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ABSTRACT

In an effort to help disadvantaged preschool children develop emergent literacy skills and improve their chances of future academic success, a cooperative project was implemented in 1991-92 by McNeese State University in Louisiana and a local Head Start agency to provide tutoring to Head Start children. University students enrolled in a teacher's aide seminar were trained as volunteer tutors. Training focused on gross and fine motor skills, social skills, language development, and cognitive development. In addition, parents were trained in the use of materials and techniques to improve their children's social, physical, cognitive, and language skills, and were provided with relevant instructional materials for home use. For the project's first year, pre- and posttests were administered to tutors, parents, and children to measure changes in attitudes and skills. Tutors' responses revealed an increased understanding of the children and satisfaction with their own tutoring abilities, while parents reported improved skills in their children, including increased politeness, and increased willingness to take turns and to exert effort. Finally, test data for 55 of the 104 Head Start children who began the project indicated gains in all skill areas, with the highest gains registered in fine motor and self-help skills. By the end of 1993 the program is expected to involve over 20 college students and provide tutoring for over 200 four-year-old children. (BCY)

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Strategies for Developing Emergent Literacy

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Recent research concerning emergent literacy indicates that oral language, reading, and writing develop gradually in young children (Brewer, 1992). Essa (1992) describes the acquisition of literacy skills as a "dynamic, ongoing, emerging process". Listening, speaking, writing, and reading are interrelated and are developed in an informal, supportive environment (Kontos, 1986). Programs designed to assist young children with emerging literacy skills must weave listening, speaking, prewriting and prereading skills together within a context of meaningful activities.

Literature supports intervention in the education of young disadvantaged children. It also documents both developmental and remedial procedures used in these programs (Bagnato and Nielsworth, 1981. Beber, 1984; Kreisman and Henderson, 1991; Parker and Clechalski, 1990; Schweinhart, 1992; Van Zant and Camozzi, 1992).

A recent review of research on preschool programs for disadvantaged children done by Schweinhart (1992) has shown that good preschool programs for young children living in poverty produce important long-term benefits. He described four important long-term studies that followed the young children to ages 18-21, and four that followed them to ages 9-13. These studies were conducted with children who participated in Head Start programs, with 3,552 children (74% of participants) being followed. Seven of the eight long-term studies reported that fewer of these students were placed in special education classes

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or retained in a grade. The four studies following students to ages 18-21 reported that a large percentage of the students graduated from high school. Two of the three studies with related data reported that their groups averaged higher on achievement tests than comparable students. Two of the three studies with related data reported fewer youths arrested. One of two studies with related data reported fewer teen pregnancies.

Kreisman and Henderson (1991) have implemented an intervention program for students in kindergarten and first grade in the Aurora Colorado Public Schools. A typical day in the program includes the learning of five new vocabulary words; writing a story using invented spellings; practicing sorting by color; and receiving direct instruction and firm guidance regarding appropriate behavior. The highly successful program stresses high expectations for children. It concentrates on a developmental curriculum which focuses on each child's motor development, social and emotional development, and early math and language abilities. Parent involvement is a key feature of the program.

Van Zant and Comozi (1992) reported on a program in the Poway, California Unified School District which focused on helping parents work with children from birth to five years. This program included distribution at the hospital of pamphlets describing child growth and development; instruction in the need for social and emotional security; and strategies for developing healthy children. When children in that district are

three, they become eligible for preschool programs. These programs require that parents work in the classroom twice a month, as well as attend monthly lessons on child growth and development. Three-year-olds attend class two days a week, and four-year-olds, three days a week. Parents pay \$265 for the eighteen-week program.

Reflecting on these and other successful intervention programs, a program designed to foster emergent literacy in disadvantaged preschool children using trained college volunteer students was implemented at McNeese State University. The community service project involved collaboration between a Head Start agency and the university. The project was funded by a Student Literacy Corps, U.S. Department of Education grant for two years. The purpose of the project was to involve college students as volunteer tutors to provide strategies to help Head Start children develop emergent literacy skills that would enable them to have successful school experiences. The objectives of the project included: involving college students in volunteer work as literacy tutors; fostering emerging literacy in disadvantaged preschool children; training parents of these children in the use of materials and techniques to increase their readiness skills; and providing relevant instructional materials for parents to use with children at home.

TUTOR TRAINING. The tutor training component of this grant involved college students who were enrolled in Education 103: Seminar for Teacher Aides. This elective three-hour credit course

provided volunteer tutors for disadvantaged preschool children in a local Head Start Center. Formal study was combined with field experience in tutoring four-year-old children. The students completed a total of sixty hours of voluntary, uncompensated service during each semester. Project directors developed a handbook for use in tutoring which included a description of the Head Start program, characteristics of four-year-olds, and fifty detailed lesson plans. Using the Head Start curriculum, the following areas were targeted for intervention: gross and fine motor skills, social skills, language development, and cognitive development. During each semester, ten hours of training was provided by the graduate assistant and the project directors to prepare the students as tutors. Lectures focused on the Head Start Program, characteristics of the young child, and behavior management. Class meetings were also used to demonstrate and practice readiness lessons. Each student was provided with a tutor handbook detailing short lessons to be taught. Since hands-on experience is vital for the preschool child, materials to be used with each lesson were provided. At the close of each semester, two class meetings on campus were devoted to record-keeping and reflection. Student input was used to improve the project. Pre and post questionnaires were administered to university students in order to measure commitment to community service.

PARENT TRAINING. The goal of the parent training component of the program was to enrich parent training already in place at

Start agency. Working closely with the Head Start Coordinator, the project directors met with Head Start parents four times per school year to present techniques for working with preschoolers on readiness skills. Each parent program focused on one of the following four areas: social, physical, cognitive or language skills. Questionnaires covering skill areas were administered to parents at the first and last sessions, so parents could evaluate the progress of their children.

During the first year of the project, college student assistants working as project tutors were invited to participate in the parent programs. They demonstrated lessons taught to the children, showed slides of the children involved in lessons, and discussed the project with parents on an individual basis. In the second year of the project, the graduate assistants were active participants in parent meetings. Kits containing balls, games, puzzles, and other manipulative materials were distributed at each meeting. These kits were especially helpful in showing parents how to reinforce skills at home. Along with take-home kits, door prizes were given as attendance incentives. Attendance at the parent meetings averaged forty parents per meeting.

EVALUATION. Both summative and formative data were used in evaluating the Student Literacy Corps program. For year one, pre- and post-surveys were administered to both tutors and parents of Head Start children being served by the project. At the end of each semester, surveys were tabulated and percentages of

responses reported. Responses revealed an increased understanding of Head Start children by college volunteer tutors. On the pretest, 60% of the tutors felt that Head Start children have very different problems from other children, while only 14% thought that their problems were very different at the end of the semester. Only 10% believed that they understood the problems of Head Start children at the beginning of the program, while 28% felt that they did on the post test. The tutors' concepts of the Head Start parents also changed. After tutoring, 58% as compared to 30% believed that Head Start parents love their children and do their best to provide for them. Attitudes concerning satisfaction with their ability to tutor changed from 40% on the pretest to 86% on the posttest. At the end of the semester, tutors strongly agreed (86%) that community service volunteers can make a difference in people's lives, and 72% said that they plan to participate in community service in the future.

Parents of children in the program were asked to complete a skills checklist survey regarding their children at both the beginning and end of the year. Results of the surveys were tabulated and percentages of responses reported. Parents noted a change in their children speaking in a friendly manner (pretest: 48%; posttest: 73%). They reported a change in children saying "thank you" (pretest: 36%; posttest: 73%). Increases were also noted in children taking turns (pretest: 44%; posttest: 64%); and in trying when something seemed difficult (pretest: 40%; posttest: 55%).

Evaluation of the Head Start children in the program was measured using the Early Intervention Screening Test, an instrument already in place in the Head Start center. Test data were complete for 55 students out of 104 who began the program. A high rate of absences during testing and a large number of students who moved from the area accounted for the incomplete data. An examination of the test data revealed the following averages:

SKILL AREA	PRE-TEST	POST-TEST	GAIN
Gross Motor Skills	5.4	6.2	.8
Fine Motor	4.8	5.8	1.0
Pre Writing	4.5	5.4	.9
Cognitive	4.4	5.1	.7
Language	4.5	5.2	.7
Self Help	4.6	5.6	1.0
Personal/Social	4.5	5.3	.8

The greatest gains were made in the areas of Fine Motor Skills and Self Help Skills and the least progress was made in the areas of Language and Cognitive Skills. Test data reflect documented norms, but it is important to note that developmental ages should be viewed as "approximate" in nature, and that norms vary among reputable research-based sources.

In addition to surveys and test data, qualitative data including age, gender, ethnicity and socio-economic status has been gathered on Head Start students to obtain a profile of the student population being served by the project. Data from the first year

of the project has been used to structure changes in tutoring strategies for the second year. Language and cognitive skills are now being taught earlier in the tutoring session to ensure that students receive adequate preparation in these areas.

In the second year of the project (1992-93), students were assigned to either an experimental or control group using a Table of Random Numbers. Scores of students in these groups will be compared in May, 1993 and will be analyzed to determine significant differences.

By the end of the Spring 1993 semester, this program will have involved more than twenty college students and will have provided tutored for more than two hundred four-year-old children who fell below age-appropriate readiness standards. Results of tutee test data; of surveys of college students who tutored in the program; and of surveys of parents of children tutored have all been encouraging. With emphasis being placed on intervention both in the school setting and in the home, it is anticipated that the Student Literacy Program will have a positive impact on emergent literacy in southwest Louisiana.

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