

Family Literacy at St. Mark's School: Enhancing Student Achievement, Building Capacity, and Developing Social and Cultural Capital in Rural Newfoundland.

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Abstract: The purpose of this paper is to report a two phase study that investigated the impact of a family literacy initiated in St. Mark's School in Shearstown in the late 1980s. We first provide a description of the study and the development and implementation of the program. Then we report the results of a study in which Norman (1997) documented changes in literacy achievement scores at the school as cohorts of children who had participated in the program advanced through the grades, as well as staff and parents perceptions of how the program affected student learning. We then report the results of a study in which parents who had participated in the initial offering of the program retrospectively reported on how it had affected them and their children. We conclude by arguing that the program is an example of grassroots educational innovation and reform whose impact exceeded the original goals and is an example of capacity building and developing social capital in a vulnerable community.

The purpose of this paper is to report on an innovative family literacy program developed collaboratively by the community, the school, and the school district at St. Mark's School, Shearstown in the late 1980s. We: briefly review the literature on family literacy, trace the evolution and development of the program, report on the findings of two overlapping studies of the program and finally, discuss how the initiatives exemplifies a grassroots approach to educational reform and capacity building in struggling rural communities.

Background

That the family is an essential component in young children's development and education is considered axiomatic by most educators (e.g., Epstein, 2006) who recognize that homes and families can be powerful sites for literacy learning. Taylor (1983), in her foundational study with middle class families, documented how literacy was a central aspect of daily life and how young children were acculturated into literacy at home. She reported that parents and other caregivers were generally unaware of the extent to which literacy infused family life and of the literacy knowledge and skills that their young children were learning by participating in these daily events. In a follow-up study, Taylor and Dorsey-Gaines (1988) found that the inner-city families with whom they worked regularly engaged in literacy, they valued literacy highly, and they supported children's literacy learning, despite living in extreme poverty and dangerous conditions. Working with immigrant families in East London, Gregory (2005), has shown how siblings support each others literacy development by essentially bringing "school literacy" home when parents and other family members are unable to support their children as they learn to read and write in English, their second (or additional) language. In their study that is frequently cited in the literature, Tizzard, Schofield, and Hewison (1982) found that a group of inner-city children in a working class neighborhood in London who read daily in English to their parents outperformed two groups of peers, one of which received specialized help in a remedial reading program and the other that received regular instruction in class. Taken together, these and other studies paint a portrait of family literacy showing that families and communities are sites for myriad forms of literacy.

Over the last two decades, family literacy programs designed to support young children's early literacy development have proliferated and growing evidence shows that such programs impact positively on young children and their families (e.g., Anderson & Morrison, 2007; Phillips, Hayden & Norris, 2006). However, two decades ago, family literacy programs and high quality early childhood programs were sparse especially in rural

Newfoundland and Labrador and it was in that context that the initiative which is the focus of this paper was developed and evolved.

Theoretical Framework

This study is framed within socio-cultural learning theory that draws on the work of Vygotsky (1978). Central to Vygotsky's theory is the notion that adults' mediation enables young children to solve problems that they cannot solve by themselves. Building on Vygotskian theory, Rogoff (1991) proposes the notion of apprenticeship in that adults sponsor or support young children's development and learning, gradually handing off the responsibility for the learning. However, Rogoff posits that there are significant differences in the ways in which this sponsorship is enacted across socio-cultural groups and that educators must be mindful of these differences.

Our work is also informed by a *literacy as social practices* paradigm (Street, 1995). From this perspective, literacy is seen not as an amalgam of cognitive and linguistic skills transferable from one context to another but as complex, social practices defined by the context in which they occur. In other words how literacy is defined, its functions and purposes, and how it is learned and taught will differ across social cultural contexts (Clay, 1993). Heath's (1982; 1983) ethnography of language and literacy learning in three communities in the Piedmont area of the United States is a classic example of this perspective. She documented family literacy practices in three contexts: Maintown, a white, middle class community; Roadville, a white, working class community; and Trackton, an African American, working class community. Although families in all three communities engaged their children in literacy activities prior to school, the literacy activities and the manner in which adults mediated these activities differed substantially across the three contexts. Drawing upon shared book reading for example, Heath reported that Maintown children were read to regularly in an interactive, dialogic manner and learned to decontextualize knowledge and to link old knowledge with new. Through the highly routinized shared book reading, "Before the age of two the child is socialized into the "initiation-reply-evaluation" sequences repeatedly described as the central structure of classroom lessons..." (Heath, 1983, p. 51). Caregivers in Roadville also read to their preschool children regularly, tending to focus children's attention on the "...discrete bits and pieces of literacy-separate items, letters of the alphabet, shapes and colors..." (p. 61). Parents usually asked questions about the literal content of stories but they did not help children connect the content of books with their knowledge of the world. Heath points out, "... children cannot decontextualize their knowledge..." (p.63). Although Roadville children did well in school initially, unlike their mainstream (or Maintown) counterparts, they began to encounter difficulty as they advanced to the elementary grades and were required to use decontextualized knowledge. Trackton adults did not regularly read to children and rarely provided books specifically for children, although they read, mail, newspapers, advertisements and other materials themselves. Occasionally, older siblings attempted to read to young children and ask them questions about books when "playing school" (p. 64). Furthermore, children were not drawn into conversation. Because they had not learned many of the literacy routines expected of them including shared book reading, Trackton children began to experience difficulty upon entry to school.

Our work is also informed by a theory of "social" and "cultural" capital developed by Bourdieu and colleagues (e.g., Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990). Central to this theory is the notion that "cultural disposition, aptitudes, preferences and behaviors/practices ...are sent unconsciously and internalized through family socialization processes" (Symeou, 2007, p. 474). Differences in the social capital that children bring to school is especially crucial in that children from middle class families come to school already having acquired the "social capital" that will support their learning at school and will be built upon there; many children from working class and non-mainstream homes come to school not possessing this social capital and therefore cannot access the codes of power (Delpit, 2006).

Taken together, then, these perspectives suggest that while all children come to school having had literacy experiences at home and in the community. Schools tend to privilege similar types of language and literacy practices and these children will benefit from the social capital which they take with them to school. Although children from working class and non-mainstream homes also tend to participate in literacy activities at home, these experiences are often not recognized or built on by schools.

Method

The Context

A number of challenges confronted the staff of St. Mark's School in the 1980s. Children in the school consistently scored low on measures of literacy and on standardized achievement tests generally. Many students dropped out of school in junior high school and relatively few of those who started at the local high school graduated (Norman, 1997). Furthermore, the school principal believed that an inordinately high number of children were being placed in special education classrooms which at that time were segregated from the "regular" classrooms (A. Mercer, personal communications, June, 2007). Because of these concerns, Gus Mercer, the school principal, had "made several appeals to his school board to secure a preschool early intervention program that could meet the needs of the future students of St. Marks" (Norman, 1997, p. 3) and in 1989, secured approval and support to begin such a program.

The Program

Because few models of family literacy were available that would meet the needs of this community, those involved elected to develop a program from "the ground-up", drawing on the extant literature in child development, early literacy, and intervention programs such as *Head Start* in the United States. But rather than designing a program and then inserting it into the community in a "one-size-fits-all" manner (Tomlinson & Kalbfleisch, 1998), those leading the program elected to involve the wider community in developing and implementing it from the outset. Thus, in addition to teachers from the school and staff from the central office of the school district, parents through the local Parent-Teachers Association, public health workers, social workers, members of the clergy, and others from the community participated in the conceptualization of the program and continued to support it through its implementation.

Although descriptive studies show that families tend to engage young children in an array of literacy activities that support literacy development, this program rather typically centered on book reading (Anderson, Lenters, & Mctavish, in press). As Norman (1997) put it, "the staff had grave concerns about the availability of children's literature in the homes of many of their students" (p. 3). However, as it evolved, the program became more inclusive and involved components beyond storybook reading.

The program was designed so that parents (or other caregivers) accompanied their four year old children who would be entering kindergarten in September to monthly sessions, each of about two hours duration. It was felt important that parents accompany the children so that they could learn concrete ways to continue to support their children at home. The kindergarten classroom was arranged so that parents and children could rotate through a number of learning centers each with activities designed to promote children's literacy learning and cognitive development in developmentally appropriate ways. In addition, the program facilitator modeled shared book reading and other strategies that parents could provide at home. Parents and children were provided books and other materials to take home.

Phase 1

Data for this paper are drawn from two sources. The background documentation and demographic data from Norman (1997) will set the context and describe the development and evolution of the program. Norman also tracked the first cohort of children enrolled in the program and using standardized measures (e.g., Canadian Test of Basic Skills), compared their achievement with peers who did not attend the program. Furthermore, she interviewed a number of parents, teachers, and administrators as to their perceptions of the impact of the program.

Phase 2

In a second study conducted in July, 2007, we interviewed 10 parents who participated in the St. Marks's program two decades ago as to their perceptions of the program's impact. From their research into the impact of museum visits on learning, David Anderson and his colleagues contend that such retrospective analysis, especially what they refer to as semantic memory, is important to document. They explain. "semantic memory, on the other hand [and in contrast to episodic memory of time, place, and events], requires subsequent reinforcing experiences or strong personal connection to the topic or context to manifest themselves" (Anderson, Storksdieck, & Spock, 2007, p. 202). It was these semantic memories that were pertinent to our study in Phase 2.

We began by attempting to contact all of the families from the original cohort that had participated in the program. Twelve families agreed to participate in the interview but for various reasons, two of these families were not able to do so. We interviewed each of the ten mothers in their homes using a semi-structured interview format. The interviews were recorded using a digital recorder and subsequently each interview was transcribed in its entirety. We first read through the entire data set and then began to sort the data into themes capable of describing the data. A second rater then coded the data set using these themes and areas of disagreement were resolved after discussion.

Results

Phase 1

Norman (1997) compared how the first cohort of children to participate in the program performed on the Canadian Test of Basic Skills when they were in grade four with previous cohorts who had not participated in the program. Tracking CTBS results across a decade, she reported the following scores: 1984-20th percentile; 1987-37th percentile; 1990-30th-percentile. However, she reported that, "the 1993 results showed the grade 4 class [the first cohort of children to have participated in the family literacy program] at the 50th percentile. This first class of Early Intervention Preschool Graduates had been the first St. Mark's class to reach these levels" (p. 44). In a further attempt to assess the impact of the program, Norman and her colleagues later administered the Gates-McGinitie Reading Test to two other cohorts of children whose families had participated in the program and who at the time were in grades two and three. Grade equivalent scores of 2.2 for the grade two class and 3.1 for the grade three class suggested that on average, children were reading at grade level.

To corroborate these normative data, Norman also interviewed a number of parents, teachers, and administrators as to their perceptions of how the program had affected student learning at St. Mark's school over the decade since its inception. She reported, "Overwhelmingly the interviewees deemed the program to be a major success in affecting the learning of the participants [in] the preschool program" (p. 53).

To summarize, then, both the quantitative and qualitative data strongly suggest that the family literacy program impacted positively on children's literacy development and school achievement.

Phase 2

In this section, we report the results of the follow-up study conducted in July and August, 2007, nearly two decades after the families participated in the program. The reader is reminded that because of the relatively small number of participants (N=10) and the fact that we used convenience sampling, the results should be interpreted cautiously.

Given the emphasis placed on reading and writing in the program, it is to be expected that all ten of the parents indicated that the program contributed significantly to their children's literacy development. For example, one parent commented, "S...she learned...like she had a better understanding of reading and she knew how to read books and she wanted to do more things." As was noted earlier, many of the homes lacked books and other literacy materials and parents also noted that the provision of literacy materials was seen as being very important. One parent commented, "Well...they had reading material they were sent home, they had a little package they could do a little homework, a little reading. Help them get ready for kindergarten, help them with reading, stuff like that."

Although the program had a very clear literacy focus, parents also indicated that children who attended accrued other benefits. Several parents made references to children learning “numbers” and “mathematics”. As well, parents indicated that their children were getting a “head start” and indeed the program was leveling the playing field:

“Ah like before this program, a lot of children went to kindergarten and they had absolutely no knowledge , anything regarding their colors, numbers and nothing. But with this way, at least every child got started, like they were a bit prepared, right?”

When the program was being designed, care was taken to insure that both content and pedagogy reflected Developmentally Appropriate Practice (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997) and student centered, hands on learning. Parents commented that the “centers... were really helpful” and that the approach to learning was more “playful”. Another explained,

“They had hands on materials...Different stuff were all around like paintings, writing, and story time. They even had a place where playing sand and water. It introduced things, like you know, probably that would not normally do if you [didn’t find] out.”

Interestingly, this stands in contrast to previous research which suggests that working class parents tend to decry holistic or child centered learning and teaching and favor direct instruction of specific skills (e.g., Fitzgerald, 1991) in early literacy programs.

Although all of the parents emphasized how they believed that their children’s academic and cognitive development were enhanced, they also recognized how their children’s social-emotional development was supported. Parents recognized that because of the structure of the program, children were learning to work collaboratively with others, to share with others, and so forth. Several parents of “only” children especially noted how they benefited from the opportunity to interact with children the same age. As one parent commented, “G is an only child right? ... [came to] know kids and like more or less a second family here”. Parents also commented that because of growing safety concerns and changing demographics in which there are fewer children in neighborhoods, children no longer played outside with their peers with minimal adult or older sibling oversight as was the case in the past. Given the relative dearth of organized child-care in the community, this program provided one of the few options for children to play and socialize with others in their age group. As one parent put it, “I thought it was really a good chance to meet people their own age. Like the fact that they’re too young to go outside to play...” while another added, “Well, it gave them the opportunity to intertwine with other kids ... we were living in an area that there weren’t a lot of children for her to play with” There is growing recognition that for some children, making the transition from home or child care settings to kindergarten can be a traumatic experience (e.g., LoCasale-Crouch, Mashburn, Downer, & Pianta, 2008). Parents intuitively recognized that children would feel more confident and secure and thus ready and able to learn. As one said,

“help them to understand what it is going to be like in school, even though I was with them during the intervention time. Of course, once they go into school, mostly they would be there on their own but, great way to break them into the idea of being in school and participating and learning with other children”

Most of the parents commented that the children learned the routines and expectations of kindergarten and thus entering kindergarten was very smooth as children “carried on” from what they had experienced in the family literacy program.

In addition to explaining how the program helped support their children’s early learning, social/emotional development, and transition to school, many of the parents also discussed how the program helped them understand children’s learning both in and out of school and how they could support that learning. The following comments from two mothers exemplify how parents felt they were gaining such insight and understanding:

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“Ah, it helped me to understand what the education of my child is looking like from the beginning.”

“it gave them [parents] a chance to actually know what the system was all about. What was expected of their child, what was expected.”

By working with their own child and seeing the range of development in the classroom context, parents also began to recognize individual differences in children. As one mother commented, “And learning for each child is so much different and then by the time you start kindergarten, you knew whether your child was slow at—what we need to work at”. Furthermore, these parents indicated that they came to see the importance of capitalizing on the child’s interests to engage him or her and sustain that interest. As one mother recalled,

“And the different things what they focused on like trying to make things interesting for them, right? You are more or less focused on things that is really gonna [sic] be interesting to them, you really attend with them, give you the ability to do it all”

As Laureau (1987) and others point out, although schools have traditionally provided opportunities for parents to come to school, these have usually been formal events in which many working class families and others at the margins of society feel uncomfortable. However, the program at St. Mark’s appeared to provide a “space” in which parents did feel welcomed and comfortable. As one parent remarked, “Because when we (as children) went to school...and if the mother came to school, that was bad”. Another parent commented, “I had an opportunity to go over and be a part of his education and meet with his teacher and see what this is all about. And I was just as excited as he was, he knew that”.

After we had concluded the semi-structured interview with one of the participants, she remarked at how after her participation in the family literacy program, she continued to be involved in the school, volunteering and participating in the parent teacher association. Several also mentioned that parents got to know each other and the teachers as a result of their participation in the program. As one suggested, “Because you know the teachers and the principal and things look better”. Furthermore, parents also appeared to view their roles as that of a partnership with the school and teachers; this perspective is reflected by the mother who stated:

“I think it’s important because in reality, yes, a child goes to school and learns in the school environment from a teacher and that is during the day. But that has to be sustained through the child’s whole life, through the rest of the day, or through their evening and so on. And, you know, so all parents need to understand that the importance, their importance, or their roles, the importance of their roles in their child’s learning.

In summary then, the family literacy program at St. Mark’s School appeared to have had a positive impact on children’s literacy leaning and their academic achievement generally. Parents learned strategies and skills to support children’s learning at school. They also gained insights into teaching and learning in early childhood education, including the role of play. Furthermore, they came to understand expectations for four and five year old children and that there are individual differences in children’s learning and different ages at which children meet these expectations. They also recognized that the program had ramifications beyond its impact on children’s literacy learning including, helping parents coalesce as a group and in feeling more comfortable and involved in the school generally.

Discussion and Conclusion

Despite the limitations of this study delineated earlier, the results are consistent with a growing body of evidence that family literacy programs do impact positively on young children’s literacy development. Although some have questioned the effectiveness of family literacy programs (e.g., Hendrix, 2000), there is converging evidence from studies conducted over the last decade in different contexts that family literacy programs “work” (e.g., Elfert, Rankin, & Brooks, 2007) Phillips, Hayden, & Norris, 2006). The work of Greg Brooks and his colleagues in Europe has been especially impressive in that they have done meta-studies of family literacy programs. While acknowledging that the research in family literacy has many methodological problems, Brooks contends after a decade of carefully examining the research that these initiatives positively

impact upon children and their families (G. Brooks, personal communication, August, 2007). To reiterate, the program at St. Mark's appears to have met the original objective of working with parents to enhance children's literacy development and their overall academic achievement.

Proclamations that "parents are a child's first and most important teacher" and exhortations to parents to get their children "ready to learn" have become ubiquitous in the popular media over the last several decades as governments and other agencies come to realize that much learning occurs in informal ways and that families and communities are indeed sites for much of this informal learning (Smythe, 2006). Despite this rhetoric, however, much still remains to be done in a practical sense in insuring that young children come to school as well prepared as they can be. Thus in many ways, the initiative at St. Mark's was groundbreaking in that it was an instantiation of ideas that two decades later are still considered innovative and novel. We believe several points about the program need to be highlighted. First, this was a grassroots initiative that arose out of needs identified by a rural community whose children were not being successful in school; much of the research on initiatives has been done in urban settings families from visible minorities or immigrant and refugee populations. . Second, it was a classic example of a community development initiative involving a cross section of the community that included educators but extended beyond the school. Third, the program itself was homegrown and therefore the contents were designed to meet the needs of *this community at that point in time*. Put differently, it was not a prepackaged toolkit imported from elsewhere and imposed on people. Fourth, although the program was locally developed, it was informed by contemporary research and theory and reflected knowledge of best practices at the time. Fifth, there was tremendous "buy-in" from all involved-the school district, the school, the community, and most importantly, parents. The confluence of these factors, we believe, enabled the program to come to fruition and to its continuance and subsequent expansion province-wide. Indeed, the work done at St. Mark's has influenced the very successful Parents As Literacy Supporters (PALS)¹ program (Anderson & Morrison, 2000) that is widely used throughout British Columbia and continues to expand into other provinces.

When we consider the time-on-task research , it is difficult to rationalize or explain how the approximately 18-20 hours of literacy experiences provided to the children during the 10 sessions at school could account for the improvement in literacy achievement that Norman documented and that parents confirmed had occurred. But, we believe that by inviting parents into the classroom and having them participate in literacy activities with the children, we were providing them with the social and cultural capital so that they could support their children at home. Based on her work with families, Symeou (2007) proposes, "families who had cultural and educational resources of the kind that were required and valued by the school were managing to effectively support their children as expected by the school" (p. 404). So by working alongside parents and children and modeling and providing explanations, we were making explicit to parents concrete strategies they could use at home with their children to build on what they had learned in the sessions. Furthermore, they were provided with the material resources to enable them to engage in literacy and learning activities at home. Therefore, the investment of 20 hours of school time grew to encompass unknown hours or out-of-school activity.

As was mentioned previously, several of the parents indicated that they continued to be involved in the school, after their child had completed the program and indeed some played leadership roles in the parent-teacher association and so forth. In her comparative study of middle class and working class parents, Laureau (1987) indicates that whereas middle class families tend to "fit in" and feel comfortable in schools, working class parents do not. Anderson and Morrison (2007) argue that family literacy programs can create a space where such families feel welcomed and comfortable, especially when they see the program as providing tangible and concrete benefits. This certainly appeared to be the case with the parents of St. Mark's School.

In neo-liberal times, centralized, system-level educational reforms often dictated by federal or state or provincial governments seem to be the order of the day. However, in analyzing the data from the 2006 Program for International Student Assessment, Schleicher (2006) reported that students in countries attempting such centralized reform performed less well than students in countries where educational reform was decentralized and focused more on professional development of teachers and decision making at the local level. As we continue to think about and implement changes designed to improve the education and the lives of children, we would do well to look at grassroots, organic models such as the family literacy program at St. Mark's as exemplars to lead us forward.

¹ More information about PALS is available at: <http://www.lerc.educ.ubc.ca/fac/anderson/pals/>

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