

What's Happening During the Parent-Child Interactive Literacy Component of Family Literacy Programs?

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The beauty of parent-child interactive literacy, a unique element of many family literacy programs, is that it is a purposeful time to “increase and facilitate meaningful parent child interactions focused primarily on language and literacy development in a high-quality learning environment where they can learn and play together” (Jacobs, 2004, p.197). Unfortunately, little research has been conducted that examines how program staff are preparing for and implementing this component of family literacy programs.

Nevertheless, in an effort to encourage high quality programs, federal legislation states that Even Start programs must use “instructional programs based on scientifically-based reading research and the prevention of reading difficulties for children and adults, to the extent research is available” (U.S. Department of Education, 2003, p. 2). Using scientifically-based reading research (SBRR) as a foundation for instruction is important because it requires program staff to rely on methods and practices that have been proven to be effective. As a result, states, districts, and schools can be confident that all children entering school will be ready to learn to read and that their parents will be able to support their children’s learning as well as develop better literacy skills themselves (U.S. Department of Education, 2003).

Our initial study of the parent-child interactive literacy component of family literacy programs is reported here and, coupled with current research, provides a prerequisite step in identifying “high quality” practices in interactive literacy experiences.

What is the Purpose of the Parent-Child Interactive Literacy Component?

Simply put, the purpose of the parent-child interactive literacy component in family literacy programs is to enhance the

language and literacy development of children through their parents’ involvement. Research demonstrates that parents play a central role in children’s language and literacy development (Dickinson & Tabor, 2001; Hart & Risley, 1995; 1999), and that children’s development is stimulated through strong and positive interactions with their parents (Jacobs, 2004). Recent research shows that a strong correlation exists between children’s academic achievement and the amount of time they spend with their parents engaged in shared activities (Eliot, 1999). In addition to making greater academic gains, children who spend time interacting with their parents also benefit from greater emotional and social growth that fosters the attachment, resilience, and protective factors necessary for their development (Werner, 1996; Powell, 2004; Pianta, 2004). Regardless of socio-economic status, the more time that parents spend interacting with their children, the more likely it is that their children will possess higher vocabulary and IQ test scores at the age of three (Hart and Risley, 1999).

Children’s language and literacy development also benefit from frequent parent-child book reading (e.g., Bus, van Ijzendoorn, & Pelligrini, 1995; Lonigan & Whitehurst, 1998; Senechal, LeFevre, Thomas, & Daley, 1998). Hart and Risley (1995) found that the way parents talk to their children influences children’s language use, vocabulary development, and learning. Darling and Westberg (2004) found through a meta-analysis of parent involvement on reading acquisition of children in kindergarten through grade three that training parents with specific strategies about how to teach children to read produced the best results. The parent-child interactive literacy component can boost both the parents’ and the children’s development and learning, increase parents’

knowledge about the way their children learn and the importance of play, and enhance parents' understanding of their role as their child's teacher (National Center for Family Literacy, 2003). Interactive literacy experiences in family literacy programs provide supervised time for parents to interact with their children while fostering language and literacy development. These experiences help parents become comfortable with the parental role of first teacher at home and support parents' discovery of an understanding of basic literacy concepts that may have eluded them when they were young (King & McMaster, 2000).

Overall, when parent-child interactive literacy occurs, parents and children have an opportunity to work, play, read, and learn together. Wherever these interactions occur, they lead to the language, literacy, emotional, and cognitive development of children.

The parent-child interactive literacy component, however, is difficult to define because each family literacy program determines how to design and implement the component based on the population they serve. Because each program has local control, it is unclear what activities family literacy programs are conducting and how much the activities and/or curriculum are based on currently available research on the language and literacy development of children.

The purpose of the study reported here was to explore the question of what is happening during the parent-children interactive literacy component in family literacy programs across Pennsylvania. In particular, we were interested in answering the following questions: (1) How do program staff articulate the purpose of parent-child interactive literacy? (2) What information is used to develop parent-child literacy activities? (3) What is the process of planning for the parent-child interactive literacy component? (4) How do program staff assess this component?

The Method

To determine what occurs during the parent-child interactive

literacy component and to learn how programs administer it, we conducted a qualitative study with 24 sites from 19 of the 73 family literacy programs in Pennsylvania. These sites were selected because previous statewide assessments indicated that they had met the majority of the Family Literacy Performance Standards required by the state (Van Horn, Kassab, & Grinder, 2002). Although the findings here may not be generalized to all family literacy programs, or even to all family literacy programs in Pennsylvania, they do provide some insight into what might be happening during the parent-child interactive literacy component of family literacy programs. We hope the study will prompt program staff to analyze their own practices as they relate to this component.

Initially, we asked program staff if they wanted to participate in the study about parent-child interactive literacy. If they indicated willingness, a phone interview was scheduled; a packet containing an informed consent form and the phone interview questionnaire was sent to them for their review. The phone interview with family literacy administrators and staff members lasted approximately one hour.

The phone interview questionnaire consisted of 14 questions that focused on designing, administering, and assessing the interactive literacy component for all ages of children in family literacy programs. Sample questions included: "What is the purpose of the interactive literacy component?"; "How do you work with parents?"; and, "How are the activities linked with the home?"

In addition to the questions on the telephone survey, the interviewer prepared probe questions in order to elicit information that was not offered spontaneously in initial responses. To probe further, for example, the interviewer might have asked: "What information did you use to decide how to structure the interactive literacy component?" If scientifically-based reading research was not mentioned by the administrator or staff, the interviewer asked, "Did you use scientifically-based reading research to help you structure your interactive literacy component?"

The Results

Data were synthesized and coded based on each interview question. Any one question could have multiple answers from a site representative. For example, when asked the purpose of parent-child literacy interactions, a program respondent could give more than one answer. Results are discussed in terms of the percentage of interviewees who gave each response.

Several questions that were answered with little cohesiveness were eliminated from the analysis. The data from responses to the remaining questions were qualitatively analyzed to determine consensus and similarities across responses.

A number of insights about how program staff perceive and implement parent-child interactive literacy were revealed. The following description of the findings relates to a variety of aspects of the parent-child interactive literacy component:

Purpose, sources of information used to develop/plan activities, ways staff plan and prepare, and assessment.

Purpose

Program staff face numerous challenges as they prepare and plan parent-child interactive literacy activities. These include developing activities that interest families as well as meet their goals and scheduling needs. When respondents were asked to define the purpose of the parent-child interactive literacy component, their responses focused on enhancing social development and on fostering family relationships (i.e., providing parents with opportunities to practice parenting behaviors, increasing parents' understanding of child development and how children learn, and, in particular, emphasizing to parents the importance of interacting and playing together). Staff at one site stated that the purpose of the parent-child interactive literacy component was to "give parents quality time with their children and to play and communicate with each other." These answers affirm that the programs are supporting goals of parent-child interactive

literacy time as they pertain to the parents becoming comfortable with the role of fostering their children's literacy.

However, there were fewer comments related to the explicit and intentional teaching of literacy skills. This is an indication that program staff either may not have a clear understanding of the component's purpose to develop children's literacy skills by involving their parents, or they may not be able to articulate the understanding that they do have of the role of literacy in the parent-child interactive literacy component. Of the 24 sites that participated in the interviews, respondents from only 8 (33%) sites mentioned literacy as one of the purposes of parent-child interactive literacy, while respondents from 15 (63%) sites did not mention literacy in their conversations at all (even with follow-up probes).

Although staff modeling behavior of appropriate and positive interactions with children was mentioned by eight respondents, and having parents practice literacy and parenting skills was mentioned by respondents at seven sites, these comments are indicative of how staff are trying to teach parenting skills. Other stated purposes for the component included: 1) increasing parents' participating in the education process of their children, 2) having time for staff to observe interaction between parents and children, 3) testing activities with children, and 4) establishing a time for children to feel valued.

Information Used to Develop/Plan

The phone interviews revealed that programs focus primarily on programmatic information to design and develop parent-child literacy interactions. Programmatic information included such issues as scheduling, structure and setting, participant assessments (adult and early childhood), and coordinating with the early childhood classroom.

Programs staff want the activities to be similar to the early childhood classroom "so that they are an extension to what the children are learning..." Although this concern is reasonable and understandable, programs did not tend to use research and

research-based models about parent-child interactions and literacy to design activities. Only one person referred to a curriculum as a source of information: “We rely heavily on the *Parents as Teachers Guide*. It is a national curriculum designed to teach parents what to do; there are activities for each month.”

Despite efforts to link parent-child interactive literacy with the early childhood component, only a small number of respondents talked about using resources that support scientifically-based reading research. Other resources that program staff mentioned when they were interviewed by phone included family literacy trainings, professional development from conferences, the National Center for Family Literacy model, and technical assistance.

Implementing an effective component that focuses on parent-child interactive literacy and follows the mandate of the No Child Left Behind legislation requires Even Start family literacy programs to use information such as scientifically-based reading research to design interactions that will assist both children and their families in literacy development. When we asked staff during the interview process about the information they used to design and/or plan the parent-child interactive literacy component, they did not mention spontaneously the use of SBRR. When probed by the interviewer about using SBRR, a variety of responses were given. One respondent claimed she “never thought about it (parent-child interactive literacy) as scientifically-based.” As another put it, “This (SBRR) is all a big buzz word. We have been doing this for years. If you use the word, then they think we are doing the right thing. I can’t say that every time we do a PACT time (interactive literacy) activity I make sure it is scientifically based. All the stuff probably is, if you want to stretch it. The important of ‘scientifically-based reading research’ is understood.”

Interestingly, the majority of the sites studied structure interactive literacy around barriers to implementation, such as the physical setting of a site, parents’ needs and schedules,

transportation, services provided by collaborative partners, and the make-up of the group. Although these are important considerations in ensuring participant and meeting the educational needs of parents and children, they may not be consistent with the goals of the interactive literacy component.

Preparing and Planning

When planning for parent-child literacy activities, respondents from eleven sites (46%) mentioned that staff members meet to plan the structure of the parent-child interactive literacy component, while eight (33%) programs do not. When asked who meets to plan parent-child interactive literacy, interviewees stated that staff met in teams of two or more, worked independently, collaborated with an outside agency, or met with parents. The teams were composed of early childhood educators, parenting educators, adult educators, home visitors, and, sometimes, parents. In the programs where interviewees commented that a staff member planned for this component independently, there was little or no collaboration among the four family literacy components in the planning of the activities.

Collaborators also were mentioned as a group that met with family literacy staff to plan and prepare for parent-child literacy activities. Collaborators included staff from programs such as Head Start, family centers, and elementary schools. Although a few respondents mentioned collaborating with elementary school staff members, the majority of program staff commented about the difficulty they had collaborating with schools to meet the requirements of this component for school-age children. Elementary school teachers were viewed as being overwhelmed and as not understanding family literacy programs. To family literacy staff members, schools seemed reluctant to commit to a relationship with family literacy programs.

There is a large variability in the planning of parent-child interactive literacy activities because of how individual staff members approach and plan for this component. When asked how often staff members meet to discuss parent-child literacy

interactions, the answers varied considerably from weekly (the dominant response) to monthly (second most) to passing in the hall. The number of times staff met to discuss parent-child interactive literacy may relate to how often it is offered in the program (weekly or monthly). However, the variability lends support to the idea that parent-child interactive literacy component is not give the same educational emphasis as the other components in family literacy programs.

Assessment

Most assessments within parent-child interactive literacy component are informal and derived from using methods such as parental journal writing, surveys, parent meetings, and general feedback. Respondents from nineteen of the sites (79%) mentioned during the phone interview that they used parents' feedback to assess parent-child literacy interactions. However, of these nineteen sites at which the use of inventory/feedback forms was reported, seven conducted assessments during classroom discussions, and eight relied on informal feedback from parents. When examining the use of assessment information to improve the parent-child interactive literacy component, 58% (14) of respondent stated that they use the information to redesign activities by modifying current parent-child activities or developing new ones.

Implementation

To implement the parent-child interactive literacy component effectively, research suggests that program staff follow the fundamental principle of working with parents prior to the activity: Determine that an activity reflects the parents' and children's needs and goals, implement the actual activity, and then debrief with parents after the activity has occurred (National Center for Family Literacy, 2003). Fourteen (58%) interviewees mentioned that they involved parents in some manner in the interactive literacy experience. This occurs in a variety of formats such as discussing the purpose and goals prior to the activity, providing feedback to parents about previous activities, or reminding parents to be the child's first

teacher. As one person stated, "Parents will be briefed with an explanation about the activity and its relevance to the child's development."

Program personnel also were asked what staff members do during the parent-child literacy activity. Responses primarily focused on staff behaviors that further the activity and assisted parents. For example, 18 respondents (75%) mentioned that staff members observe the activity to provide input to parents; 17 (71%) stated that staff members facilitate the activities; and nine (38%) mentioned that instructors model the activity for the child and the parent.

Finally, when discussing how programs debrief with parents, 11 (46%) respondents mentioned during the interview that they debrief with parents either after the activity, before the next activity occurred, or in parenting education class. Twelve (50%) respondents did not mention how they debriefed. Interviewees at ten sites (42%) mentioned that during the debriefing parents either wrote in journals, completed surveys, or engaged in discussion.

Discussion

The parent-child interactive literacy component of family literacy programs is an opportunity for parents and children to interact, play, and learn together so that language and literacy skills improve for both parents and children. As stated earlier, children's development is stimulated through strong and positive interactions with their parents (Jacobs, 2004), and children's academic achievement is strongly correlated with the amount of time they and their parents spend together doing shared activities (Eliot, 1999).

Although is it important for parents and their children to interact through play, it is not the salient reason for the parent-child interactive literacy component of family literacy. As King and McMaster (2000) state, parent-child literacy interactions are "more than simply setting aside 'quality time' for parents and children to play together" (p. 17). Rather, they are a time during which parents can engage, under

supervision, in play and interactions that are rooted in language and literacy development. This is also a time when parents can focus on a child's interests with support from staff and a time when staff can assist parents in understanding that children learn through play. Our study shows that while program staff are following the original intent of parent-child interactive literacy activities, they may not recognize that parent-child interactive literacy is primarily a time for enhancing children's language and literacy development. Although staff from only a few programs articulated that literacy is one of the purposes of this component, it may be that they have a fundamental understanding that literacy activities should occur to support the overall purpose of the family literacy program.

Implementing the parent-child interactive literacy component has always been a challenge to programs because of the varied needs of the participants. Scientifically-based curricula for the component do not exist. Each program offers activities that work best with the participating families. The need for a specific curriculum, however, is not as critical as planning sequential and targeted activities that meet the goals of enhancing children's (and parents') literacy development as well as teaching parents how to support that development. However, in the absence of an articulated primary purpose for the component that enhances children's literacy development, development of this component tends to be driven more by programmatic issues.

A couple of reasons may exist for the finding that no interviewee voluntarily mentioned using research for the development of activities as mandated by the legislation. First, program staff may not understand the definition of scientifically-based reading research and its application to the parent-child interactive literacy component. SBRR is viewed as directed only toward early childhood programs and its connection to parent-child interactive literacy activities appears loose. Second, program staff may have difficulty knowing where to access information about SBRR. In fact,

many program providers may be implementing scientifically-based reading research, as defined by the National Reading Panel (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000), to the parent-child literacy activities, but they simply may be unaware of the meaning or exact connection between the activities and the definition for the term. The data revealed that family literacy personnel can benefit from a clearer understanding of what scientifically-based reading research means, how to access it, and how to apply it within the four components of their program.

When planning for the parent-child interactive literacy component, most program staff mentioned teams of staff members meeting to discuss activities. It is an important and valuable use of time for the child's teacher and the adult educator to work together to meet the needs of the family. The more collaboration that exists across components, the more parents can see the connectedness of literacy in all aspects of their lives and the lives of their children. Implications of this finding for program administrators include the incorporation of planning time in teachers' schedules and duties.

Improved collaborations with elementary schools will address the parent-child literacy interaction needs of school-age children. This age group often is overlooked because of the difficulty program staff have making connections with elementary school teachers. However, children may need the most support from their parents when they begin school. When teachers begin to understand that the goals of family literacy programs are similar to those of the schools, then the working relationship will improve.

Finally, with further study and support, family literacy administrators and staff can increase their understanding that the parent-child interactive literacy component can play a crucial role by focusing on children's language and literacy development rather than merely on play and on parenting skills. The cohesiveness in this component begins with its purpose in relation to the other components and continues to deliberate and on-going planning, implementing, debriefing,

and assessing. Rather than defining this component as a time for parents to play with their children and work on parenting skills, program providers can focus on children's language and literacy development through interactions with their parents.

The second phase of our research in this area is two-fold. First, we are analyzing written descriptions of parent-child interactive activities provided by programs. Second, and with the goal of developing an observation tool for programs, we are conducting observations of programs during the parent-child interactive literacy component. Our aim is to help program staff to develop a better repertoire of best practices for achieving high quality family literacy programs.

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