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## ABSTRACT

A demonstration project was conducted in three diverse, multiethnic Western Pennsylvania communities to use older adult tutors to improve Head Start parents' literacy skills so that these parents could aid and encourage the development of their own children's literacy. During the project, the partnerships in two Pennsylvania counties developed and set into operation procedures for recruiting, training, and matching older adult mentors with their client families. In addition, strong follow-up and inservice and support procedures were implemented. The training curriculum including an introduction to family literacy, a discussion of intergenerational relationships, and preparation for making home visits. The follow-up strategy consisted primarily of monthly group workshops, along with frequent telephone contact among the project coordinator, the mentors, and the parents. Many of the mentors extended their commitment past the Head Start semester and helped the parents and children in the transition from Head Start to kindergarten. The project had many successes in developing relationships between five Western Pennsylvania human service agencies, developing a well-received curriculum for training older adults in family literacy concepts, and developing effective methods for communicating these concepts to at-risk families. Recommendations for modifications to future such projects included realizing the need and increasing efforts to recruit volunteers continuously, keeping training times realistic, and remaining flexible with project implementation. (KC)

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ED 372 289

Generations Together/University of Pittsburgh

*Final Report to the  
National Institute for Literacy*

**INTERGENERATIONAL FAMILY LITERACY:  
A HEAD START/OLDER ADULT PARTNERSHIP**

May 15, 1994

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**PROJECT GOALS AND OBJECTIVES**

**Goal:** To demonstrate the use of older adult tutors to improve Head Start parents' literacy skills so that these parents may aid and encourage the development of their own children's literacy.

**Objectives**

1. Improve the literacy skills of 45 Head Start parents in three diverse, multi-ethnic Western Pennsylvania communities
2. Improve the Head Start parents' ability to read with their children
3. Change the Head Start parents' perception of their role in reinforcing their children's literacy skills
4. Motivate the Head Start parents to participate in ongoing development of their children's literacy skills
5. Develop supportive intergenerational relationships between the Head Start parents and older adult literacy tutors from their communities
6. Train older adults as effective, interested literacy tutors
7. Document the project for dissemination to other Head Start programs across the United States.

**INTRODUCTION**

As described in the proposal, the tasks related to these objectives were implemented in two Western Pennsylvania counties (Beaver and Allegheny) through a collaborative effort involving:



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- Generations Together
- Beaver County Head Start
- Allegheny Intermediate Unit Head Start
- Council of Three Rivers Head Start
- The Greater Pittsburgh Literacy Council
- Penn State Beaver/Adult Literacy Action

During this project, the partnerships in both counties developed and set into operation systems for recruiting, training, and matching the older adult mentors with their client families. In addition, strong follow-up and in-service and support procedures were implemented. The successful home-visiting component was documented in a manual entitled *Home-Based Family Literacy Mentoring: A Guide for Head Start Teachers*, which contains quotations and descriptions of parent outcomes related to Objectives 1-5. The *Guide* is appended to this report.

### PROJECT TASKS ACCOMPLISHED

Generations Together (GT) officially launched the project on November 3, 1993 at a team meeting which was convened at the University of Pittsburgh and which was attended by representatives from all the participating agencies. At this meeting, partner agency personnel were introduced to their GT liaisons, and the project design and tasks were discussed in detail.

GT staff used a worksheet to guide the discussion, making sure that the three Head Start sites understood the kinds of information they would need to collect and/or relay to their project liaisons. Specific issues that were discussed included:

*Recruitment:* During a discussion of the responsibility for older adult mentor recruitment, the participants decided that Generations Together would work individually with each set of community partners. GT agreed to take a more active role in the Allegheny County area, while Beaver County Head Start (BCHS), because of their familiarity with the older adult population in their community, assumed responsibility for recruitment of older adults in their region.

*Training:* A decision was made to conduct separate training sessions. The Greater Pittsburgh Literacy Council (GPLC) agreed to train the Allegheny County mentors (from both programs) and Penn State Beaver/Adult Literacy Action assumed responsibility for the Beaver County group.

GPLC representatives led a discussion about the design of the training component: goals, needs of parents, focus of the program. A consensus emerged that affirmed the Head Start parent outcomes as the primary project goal, with the older adults being trained as coaches, encouragers, or "mentors."

*Continuation through the summer:* A question arose regarding the project timeline: should the home visits continue through the summer months, when the Head Start programs are not in session? The partners agreed to maintain a flexible home visiting schedule through the summer months, a decision which contributed much to the success of the project.

Following this initial meeting, Generations Together and the partner agencies began implementing the project procedures in their respective communities. Those efforts are described separately in the following two sections.

## **BEAVER COUNTY**

The project in Beaver County was enhanced by a previously-established working relationship between BCHS and Penn State Beaver/Adult Literacy Action. This connection enabled quick decision making, especially concerning the role and responsibilities of each partner agency. Ann Herbruck, the Penn State Beaver/Adult Literacy Action literacy coordinator, served in a leadership role as the liaison between the mentors and volunteers. Her responsibilities included:

- conducting the majority of the training
- doing home visits with the volunteers
- conducting or attending the in-service training workshops
- convening follow-up project meetings involving parents, staff, and mentors

### **Recruitment, Intake, Screening**

The Beaver County team launched their recruitment campaign in January, 1993; recruitment information went out during the first week of the month, and follow-up calls were made a week later. Contacts included literacy program participants, retired teachers groups, job training programs, Foster Grandparents, Green Thumb, RSVP groups, churches, clubs, and Department of Aging offices. In addition, flyers were designed, distributed throughout the community and sent home with Head Start children, newspaper ads were placed, and presentations were made at several older adult group and club meetings. The target number of mentors in this county was seven.

Head Start accepted the intake calls, a particularly effective strategy because of the prior connection between BCHS and GT (they collaborated on JTPA -funded older adult child care employment training programs in 1991 and 1992). As a result, the BCHS receptionist already had experience with "first-level" intake calls, was sensitive to the needs and concerns of older adult volunteers, and was able to conduct a preliminary screening during the initial phone conversation.

The recruitment campaign took longer than planned: About 20 inquiries concerning the program were recorded, and, after further interviews by Penn State Beaver/Adult Literacy Action and BCHS staff, the initial training roster listed an enrollment of ten mentors. All ten of these trainees had had some previous contact with one of the partner agencies.

Four of the ten selected trainees did not begin the training for various reasons, including schedule conflicts, personal, and family illness. Another trainee experienced a medical emergency, and was forced to leave the class during the first week, leaving a core group of five mentors who finished this training cycle. Additional recruitment and training efforts yielded a final total of seven Beaver County mentors.

### Training (*Objective 6*)

The training curriculum was designed collaboratively by Generations Together and both of the local partner agencies. It included the following components:

- An introduction to Family Literacy (Penn State Beaver/Adult Literacy Action)
- A discussion of intergenerational relationships (GT)
- Preparation for making home visits (Beaver County Head Start)

The Beaver County partners originally planned a six-week course which included, in addition to 20 hours of classroom instruction, observing and implementing a home visit with the Penn State Beaver/Adult Literacy Action liaison. The schedule was adjusted to accommodate the additional time necessary for recruitment, and the course was completed in four weeks (March 23 through April 15, 1993). The initial demonstration (behavior modeling) home visits were made during the week of April 19th. At the final mentor training session the trainees reported on their experiences with their demonstration visits.

### Mentor support/Follow-up

The follow-up support (or in-service training) incorporated into the project structure was a critical factor in the comfort and success of the older adult mentors. In Beaver County, most of these follow-up tasks were conducted by Anne Herbruck, Penn State Beaver/Adult Literacy Action, with the guidance and support of GT and the cooperation of the BCHS staff.

The follow-up strategy consisted primarily of monthly group workshops. The agendas for these sessions were developed through discussions between Ms. Herbruck and the GT coordinators, who jointly assessed the needs of the mentors and families and planned

appropriate activities. Ms. Herbruck convened the meetings, which were attended by mentors, various BCHS staff members, and the GT coordinator.

At each of these training sessions, the mentors, with the help of the project staff, developed the next month's activity plans, using a structured worksheet to plan specific activities. They organized the necessary materials, "walked through" their activities with the workshop leader, and practiced through role playing with each other. Particular emphasis was placed on the reasons for selecting particular activities and ways to evaluate their effectiveness.

In addition to the monthly workshops, Ms. Herbruck had a great deal of individual contact with each mentor, and with the parents. She took phone calls, answered questions, helped to arrange appointments and special events, and provided transportation when necessary. This individual support was a positive expansion of the group workshops.

### The home visits

Twenty-two BCHS families volunteered for participation in the mentoring project, and were matched with mentors according to location and transportation concerns. Mentors were accompanied on at least their initial visit to the family by Ms. Herbruck.

During the home visits, Beaver County mentors conducted their self-designed family literacy activities. The basic process involved:

- picking a theme
- reading a story around that theme
- doing an activity with the parents focusing on listening skills, questioning techniques,
- relating other concepts to the activity

During most visits, the volunteers tried to engage both the child and the parent(s) in either the planned activity, or in something else that seemed more appropriate for a particular session.

The mentors also attended debriefing meetings, which will also involve Generations Together, Beaver County Head Start, and Penn State Beaver/Adult Literacy Action personnel.

Beaver County participants validated the decision to continue the program during the summer months, instead of reassigning the volunteers to new children. Most of the participating children moved on to kindergarten, and the mentors were able to help families "bridge" that transition by introducing kindergarten concepts, providing



information, and offering encouragement to anxious parents and children. In a few cases, mentors even accompanied parents and children on visits to their new kindergarten classrooms, where they met the teachers and provided valuable information about the children's abilities and developmental levels.

### The Parents

The Beaver County program leaders elected to have Head Start parents volunteer for project participation. They also suggested that the most troubled children or families not participate, believing this group would be difficult for mentors to work with.

Parents gave many reasons for volunteering to participate:

- A mother looks forward to having something for her child in the summer
- A mother of seven (and grandmother) with a second-youngest child in high school and a youngest child in Head Start: "I'd don't know what I'd do if I can't be involved in Head Start."
- "My four-year-old is slow and impatient and already behind."
- "My eight-year-old is slow, my four-year-old is bright. I'd like to help all four of my children."
- A missionary from Colombia whose husband is a student at the seminary in Ambridge wants her son to learn English and sociability."
- "My child is slow and needs language help."
- As father of four is concerned that his children not forget what they learned over the summer.

On April 2, 1993, ten parents (eight mothers, one father, one sister representing a mother) attended a meeting of participating parents. One mentor also attended, and the meeting was conducted by BCHS leaders and the Penn State Beaver/Adult Literacy Action liaison.

After introducing the agency leaders, parents introduced themselves, learned and asked questions about the program, and discussed what they felt was important for their children. Parents had a number of questions:

- "What do you plan to teach the kids?" "The parents?"
- "How will you match the mentors with the families?"
- "Are there any male mentors?"
- "What will they be doing in Kindergarten? Do they need to know how to write?"

This started a discussion among the parents, many of whom worry about children needing to know how to do particular things like name, telephone number, etc., in order to pass a screening to get into Kindergarten. The parents are clearly concerned about

the level of pressure placed on their children, and the project leaders talked of ways the program can help parents to articulate their concerns to schools.

Further comments on what parents want from the program for their children:

- One mother explained that her daughter was extremely shy. She thinks working with mentor in home may help to overcome this.
- One parent described how her boy would read grudgingly with her, then immediately run off to the TV and play by himself. He complained when she tried to do reading, saying that he did enough of that in school.
- Some parents were concerned that children don't know writing and numbers like other children

### Beaver County Highlights

The project in Beaver County produced some creative project adaptations and some unexpected positive outcomes:

- At the suggestion of the parents and mentors, a major field trip was arranged. Participants – mentors, parents, children, project staff – gathered as a group and took a bus to the city of Pittsburgh for a day-long visit to the Carnegie Museum of Natural History.
- The Beaver County project received significant attention from the local media. The *Beaver County Times* ran an article – with photo – describing the program and the impact it was having on several families and mentors. Also, a reporter from a local radio station accompanied the group on the museum field trip, interviewing participants and gathering impressions for a segment of a local news show.
- Almost from the first visits, many Beaver County mentors were involved in helping their families manage the transition from Head Start to public school kindergarten. In addition to "generic" information provided by the partner agencies, mentors shared their experiences and knowledge of specific school systems, and acted as advocates for their families in negotiating with the school bureaucracies.
- With a grant extension from the National Institute for Literacy, Generations Together staff prepared *Home-Based Family Literacy Mentoring: A Guide for Head Start Teachers*, a home-visiting handbook based upon the experience of the project mentors (see attached). The material in the handbook was presented to BCHS teaching staff at an in-service workshop in late fall, 1993.



## ALLEGHENY COUNTY

The Allegheny and Beaver models were different in two basic dimensions:

- The Allegheny County project initially involved two separate Head Start systems (Allegheny Intermediate Unit [AIU] and Council of Three Rivers Head Start [COTRAIC]), both of which are more complex organizationally than Beaver County Head Start. Due to administrative difficulties and recruiting problems, the AIU agency withdrew from the project in the spring of 1993.
- Allegheny County Head Start has a less-integrated relationship with the local literacy group.

The project began with a series of organizational meetings, two at each Head Start site, involving GT and GPLC as well as Head Start leaders. A key decision was made during this process: to hold the mentor training class jointly, in one location. The reasons for this decision included increased efficiency and the preferable class dynamics of training with a large group. (This combined program will hereafter be referred to as the "Allegheny County" project.)

As a result of combining the two projects, the GT coordinator assumed increased responsibility in Allegheny County for hands-on management of project tasks. GT's role also included facilitating arrangements between the two Head Start agencies until late summer 1993, when, as noted earlier, the AIU Head Start Program resigned from the project. Other differences are reflected in the program description which follows.

### Recruitment, Intake, Screening

In January, 1993, the Allegheny County partners implemented a recruiting strategy similar to that used in Beaver County throughout most of Allegheny County. In addition, presentations were made at churches, senior high-rise, and a retirement community gathering. Intake calls were taken at GT, and screened by the GT recruiter.

The campaign netted approximately 20 phone calls from interested older adults, thirteen of whom planned to attend the training and received written follow-up materials by mail. As in Beaver County, the partners agreed to extend the campaign due to the inadequacy of the initial response.

Of these thirteen recruits, all but one left the program for various reasons at various times during the training. One additional candidate was recruited in early May, 1993, who participated in special training sessions.

### **Training (Objective 6)**

The Greater Pittsburgh Literacy Council designed a two-week, 24-hour training curriculum, with input and feedback from GT coordinators and Head Start child and home visit experts. The content was similar to the Beaver County curriculum, and the GPLC adult literacy trainer (Arlene Cianelli) shared the training responsibilities with the GT coordinator.

The training was originally scheduled to start in mid-February, but was delayed due to the recruitment difficulties. The Allegheny County partners eventually agreed to revamp the curriculum, reducing it to twelve hours of classroom time, and scheduling it during the weeks of April 8-20, 1993. The trainees and instructors agreed that the follow-up or in-service sessions, once the home visits had begun, would be more important than the initial classroom training.

By mid-May, training and family placement was completed for two project mentors.

### **Mentor support/Follow-up**

In both counties, the training was conceived as on-going, implemented through the monthly workshops and debriefing sessions. In Allegheny County, contact between the mentors, families, and agency partners was facilitated by Debbie Gallagher, the project liaison from COTRAIC Head Start.

### **The Home Visits**

Each Allegheny County mentor visited two families. For a description of the home visit structure and the duties of the mentors, see the Beaver County "Home Visit" section of this report. In the Allegheny County project, Ms. Gallagher encouraged one successful variation: a more active parent role in the selection and design of the home visit activities.

### **The Parents**

Due to time constraints and geographical concerns, no preliminary parent meeting was held in Allegheny County. Head Start staff recruited volunteer families for each mentor from the Head Start centers located near the mentors' homes. The family recruitment criteria were similar to those adopted in Beaver County.

## THE PROJECT EVALUATION

As described in the initial proposal, GT conducted both formative and summative evaluations for this project.

To ensure that the project was meeting its stated goals and that experience learned early in the project was built into later activities, the project evaluator conducted early interviews with project staff, Head Start staff, older adult tutors, and parents, and made on-site visits. These included initial meetings with the project team, meetings with the literacy groups to discuss training, and two visits in April to the Beaver County program, the first to meet with the Head Start parents and the second to meet with the mentors. Short written reports from these meetings have been prepared and given to the Project Coordinators and GT Executive Director for discussion.

In addition, prompted by a presentation at the November NIFL meeting in Washington, the project evaluator conducted five at-length debriefings with the Project Coordinators, taping three for transcription and putting the others directly into the computer, in order to document the project.

To gather data for the summative evaluation, the evaluator conducted discussions with project staff members, the Greater Pittsburgh Literacy Council, the Beaver County Team, and literacy experts of the University of Pittsburgh's School of Education about appropriate measures and instruments.

The consensus of these discussions was that the evaluation should determine the change in actual literacy-promoting behaviors parents use with their children over the period that the mentors work with them (May to October) and that behaviors should be those covered in the mentor training and then taught by the mentors to the parents.

Further discussion, particularly with the Beaver County Team (which was ahead of Allegheny County in the timeline) centered on how to gather the needed data, given the dual constraints of access to Head Start homes to observe and limits on project evaluation time. The evaluator, working with the Beaver County Team and the GT staff, implemented a three-part strategy in both counties that draws on the mentors' access to the Head Start parents:

### Weekly Mentor Reports

- A basic list of questions about parents' literacy-promoting behaviors was developed and put into a form that mentors can fill out and turn in following each visit (see attachment).
- The project evaluator trained the mentors in the use of the form on a site visit to Beaver County in April.

- The project evaluator met with the mentors after the first month of visits to discuss how the data collection was proceeding; they turned in their sheets each week to their Head Start liaison.

#### Parent Diaries

- The same questions were used as the suggested format for the diaries parents were asked to keep.

#### Parent Interviews

- At the end of the project, the evaluator interviewed the Head Start parents to determine their perceptions of how they had changed over the course of the project in these behaviors.

At the end of the project the evaluator also interviewed the older adults, project staff, and Head Start staff to assess the effectiveness of the older adult tutor literacy training and the degree to which the parents and older adults developed intergenerational relationships. Quotations and conclusions from these interviews are presented in the accompanying manual, *Home-Based Family Literacy Mentoring: A Guide for Head Start Teachers*.

#### WHAT WE'VE LEARNED FROM THE PROJECT:

GT staff, through taped de-briefing sessions, collected information that will be very important to the design of future successful projects. These insights include:

- The meeting (in Beaver County) between parents and mentors before the mentors went into the homes was especially important. Parents and mentors alike felt anxious about the visits, and the preliminary meeting greatly alleviated this.
- The parent orientation could have included a section dealing more specifically with the characteristics of older adults (i.e. "Who are older adults today?")
- Volunteer recruitment is a dynamic process, always in a state of flux. Provision must be made for replacing dropouts in all phases of the project. Systems therefore need to allow volunteers to enter the program throughout its period of development and should provide training at the time of entry. Such individual training in later phases of the project should involve those mentors who are already participating.
- Orientation and/or pre-service training should be flexible, available to large groups, small groups, or individuals as needed.

- Pre-service training must require a realistic time commitment (to retain mentor recruits, the classroom training in Allegheny County was reduced from 24 hours to 12 hours).
- Volunteers for projects such as this are usually busy people, active and engaged in the life of their communities, and their existing schedules need to be taken into consideration.
- Clear, concrete training outcome statements must be developed early in the project, and used to guide the training as well as the project evaluation. The original training objectives were too broad and driven by existing literacy curricula. This curriculum needs to be adapted to meet the needs of diverse student populations.
- For the concepts in question, in-service and/or hands-on training is especially important to this group of trainees.
- Collaborative projects involving separate agencies need a clearly-designated "home" within each agency, and an agency project leader with a clearly-defined role.
- A significant problem encountered in this project was the difficulty of recruiting and retaining appropriate numbers of older adult mentors. One strategy to deal with this problem would involve focused recruiting in communities with a high population of older adults and a history of participation in projects similar to this model. Additionally, Head Start systems should be encouraged to assign extra families to volunteers where possible, to allow for both family and mentor attrition. Over-enrollment, with the approval of the mentors, will result in a higher probability of achieving the targeted number of families to be served.

## SUCSESSES

### The Generations Together-coordinated partnership:

- established comfortable working relationships with and between five Western Pennsylvania human service agencies
- developed a workable and well-received curriculum for training older adults in family literacy concepts
- devised appropriate and effective methods for communicating these concepts to at-risk families

As can be seen from their comments quoted in the accompanying *Guide*, the older adult mentors felt that the project was quite successful. They seemed especially open to the idea that literacy is an affective activity, and enthusiastically shared stories about the influence of their own grandparents on their literacy skills. The participating parents, too, were excited about the project.

## DISSEMINATION

The project generated widespread interest among literacy professionals, who contacted GT from programs and agencies across the country. In addition, representatives from the participating agencies presented workshops on the project at two regional conferences:

- The Northeast Regional Adult Literacy Conference, held in Pittsburgh on June 11-12, 1993.
- The Pennsylvania Association of Adult and Continuing Education Midwinter Conference on February 10, 1994.

## CONCLUSION

Although the performance of the project tasks was firmly guided by the proposal objectives, the coordinator took a flexible approach which allowed each of the collaborating agencies opportunities to shape the project as it progressed. This approach had several positive effects, empowering the partners to contribute the best of their knowledge and expertise, and creating a sense of excitement that motivated all the participants, from program coordinators to mentors to parents.

This excitement was reinforced continuously by the feedback from the mentors and the parents, who clearly valued deeply the long-term intimate bonds that were created by this program. Although the project managers were frustrated by the problem of recruiting larger numbers of mentor volunteers, these feelings were more than balanced by the obvious value and benefits of the program to the mentors, and to the families and children they supported.



FAMILY NAME \_\_\_\_\_ DATE OF VISIT \_\_\_\_\_

VISITOR'S NAME \_\_\_\_\_

1. On what days did the parent(s) read aloud to their child(ren) this week? (circle)

M T W Th F S S

2. What did they read to their child(ren) this week?

3. In what activities did they use reading with their child(ren) this week?

4. Did they do any writing with their child(ren) this week? Yes No

What kinds of things did the child write?

5. When did they talk with their child(ren) this week?

What did they talk about?

Did they talk about the books the child(ren) read? Yes No

6. What other activities did they do with their child(ren) this week?

7. Is there anything they wanted to tell about their thoughts, feelings, or experiences as they worked with their child(ren) during this week?