

A MODEL TO IMPROVE READING PROFICIENCY THROUGH INCREASED INVOLVEMENT OF AFRICAN AMERICAN PARENTS

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Abstract

Limited reading proficiency among elementary children is prevalent across all racial groups. Lower performance in reading is generally more pronounced for African American children. Studies indicate that parents who assist in reading assignments have improved children's reading proficiency. Based on this, a study was implemented in an elementary school with a predominantly African American population. With the support of the school administrators and teachers, a participatory model to increase and improve parental involvement in reading was validated. Focus group interviews were organized to identify what parents needed in order to provide effective support to their children in reading. Parents identified, as a major barrier, their inadequate preparation to assist children in reading. Focus group findings guided the school to engage parents in the reading activities of their children.

INTRODUCTION

Acquiring the ability to read is one of the most significant stages in an individual's educational development. The importance of reading cannot be emphasized enough in the everyday life of an individual. Reading is needed to understand and master every subject in the curriculum; reading is necessary on most jobs; reading is needed to participate in the everyday life of our society, nation, and that of the globe. "Reading matters: being able to read is both a means and an end to enhancing life materially and intellectually. For this reason, concern about reading standards is an ever-present feature of our society" (Davies, 1999, p.203).

In spite of the obvious advantages of reading, there is still a dearth for adequate attention to improve reading among children and youth. According to the findings on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), the average reading score for high school seniors in 2005 was lower than in 1992; the percentage of those performing at or above the basic level decreased from 80% to 73%, and the percentage of

those performing at or above the proficiency level decreased from 40 to 35% (U.S. Department of Education, NCES, 2007). The Nation's 2003 Report Card revealed that only 31% of fourth graders and 32% of eighth graders performed at or above the proficient reading level (U.S. Department of Education, NCES, 2004). Baumann, Duffy-Hester, Hoffman, and Ro (2000) reported that 24% of students at the elementary level read below grade level. Torgesen (2000) found that close to 20% of children had difficulty with the fundamentals of reading. The National Assessment of Educational Progress reported that in 1998, 38% of fourth graders, 26% of eighth graders and 23% of 12th graders nationally could not read at the basic level (Donahue, Voelkl, Campbell, & Mazzeo, 1999); this meant that they could not read at age- and grade-level. Chall (1996) reported that students made low scores in the verbal section of the SAT exam because of their poor reading skills.

Although reading problems appear to be present among all racial groups, data from state-wide and national tests indicate differential reading achievement gaps among White, African American, and Hispanic school children across the nation (Learning First Alliance, 2000). Data from the Educational Longitudinal Study (2002) showed that there was a gap in reading achievement between African American and Caucasian students at the tenth grade level (Ingels, Burns, Charleston, Chen, & Cataldi, 2005). Ingels et al. (2005) also suggested that African American students were likely to make lower reading scores than students from other racial and ethnic groups. According to the 2003 National Assessment of Educational Progress, African American 12th graders scored lower than any other ethnic group on the reading assessment in 2002, and Caucasian students/Pacific Islander students outperformed African American, Hispanic and American Indian/Alaskan students on average in grades both four and eight. At grade four, Hispanic students scored higher on average than African American students (U. S. Department of Education, 2004). Similarly, results of the 2005 National Assessment of Educational Progress indicated that the average reading score for African American eighth graders was 243 while the average score for Caucasian eighth graders was 271 (Perie, Grigg, & Donahue, 2005).

Extensive research continues to be done to design effective reading programs. The No Child Left Behind Act (2001) made reading instruction one of its top priorities. Hence, the NCLB law funded two new reading programs: Early Reading First and Reading First. These programs were based on scientifically-validated research that developed effective reading

instruction models. Early Reading First is designed to provide preschool-age children language and cognitive skills, and an early reading foundation for continued school success. Reading First focuses on implementing proven methods of early reading instruction in classrooms to ensure that all children learn to read well by the end of third grade.

Besides designing reading programs, integrating parents into the reading development of children has also been found to be effective. Finding evidence that parental involvement in Title 1 reading programs increased reading achievement, Shaver and Walls (1998) added parental involvement to the many strategies that improved oral reading and reading comprehension. Nye, Turner, and Schwartz (2006) reviewed 19 studies which focused on parental involvement; they recommended parental involvement as a useful strategy to improve classroom performance. Extensive research studies have illustrated and reinforced that parental involvement does have a positive effect on students' academic achievement (Astone & McLanahan, 1991; Billman, Geddes, & Hedges, 2005; Cherian & Malehase, 2000; Edwards, 1992; Epstein, 2005; Hango, 2007; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Ortiz, 2001; Roberts, Jurgens, & Burchinal, 2005; Weinberger, 1996; Yan & Lin, 2005). Specific to reading achievement, as early as 1988, Hewison found increased parental involvement to be more effective in increasing reading skills than small group instruction in school. Senechal (2003) found as a result of studying 1,583 families that parent involvement had a positive effect on children's reading achievement. Castro, Bryant, Peisner-Feinberg and Skinner (2004) found that parental involvement helped the reading skills of preschool children. Kohl, Lengua and McMahon (2000) indicated that parental involvement positively impacted academic success, specifically reading. Morrow, Kuhn, and Schwanenflugel (2006) made it clear that involving parents as an integral part of education was crucial, and articulating to them how their support would improve the academic outcomes of their children was equally important. According to Hiatt-Michael (2001), parent involvement seemed to correlate with improved school attendance, decreased dropout rate, improved classroom behavior, and a significant escalation of reading and math scores. For the same reasons, legislations have been passed mandating schools to involve parents in the education of their children.

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 1997) strengthened the role of parents in the educational process when it mandated that special education evaluation, identification and placement

decisions, implementation of the individualized education program, manifestation determination ought to be done with the involvement and consent of parents. Understanding the importance of parental involvement, the No Child Left Behind Act (2001) mandated that elementary schools should provide parents the tools they required to support their children's learning at home, and that schools should conduct family workshops to facilitate parents to take leadership roles in the planning, review, and improvement of Title 1 programs. One of the goals in Goals 2000 Educate America Act stated that "every school will promote partnerships that will increase parental involvement and participation in promoting the social, emotional, and academic growth of children" (U. S. Department of Education, 1994).

Improved academic achievement as a result of parental involvement was not specific to any one racial group but was consistent across all groups (Jeynes, 2005). According to Hill and Craft (2003), parental involvement seemed to have a strong impact on the academic achievement of African American students. As a result of a meta-analysis of 77 studies, Jeynes (2005) found that parental involvement in reading activities had a significant effect on the child's learning outcomes, and that the effects of parental involvement tended to be larger for African American and Latino children than they were for Asian American children. Smith, Krohn, Chu, and Best (2005) indicated that the African American parents learnt skills in order to assist their children with their homework at home. Another study (Darling & Westberg, 2004) revealed that one of the most effective forms of parent involvement was training parents to adopt reading strategies that teachers used in school. All this substantial evidence leads us to hypothesize that African American students will show significant improvement in their reading skills with greater parental involvement.

This paper describes a project that two university professors organized to help African American parents acquire skills that would improve reading skills of their children in an elementary school in a southern region. The elementary school was predominantly African American with a little more than 500 students. The school was eligible for participation in State and Federal Title I Programs. Some students participated in free or reduced lunch program. A major concern of the school community including parents was that children were not making passing scores on the state reading assessment. The school administrators and teachers agreed that a vital factor in improving the reading scores might be getting parents more involved in the reading activities of their children. Research has

emphasized, time and again, that schools need the support of parents to teach students more effectively (Machen, Wilson, & Notar, 2005).

METHODOLOGY

The framework for the design of this university project was based on participatory action research; parents participated in every phase of the project starting with the decision to participate in focus group interviews and developing the questions for the focus group interviews. Parents were asked to define the skills that they needed to best help their children. In order to do this, the principal of the elementary school along with her staff conducted a survey among a representative group of parents to solicit the kind of questions that should be asked of the general body of parents whose children were attending the elementary school. Parents gave a list of seven questions that were used in the parent focus group interviews.

The focus groups were conducted under strict research protocol to maintain scientific rigor. The school principal sent out letters of invitation to all the parents of children in grades K – 6 and an initial response showed that 42 parents were interested in participating in focus group interviews, although a total of only 14 participated. Four groups were formed with three in each of the four groups and two in one of the groups. The parents were randomly assigned to each of the four groups. Parents signed an Informed Consent Form and were given the opportunity to withdraw from the interview any time. The form also guaranteed anonymity and confidentiality of the responses that were recorded. Letters of invitation were sent out to faculty and graduate students at the university to serve as moderators and recorders. Those who volunteered were given online training on how to conduct the focus group interviews. The training included tips on (a) how to get each participant share his or her opinions; (b) how to supplement the pre-determined questions with additional questions to get clearer, more direct and elaborate responses; (c) how to keep the participants focused on the discussion; (d) how to remain cognizant of the time limits; (e) how the moderator should maintain an open outlook, and (f) how to record the oral responses verbatim including the body language of the participants.

The focus group interviews took place in different classrooms located in the same building in the university. The interviews began with the registration of the parent participants who also completed a short demographic form. The parent participants were then seated in their

respective rooms, and the interviews began with the participants introducing themselves. Next, the moderators explained the basic rules for the session including the session's time frame and answering process. The moderators also addressed relevant issues related to confidentiality of information shared during the session. Using seven predetermined interview questions, the moderator elicited responses from the parent participants. The recorders were instructed to record the responses verbatim. The focus group interviews lasted for about an hour and a half.

The following seven questions were used in the focus group interviews:

1. What do you need to help with your child's homework?
2. What are your child's academic and nonacademic interests?
3. What do you need in order to share in these interests?
4. How do you make your child aware that his/her education is important to you?
5. What are your dreams for your child's future?
6. What do you think you need in order to have these dreams accomplished?
7. Give us a list of activities that you would like to do to enhance your child's achievements in reading, writing, math, and other subjects.

DATA ANALYSIS

After the focus group interviews were over, the investigators collated the responses to each question thus grouping the results. In the content analysis, the investigators independently examined the responses of the parents for significant themes, and coded and categorized the themes. They looked for feelings and emotions, common perspectives, phrases and words that emerged among the responses of the four groups of parents. After examining the parents' responses independently, the investigators compared the themes that each had identified, and agreed on the significant categories that emerged from the focus group conversations.

RESULTS

Two major categories emerged from the responses of the parents in the focus group interviews: barriers to parents helping children with their homework especially reading and activities that the school should offer in order to improve the children's achievements in reading, writing, math, and other subjects.

Perceived barriers

The following are select direct statements from the focus group participants:

“I want to help but I do not know how; teach me, teach me, teach me; I want to learn so that my child can make good grades and go to college”.

“I want to know what strategies the teachers are using, so that I could use them at home”.

“I feel helpless about my inability to help my child. I need skills training.”

“I want help with after-school activities”.

“I am interested in helping my child but I do not have the skills especially in reading and math”.

“Teachers tell children the do’s and don’ts but do not show them how to do. Show me how to do; how to approach a task and I will teach my child”.

“I want to learn since everything has changed since I have been in school”.

“I go to the library; I do not know what book to pick up (chokes because of a surge of emotion)”.

“Too much of homework is given; my daughter and me do not have the time to complete it. I do not know how to help her with the math problems and with the reading assignment”.

“Teachers need to be realistic; my son has a learning disability and he needs more time than other children. He sits there at the kitchen table until 10 p.m. without having completed even half of his homework. Added to this, I do not know how to teach him”.

“I left school long ago when we did not have this amount and kind of homework to do.”

“I have dyslexia and I cannot read.”

“Whatever is not completed during school time is assigned as homework.”

“State tests are putting pressure on the teachers who in turn are exerting pressure on the children.”

“Be realistic with the homework. We want our students to have homework but not too much”.

“I want the school to organize workshops for parents like me and teach us some reading strategies. We can take this home to help our children. Teachers can discuss with us what is planned for the next nine weeks”.

“I am a grandmother and every Sunday, I spend one to two hours with my grandchildren reading to them. But I do not know how teachers teach reading in the class. I am eager to learn. I want my grandchildren to be able to read and become somebody big”.

All parents, unanimously, agreed on being inadequately prepared to help their children with reading and math homework. An overwhelming feeling of helplessness was evident in the responses of the parents and they were all eager to acquire the knowledge and skills that they needed to help their children. Each and every response only reinforced the fact that they wanted to help their children academically.

Perceived needs

The second significant theme that emerged was the type of activities that parents wanted to see implemented in school. They discussed activities that would help children do better academically and help parents become more involved in school matters. A few parents felt the school principal was doing a good job in arranging after-school activities but the emphasis on students passing the state assessments had made the school authorities cancel some of the programs that were being implemented in school. One parent remarked, “I want to see a reading academy and a math academy set up in school where both parents and students could get extra help”. There were parents who wanted educational trips at every grade level and that the school should look into the possibility of organizing a book club, student council, math club, science club, etc. A parent suggested that the school should invite authors of children’s books to come to the school and talk to the children. The parents’ responses showed their interest and longing to have more offered in school, so that their children can do better.

CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

Once the investigators compiled the results, a report was prepared and sent to the principal. The investigators brought to the attention of the principal that the immediate need was to offer training to parents, and the training must be hands-on. Theories of adult learning emphasize the observation of a skilled model, hands-on learning and feedback for the acquisition of new skills (Bandura, 1977). Hence, instead of a one-time training workshop, the investigators recommended on-going training to the parents for better and quicker outcomes. Based on the report, the school planned

to have training workshops for parents at regular intervals, so that both children and parents would benefit.

There were seven questions posed to the parents in the focus group interview; however, information from the seven questions supported each other in such a way that only two themes seemed to emerge unequivocally – what hindered parents from helping children with their homework especially in reading, and the type of activities that the schools should offer in order to improve the children’s achievements in reading, writing, math, and other subjects. From the “thick descriptions”, it appeared that there was disconnect between the school and the African American parents who participated in the study. While there was a strong interest among the school personnel and parents to increase parental involvement, very few interventions were in place to make parents acquire skills needed to work with their children. It was also apparent that parents had not contacted the school on their own to express their eagerness to learn the skills to support their children. The project brought the two groups together and became the catalyst for discussing the need for a meaningful working relationship. Parents’ requests to the school authorities to give them appropriate reading strategies and resources, and to initiate learning opportunities were the salient outcomes of the discussion. The results of the focus group discussion affirm what already exists in the literature: that parents feel inadequately prepared to assist their children especially in reading assignments. Workshops that focus on providing African American parents with the skills they need to assist their children at home have shown to increase parents’ self-efficacy and, in course of time, to improve their children’s academic success (Educational Testing Service, 2007; Gutman & McLloyd, 2000; Trotman, 2001). Hence, elementary schools that have a high proportion of students with limited reading skills should assess and improve parent participation, and organize training workshops to empower parents and give them the knowledge and skills to help their children at home. There is also a need to formulate policies and practices at the school district level to enhance parental involvement to improve the reading skills of children.

Besides determining the factors that were needed to enhance parental involvement, this study also validated the use of focus group interview as an appropriate design to gain access to the private emotions and information of parents. The focus group format allowed the participating parents who shared similar concerns and characteristics to voice their perceptions, reactions, expectations, dreams, and needs spontaneously.

The responses, some of which were charged with emotion, showed that all parents were bound by one common agreement – to attend training workshops that would enable them to help their children at home. Even though the sample used in this study was small, there was a salient implication for further research. The participation of parents in the focus group and their comments seemed to dispel the stereotypical notion that there is little involvement of African American parents in their children’s learning. It was evident that they, like all parents, do want to participate; they seemed to need specific knowledge and training to participate in the education of their children.

ENDNOTES

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