

Building Family and Community Relationships

Introduction

Background

Because young children's lives are so embedded in their families and communities, and because research indicates that successful early childhood education depends upon partnerships with families and communities, early childhood professionals need to thoroughly understand and apply their knowledge in this area. During the Families Unite through Literacy (FUTL) program, graduate students engaged parents and their children in a six-week literacy initiative. We focused on marginally literate parents and their young children.

The program was designed to reinforce the role of the family as a major social economic unit. We worked with families through weekly group sessions and one-on-one home visits by graduate students to help parents and children unite and communicate around the act of reading and exploring literature together to improve skill and achievement for the children. Classical fiction children's books were provided by the First Book Campus Advisory Board. The books were traditional stories that addressed ethical and values issues. Our weekly sessions involved reading together and discussing weekly topics such as history, literature, cultural, and ethical issues through character traits such as fairness, honor, courage, kindness, resilience, and perseverance. (Neuman, 2003).

We also hoped to help families move their children into academic adjustment through informational sessions and demonstrations concerning the value of play and creative arts. Walker (2004) found that there is a direct correlation between emergent literacy, play, and creative movement. Findings also suggested that extensive training should be provided through professional development for teachers. We hoped to encourage parents to describe their understandings of emergent literacy through perceptions about themselves, their child rearing practices, how children acquire literacy, and the connection between literacy and play.

Our own students seemed to have difficulty accepting this predicate. Over and over again in personal interviews with the students, the researcher heard stories of parents using flash cards and other methods of paired-imaging (associative memorization) with children below the age of four to teach letters and numerals. We found it necessary to review with our students the importance of developmental theory stating that children were incapable of assimilating operational functions until they reached the appropriate stage of development (Piaget, 1952; Bredekamp & Copple, 1997).

Our graduate students, for the most part, effectively demonstrated the knowledge and skills needed to support and empower families through respectful, reciprocal relationships. Assessments centered on affective/emotional literacy, parenting styles, and values help interventionists to develop an inventory of skills to encourage parents and children to communicate through literature or simply talk intelligently with their children.

Parents and children can develop skills at making healthy choices in life and learning through the employment of emotional intelligence skills (Fish, 2002, Goleman, 1998; Stone-McCown, K., Jensen, A. L., Freedman, J.M., & Rideout, M. C., 1998). We hope to develop in low-literacy; low-income parents the desire for self-initiated learning to achieve educational goals.

The bases for this program were derived from information gained through the research of Betty Hart and Todd Risley (1995). They determined that certain variables were salient in the development of literacy skills in children which led, in time, to successful academic matriculation. Among others, these variables were:

- Time spent with their children
- Responsiveness to children's questions and concerns
- Quantity of words used in conversation
- Expression of approval/affirmation of child's thoughts and feelings

They arrived at these conclusions by placing observers in the homes of families from different socio-economic backgrounds and noting the types and numbers of parent/child interactions.

Family Literacy refers to the ways parents, children, and other family members use reading and writing in their home and community to share ideas and information, get things done, tell family stories, and teach about cultural values and practices (Newman, 2001; Rogers, 2002). Through working with families to encourage voluntary reading and talking about what they read, our graduate students learned how these families function. Then, they attempted to help families move from functional to thoughtful literacy. We hoped that the families learned from the graduate students, and the graduate students learned from the families.

Each graduate student was responsible for at least one family during the entire program. They worked with the parents on parenting styles and emotional literacy. During their weekly visits with the family, they learned about the functioning of the family, helped with read-aloud skills, encouraged parenting skills, and helped them get library cards. If the family needed help with transportation issues, they were instructed to contact the appropriate community resource agency to arrange for this. They were to become part of the extended family for six to seven weeks.

This project was initially adapted for our departmental student organization. We found profound difficulties with the families in the area of reading with their children. It has been reformulated to use as an experiential project with our graduate students. Since this is a relatively new strategy, data has been collected. The analysis of this data will be forthcoming if time is allotted for the major researcher to work on it.

We postulate that:

1. Children who come from homes in which there is a lot of conversation, reading, and writing learn to value literacy and are motivated to learn academic skills.
2. There is an appropriate level of affective (emotional) skill necessary to effectively motivate children to value literacy and learn academic skills. This skill is called Emotional Literacy (Fish, 2002; Hill-Clarke, K. Y., 2006).
3. Intervention with families who are at risk can improve communication and emotional literacy skills with the parents and have a positive effect on the children.

Our methodology centered on qualitative action research. The project was conducted during the summer and during the fall of 2007. During the summer project, we drew from a population from the Progressive Missionary Baptist Church in Jackson. During the fall session, students were allowed to choose families from their own schools, churches, or neighborhoods. Whole group sessions were held at the church during the summer project and at the University during the fall project. Permission for the study was obtained through the Institutional Research Board at Jackson State University. (Copy provided upon request.)

Students maintained visitation logs for each visit with the families. They compiled portfolios describing the broader community, the general school population, and overall home environment setting in terms of geographic location, cultural makeup, socio-economic profile, religion, language, and race/ethnicity. Additionally, they described the characteristics of their target family, noting age/grade level, size, exceptionalities (disability or giftedness), gender ratio, interests, achievement/developmental levels, language (speakers of other languages and those with limited language proficiency), and special needs members. They also noted any significant variations between the description of their target family and community description given. Physical features of the home noting the availability of resources, vehicles, and any other physical features impacting family functioning were also noted.

Furthermore, with respect to the goals of the project and the target family they noted the main ideas and concepts that made up the overall content of their intervention, indicated the importance for the family members to learn about the topics discussed in the program, and specified what they expected the family to know and/or be able to do at the conclusion of the program.

The families were asked to complete pre and post project inventories including demographic information and specific information related to literacy. The students also worked with the parents to complete three other inventories – a parenting styles questionnaire, an emotional literacy questionnaire, and a values game. Parents and students completed evaluations of each group session. At the end of the studies, parents were sent a survey to rate the effectiveness of their student interventionists. We have received 20% of those surveys back from the summer session, and we will be sending the fall surveys out in January.

Upon completion of the data collection process, we look forward to beginning the compilation process. We plan to use descriptive statistics and written comparisons to compile data to write a paper on the effects of the intervention on family life. Venues for publication would include journals dealing with early childhood education and the effects of parents' emotional literacy skills on children's academic adjustment.

We hope to add to the body of literature related to the achievement gap presently in existence in the state and the country as a whole. We have seen in past research that the gap is related to family habits. Through our interventions and the data collected, we hope to show that change is possible.

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