group meetings for discussion were done biweekly so that each mother experienced part of the intervention weekly. As with the children in cohort 1 in the previous program, these children had positive outcomes in their academic achievement. Study 2 of this research looked at these same children six years after the completion of the training program. The low-income population included in this Turkish study has a high incidence of students leaving school early. The researchers in this study found that most of the children whose mothers were in this training program remained in school beyond the compulsory primary school level. This suggests that interventions that teach parents how to work with their children can have lasting effects on their achievement levels.

Lopez and Cole (1999) designed another study that used home visits to train parents to work with their children. This intervention was used with Puerto Rican families whose kindergarten children had difficulties naming the letters of the alphabet. After learning a technique to teach their children the letters, the parents reported that their experience was positive, and the children were pleased with their progress. The researchers noted that while many Hispanic parents have been thought to not value education (Edwards as cited by Lopez & Cole, 1999), they suggested that the parents might need to be trained to help their children. The training that the researchers provided enabled the parents to help their children increase their letter knowledge, and teachers reported that these children also improved their overall school performance.

Although children can develop literacy skills while in formal preschool and kindergarten settings, research has shown the value of a literacy-rich home environment (Jordan, Snow, & Porche, 2000). Jordan, Snow and Porche report on an intervention called Project EASE, which not only provides interactive activities for parents to use to help their children develop their literacy skills, but also provides the theoretical background so that parents understand why they are helping their children. In this program, parent training was conducted in five, 1-month sessions, followed by time with their children, allowing for immediate practice of the techniques learned. Additional activities were then sent

home with the family for the application to continue at home. These activities, which included vocabulary-building, letter recognition and concepts of print, enabled parents to see a significant gain in language skills. Jordan, Snow and Porche found that while there is evidence that parent involvement can improve children's school performance, there are also considerable resources necessary to carry out the intervention. They also noted that while parents are highly motivated to tutor their children, they are not usually invited to be trained to work in this capacity.

Parents have been trained as tutors in many of the studies reviewed by this author, and the results have been very encouraging. Faires, Nichols and Rickelman (2000) found in their research that simply encouraging parents to listen to their children read at home is not enough. Their intervention involved training parents of first graders during two, 45-minute training sessions to follow a model that includes familiar books, letter identification, writing sentences and other activities. Teachers modeled the lessons and extra training was given if requested. The findings included an indication that the literacy level and socioeconomic status of the parents did not come into play after the parents received training and support from the teacher. Through their involvement, the parents were able to help their children raise their reading levels and support their children's growth.

To this point, the studies have focused on teaching parents to help their children increase their literacy development and reading skills. Starkey and Klein (2000) found that students from low-income families were at risk of underachievement in mathematics, and even preschool children exhibited a gap when compared to their middle-class peers. The intervention they describe is a two-part study, the first part including participating African–American families and the second part made up of predominantly Latino families. The experimental group from each part of the study attended 8, biweekly classes with their children. In these classes, the parents and children were shown the activity together, the parents were monitored while they worked on it with their children, and feedback was provided. Over the course of the study, the children taught by their parents showed significant growth in the areas of enumeration, numerical reasoning and geometric reasoning. This study indicates that when given information and training, parents can teach their children the mathematical skills needed to be successful in school as easily as they can teach them language and reading skills.

Recognizing that the wealth of research indicated that parent involvement and a literacy-rich home environment were linked to children's

academic success, the National Center for Family Literacy (NCFL) partnered with Toyota to develop the Toyota Families in Schools project. This project consisted of creating a comprehensive family literacy program, including adult education, parenting education, early childhood education and interactive literacy activities for parents and children. Data collected from the forty-five participating schools indicates that a higher percentage of children involved in this program are rated as average or above in such things as overall academic performance, motivation to learn, attendance, parent support, classroom behavior, and involvement in classroom activities. Parents in this program reported an increase in their own involvement in their children's education, but also indicated that their children's academic performance improved (NCFL, 2004). In addition to the positive outcomes attributed to parents and children as a result of their participation in this program, NCFL also indicated that teachers viewed the program positively and were more likely to view parents as partners in their children's education.

Summary and Conclusions

What does this research mean to family literacy practitioners and early childhood and elementary school teachers? Sénéchal (2006) concluded in her meta-analysis of parent interventions and their effect on children's reading outcomes that parents should be trained to teach their children to read, and should be encouraged to listen to their children read. While simply encouraging parents to become involved in their children's education can produce positive outcomes when followed through by the parents, educators should realize that not all parents feel competent enough to work with their children (Cairney & Munsie, 1995). In addition, the research that included interventions with low-income and low-literate parents reported that a considerable duration of time was needed to produce positive results. This suggests that these are things that should be considered when planning strategies to work with parents.

According to Fry, (1977), many educators do not give parents credit for their ability to teach their children. In the literature reviewed, the researchers have consistently concluded that parents, including parents with low literacy skills or limited English proficiency, can be trained in intervention techniques. These parents, when using these techniques with their children, can help to increase their children's academic achievement. This is reason enough for parents to be trained to help their children develop their literacy skills.

Interventions can be done within family literacy programs. Parents in these programs often have children of different ages, in different classes, and sometimes in different schools. Parent education can be done in a group setting, but interventions are often child specific. Henderson, Mapp, Johnson and Davies (2007) suggested that schools demonstrate a learning activity to parents and explain how the activity will develop the skills. If teachers are not comfortable working with low literacy level parents, family literacy practitioners can work with a child's teacher and together they can determine what the child's weaknesses are and the type of intervention to be developed. The family literacy instructor can then teach the parent the intervention and give them the materials to use. Afterwards, the parent can help to assess the child. Seeing the difference their activity makes in the child's achievement may encourage the parent to continue working with their child. They may even begin to approach the teacher for ideas themselves.

Family literacy programs can also work with local schools to incorporate parent time during an existing after school program. During an online book discussion, two participants indicated that this has been successful to varying degrees. The program that has a more structured parent involvement piece has indicated that the teachers meet with the parents to discuss report cards, test results, and different techniques to use while working with their children. Parents were able to see an increase in spelling test scores in a short amount of time because they learned how to work with their child and followed through (R. Marotta & K. Marino, personal communication, April 21-23, 2008).

There are different ways to encourage a parent to attend after school homework activities and parent education programs. A family literacy program that meets in a school may be able to use a bulletin board at the school to showcase the work done by parents (NCFL, 2001). The programs could even assist the parents and their children in designing and creating the board to reflect their own lives and dreams. The parents can also be supported in developing goals for their children. These can be done with pictures for those with low literacy skills and translated for those parents who are English language learners (NCFL, 2003). These goals can be posted in the parents' classroom as a reminder that the parent needs to work with the child in order to see these goals fulfilled.

Parents who are uncomfortable with interventions that look too much like a formal teacher-prepared assignment, or who have children resistant to working with their parents may need a different type of intervention. Maiers (2001) suggests many activities that involve games,

storytelling and cooking. The activities are designed to teach specific skills, but are taught by the parents in a meaningful setting. This helps the parent to teach in a real life context, and helps the child to learn by doing. Family literacy programs can work with the child's teachers to determine what types of activities to plan. They can also have a conference with parents to discuss homework, tests and report cards, and to develop activities together. Using the Internet, teacher magazines and other resources should yield many options, and teaching parents how to find these resources themselves will ensure that parents have the skills they need to help their children after they have left the program.

The research reviewed in this paper has been consistently positive in its perception of parent involvement. The researchers agree that parent involvement can be defined in many different ways. Parents can be involved in their children's school by attending parent meetings and conferences. They can be involved through volunteer work in the school. Parent involvement can also mean talking to one's children about the importance of school, and encouraging them to do their best and have a positive attitude about school. Parents can help their children with homework, read to their children, or listen to their children read to them.

Interventions can be designed to help parents become involved by teaching them specific activities to do with their children so that they will increase their literacy development. These parents want their children to be successful in school, but are unsure about how to help their children develop good reading skills. Attending workshops and parenting education classes can help these parents by teaching them specific techniques to use when working with their children. Follow-up sessions and continued monitoring can help parents become more confident in their abilities to teach their children. Parents with low literacy skills may need interventions that last for several weeks or months. The children whose parents have participated in interventions such as these experience significant gains in their academic achievement.

Parents want their children to succeed. They want their children to do well in school, graduate, and go on to become successful in life. Parents whose own literacy skills are minimal also have these dreams for their children. Often, they would like to be able to help their children, but they are unsure of their abilities to do so (Cairney & Munsie, 1995; Morrow & Young, 1997; Tett, Caddell, Crowther, & O'Hara, 2000). Educators also want children to be successful in school. When these two groups of people work together, there is a greater chance that the shared

goals for the children will be realized. Working with parents to increase their abilities to work with their children can have positive outcomes and can help to ensure that no child is left behind.

The research that has been reviewed has convinced the author that parents can be trained to use certain educational practices to teach their children. As tutors, parents can be effective in helping their children to develop their literacy skills and increase their academic levels in school. Parents whose literacy levels are low or who do not speak English as their native language can be trained to work with their children and can achieve the same positive results.

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