

**It's a 'Win/Win': The Best Thing We Ever Did Was to
Invite Parents to Learn with Their Children**

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Abstract

This paper describes a community-based after-school tutoring project, where families are participants together with their children. There are 50 family members involved in the project, several have multiple children enrolled, and four families were selected for an in-depth case study. The goals of this mixed method study were to determine why parents persist at endeavors such as these with their children who struggle in school, and how schools of education can effectively incorporate families as an essential constituent in teacher education. Findings indicated that all families engaged in the project reported the positive impact of the project on their children's academic learning and growth in confidence. In addition, families reported ways they learned to engage in their children's learning processes. This meaningful engagement was reported as one of the key reasons that motivated families to stay involved.

Introduction

Families possess more power for positive interventions in their children's education than schools often credit them for and than what most parents even realize (Goodlad & Lovitt, 1993). This lack of realization is unfortunate because it limits the potential for parents to play a major role in shaping how they and schools can work together for the benefit of their children. However, because of the many different kinds of parents in our schools today and the increasing numbers of parents and children from diverse cultural, ethnic, racial, socioeconomic and linguistic backgrounds, effective parent-school collaborations can potentially be more challenging. Therefore, it seems logical that today's teachers preparing to enter the profession for the first time learn how to involve this wide array of parents for the benefit of all the students in their classrooms. Preparing preservice teachers to be able to effectively involve parents in their children's learning and for parents/guardians to work with the preservice teachers was, for us, not only essential, but entirely providential in this tutoring project. In short, it was a "win-win."

In this study, we explore family participation in a collaborative tutoring program that is conducted through students' reading of several narrative texts, their participation in music, as well as through their involvement in science experiments and science tutoring classes. Through collaboration preservice teachers, university faculty, community partners and volunteers served as tutors, while identified struggling readers from local schools were tutees. One of the major features of this tutoring program is that family participation is mandatory.

Theoretical Framework

More than three decades ago Bronfenbrenner (1986) made the argument that key to the promotion of a child's development is the family. This view of the importance of family in children's education has been supported over and over again in various settings and environments. In settings that highlight children's reading efforts, researchers found improved comprehension among children when

parents were involved with their children in shared-book reading (Sénéchal & LeFevre, 2002; Sénéchal, LeFevre, Hudson, & Lawson, 1996; Sénéchal, LeFevre, Smith-Chant, & Colton, 2001). Parents can partner with schools to continue or supplement the instruction their children receive. Central to this idea of parents helping to supplement instruction is the requirement that schools treat parents as equal partners in the education of their children. In shaping her comprehensive framework related to school, family, and community, Epstein (1995) points out that the task of preparing children for educational success really begins when schools view parents as partners.

We agree with many researchers since Bronfenbrenner (1986), who continue to argue that parental involvement is beneficial to children's academic achievement (Epstein, 2005; Hoover-Dempsey, et al., 2005). We argue that such involvement not only allows parents to see up-close their own children's academic abilities, but that it also helps parents who are trying to determine how best to help their children at home if they know what and how their children are learning (Epstein, 2005). Parental involvement is further enhanced by the issue of "value." As Rattigan-Rohr (2012) notes, "The bottom line is children's views of school and how they participate in it are impacted to a significant degree by what they come to believe in their homes" (p. 8). If parents are involved in their children's academic pursuits, then there is a relatively loud statement to children that parents care about and value what their children are doing academically, thus, creating an environment in which the children themselves begin to view their own academic efforts as valuable (Epstein, 1988; Hill & Taylor, 2004).

Convincing evidence supports the view that the importance of parental involvement in school-related endeavors does not stop with a child's academics. Such evidence further indicates that parental involvement also affects variables which serve to enhance overall academic achievement. Variables such as appropriate behaviors, regular classroom attendance and positive attitudes are all strongly correlated to parental involvement (Billman, Geddes, & Hedges, 2005; Epstein, 2001; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Hill &

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Craft, 2003; Jeynes, 2005; Overstreet, Devine, Bevins & Efreom, 2005). Considering the ample evidence supporting the significance of parental involvement, it is important that educators learn to include the many different parents found in today's schools in their children's academic achievement and is vital because of the deficit view, held by many, of minority parents (Villenas, 2001). This view is manifested in the assumption by some that many minority parents are unwilling to support their children's education (Valencia & Black, 2002). We would argue that this assumption is confounded further when the minority parents are poor. Furthermore, candidates in teacher education courses are often not representative of the wider population (de Courcy, 2007).

As such, cultural diversity courses in teacher education programs often prove to be beneficial. Nonetheless, as important as diversity courses are to teacher education, such courses alone are not enough. A study by DeCastro-Ambrosetti and Cho (2005) revealed that a majority of preservice and inservice teachers, who took courses that had cultural diversity concepts embedded within the curricula, experienced an increased self-awareness; an awareness, understanding, and appreciation of other cultures; as well as an accepting and understanding attitude toward culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) PK–12 students. Despite the positive change toward PK–12 students however, the majority of the preservice participants still exhibited negative perceptions toward the value ethnic minority parents place on education. The participants continued to believe that the home and the lack of value that minority parents placed on education were responsible for their students' deficient academic achievement. Lawrence-Lightfoot (1978) explained the perceptions about Black and poor parents as myths that minority parents “do not care about the education of their children, are passive and unresponsive to attempts to get them involved, and are ignorant naïve about the intellectual and social needs of their children” (p. 36).

Undoubtedly, there is a need to find an approach to improve reading abilities among poor Black and Latino students nationally. If educational disparities in the United States, including the ability

to read, delineated along social class, race, and ethnicity are to have a counter-narrative, then parent involvement which has been shown to be positively related to students' academic successes should be broadly explored by teacher education (Barnard, 2004; De Civita, Pagani, Vitaro, & Tremblay, 2004),

Specifically, we should seek to provide meaningful opportunities for preservice teachers to not only have practicum opportunities to practice how to teach reading to underperforming readers of CLD populations, but we should also provide them opportunities to closely interact with and to engage CLD parents, and to work to support such parents in the academic learning of their children.

Program Context

The project for our study takes place in an area of North Carolina that has fallen on hard economic times. Many of the textile mills that supported the area in better times have now relocated to other countries. There has also been a significant increase in the area's Hispanic population. Many of the newly arriving Hispanic parents only speak Spanish, and often they are unemployed.

Economic difficulties in the region and its resulting poverty rates are detrimental to student achievement on many levels. We know from research that more than 40% of the variance in average reading scores and 46% of the variance in average math scores is associated with variation in child poverty rates (NAEP, 2012). In North Carolina, 26% of children live in poverty (Kids Count Report, 2012). However, in the area in which our project operates approximately 29% of children live in poverty (North Carolina Justice Center, 2012). The recent Kids Count (2012) data also noted that 41% of children born into single-parent households live in poverty. In our county, 39% of children live in single parent households. It is against this backdrop that our project is situated.

The "It Takes a Village" Project (or Village Project) is a multi-site university-community collaborative tutoring project designed specifically to engage struggling readers and their families. Similar to other community-based tutoring programs, the Village Project aims at enhancing struggling readers' reading achievement and

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motivation through one-to-one tutoring. One of the unique features of the Village Project is its family involvement requirement. In addition, as a university-community collaborative project, other volunteers, including inservice teachers, also assist in the work with struggling readers and their families. However, the majority of the tutors participating in the Village Project are preservice teacher candidates.

The preservice teacher reading course, from which this particular study is derived, was first designed as a traditional reading methods course which examined the five components of reading and explored various cases of students' reading struggles with decoding and comprehension. However, the professor of the reading course was unconvinced that preservice teachers ended the course with an appreciable understanding of the complexities associated with reading difficulties. That is, did preservice teachers fully grasp the concept that there could be several reasons for children's reading difficulties? If so, were they able to address those difficulties in a real struggling reader as opposed to a case study on paper? Did preservice teachers think about the effects of those reading difficulties upon the struggling students and their parents? And did they consider their own roles in working with parents to address students' reading issues? With these questions as a catalyst, the reading course was redesigned to include two phases. Phase I continued to cover reading theory with emphasis on the five core reading components - phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension – and how to successfully teach each component. Additionally, as Fang (2008) suggests, preservice teachers also looked beyond these five components and examined the complexities associated with reading expository texts. Phase I also involved a great deal of Duffy's (2003) work regarding the explicit teaching of comprehension strategies. Preservice teachers also read about and discussed the value of parental inclusion in education and the importance of parent voice in the educational efforts of their children (Epstein, 2001).

Phase II addressed praxis. In Phase II, which was held at the local library, preservice teachers drew upon the knowledge they

gained in Phase I to tutor (one-on-one) a struggling reader and involve the reader's parent(s) in the process. Preservice teachers were not only given the opportunity to work with struggling students and their parents, but they were also expected to challenge and stretch themselves as they prepared various lessons for their tutees. Additionally, the course provided preservice teachers with the opportunity to closely examine the many issues faced by some students for whom reading is difficult and, if needed, to adjust the lens through which many struggling students and their parents are viewed. Phase II of the project was a reciprocal relationship and the preservice teachers had many opportunities to learn from parents regarding their children's reading interests, the types of techniques that seem to work at home, and other advice or information the parents desire to share.

Initially, families were recruited into the program by classroom teachers and principals from partner Title I schools. A flyer was sent home with students who received a failing score of "level 1" on their end-of-grade standardized test in reading. Over time however, parents started to tell other parents about the project, and as a result, a large number of parents began bringing their children to the sessions and there was no longer a need to send home letters with children through the schools. The tutoring sessions were held at the local library in the students' neighborhood. The library was chosen after an initial on-campus location proved to be difficult for some parents to access. The first time we offered the tutoring in 2008 we essentially asked parents to come to us. That year, the project started with 25 students and their parents, but by the end of the semester only 16 students and their parents remained in the project. Parent evaluations at the end of the course led us to conclude that a change of venue closer to our students' community was more desirable for our parents, rather than having them make the trip to campus. Thus, the community library was selected for two important reasons: 1) Many of our students and their families could walk to the library, eliminating the transportation issues which plagued the on-campus sessions; 2) Parents and students could readily access the materials and services in the library without any

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cost to them.

In spring 2013, the tutoring project took place on Mondays and Wednesdays. Each student was assigned his/her personal tutor. Tutoring sessions were held for two hours per session and parents/guardians attended every session for a seven-week period. Reading and music tutoring sessions were offered on Wednesdays, while science tutoring sessions were offered on Mondays. As a result, parents and their children participated with us for a total of six hours per week over seven weeks. Though we began the tutoring sessions in 2008 with a focus only on reading (we call this reading in the Village), over time we added science (science in the Village) and music (music in the Village). Science was added because parents noted many of their children were having difficulty comprehending their science textbooks. Music was added because many of the elements required for effective reading comprehension are utilized in choral singing (Gromko, 2005). These include prosody, rhythm, syllabification, and comprehension. Thus, by 2013 during the period of this study, students were reading various texts – narratives, science books and song books. This particular study focused only on the reading component of the Village Project.

Methods

In this study we focused on the family involvement component of the Village Project. The following questions guided the design of this study: 1) What do families perceive as the impact of the Village Project? 2) What motivates families to continue to participate in the Village Project?

Participants

A total of 50 family members (including parents, grandparents, and other guardians) and 68 children participated in the Village Project in spring 2013. We should note that our view of family involvement is not limited to the traditional construction of parents as mother and father of a child. For us, “families” attending the project with their children could include any family member or guardian who attended the project with the tutee and who continued

the work at home with the tutee. Though most of the family members attending were the mothers of the children, there were also 10 fathers, four grandmothers, two aunts, and one college-aged sibling. Fifty-four percent of the families were Hispanic, 40% were African American, and 6% were White. Fourteen of the 50 family members have been participating since the project's inception in the spring of 2008. Eight parents participated for the first time in spring 2013, while attendance of the others ranged from three to four years. Forty out of 50 families completed a project survey at the end of the spring 2013 semester (80% response rate).

To better understand families' experiences and their perceptions of the project, in addition to the survey we focused on four participating parents in this study. These four parents were selected based on their language proficiency, educational background, employment status, and the length of time they had been engaged with the Village Project. We believed these criteria for our case study selection provided us with a broad cross-section of opinions.

The four selected parents were Tasha (English speaking, high-educational level), Joseph (Spanish-speaking, high-educational level), Jasmine (English speaking, low-educational level), and Lilly (Spanish-speaking, low-educational level). These parents have been involved with the Village Project for one to five years. Three of our selected participants were involved as parents, while Jasmine is a grandmother.

Tasha came to the Village a year ago. She was a stay-at-home mom with a relatively high-educational background. Joseph and his wife have also been involved with the Village for one year. The family is originally from Columbia but Joseph obtained a position to teach Spanish in a local high school, relocating them to North Carolina. Knowing that some parents wanted to learn other languages, Joseph offered to teach Spanish to other parents in the Village.

Jasmine has been with us for five years. She has three grandchildren attending the project. She became the de facto "matriarch" of our Village. She is known as "Miss Jasmine" to all of us. We were all enthralled with her energy and her fierce determination that her

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“grandchildren will get every opportunity [she] did not have.” In recent newspaper coverage about the project, Miss Jasmine was quoted as saying that the project has taught her grandchildren that though you are poor and might be “in the valley you can make it to the mountain.”

Lilly has been with the Village for four years. She recently became an informal “leader” in a lively group of English-speaking parents (mostly African American) and Spanish-speaking parents (mostly Mexican and Colombian) who have started to help each group learn the other’s language. For one hour each week, this group of parents comes together to work with each other. Their reading material consists of everything from supermarket circulars to restaurant menus.

Research Design

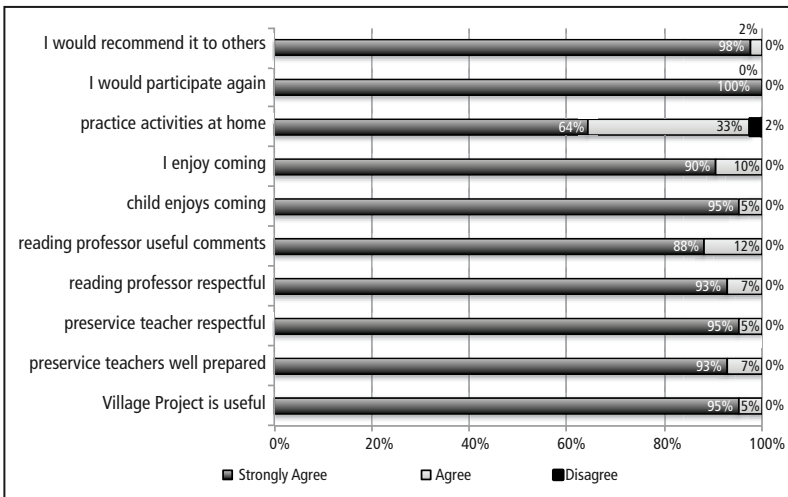
A mixed methods design was employed to capture the perceptions of all participating families and highlight four parents’ cases with in-depth description (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). Both quantitative and qualitative data were collected from participating families during spring 2013 to address the research questions. The study was conducted in two phases. During the first phase, a survey containing both Likert-scale items and open-ended questions was distributed to all families at the end of the tutoring program. Surveys were written in English and Spanish, and families were encouraged to respond in their native language. Descriptive statistics were reported based on the quantitative data from the survey. Qualitative data from all parents were analyzed for themes and patterns as related to the research questions (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). To better understand individual participants’ experiences, we conducted additional interviews with four selected parents representing different levels of educational backgrounds (high or low) and native languages (Spanish or English) during the second phase of the study. Data from the four identified parents were analyzed first in a vertical manner to form four individual cases and then compared horizontally to identify similarities and differences across cases (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The overall survey results

and in-depth case descriptions offered us a more comprehensive understanding of families' experiences in the Village Project.

Findings

Family Perceptions of the Village Project

All families reported their perception of the effectiveness of the Village Project on the survey. As illustrated in Figure 1, the quantitative survey results indicated overwhelmingly positive feedback from families. Almost all respondents found the Village Project useful for their children, felt the preservice teachers and reading professors were respectful and helpful, and noted that their children enjoyed the experience. Most of them also strongly agreed that they practiced some of the activities at home (60%).



The qualitative findings from the survey suggested that the parents practiced what they learned from the Village Project, including reading strategies such as read-alouds, role plays, drawings, flash cards, and sounding out words; games such as word bingos and memory games; and other computer programs, at home with their children. Some parents even commented on specific strategies they noted that can help their children in reading. For example, one parent mentioned that they “read together and use our imagination”

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to assist the reading practices at home. When asked about how the project can be improved, most of the parents reported how much they appreciated the one-on-one support tutors provided, and many of them wanted to continue to participate in the program and wished that the program could be longer.

The four case study participants reported different perspectives on the impact of the Village Project for them and their children or grandchildren. Tasha found the Village a “worthwhile experience” not only for her child, but for herself as well. Joseph found the project helpful for both his son and his wife. Tasha noted that she can “be there along with my child learning hands-on and gaining experience in education.” She emphasized that she continued to practice literacy strategies at home with her daughter. The most important aspect of the Village for Tasha was “confidence.” As she commented:

“If a child has confidence that someone believes in her, being the mother and the actual tutor, then it will go a long way. Last year we had so many problems at school because my child was so frustrated and down on herself all the time. She just didn’t know how to read well. When Ms. Tucker (her child’s teacher) suggested I come down to see if we could get a space I jumped at it right away and came down here the very next day. They put us on the waitlist, but I called every day, sometimes I called twice a day. I know I was a pest but my pestering paid off and we are so glad because it’s like night and day for her self-esteem. So yeah, I would say, to me, the confidence building is the biggest thing the project has done for us.”

It left little doubt that Tasha was very satisfied to see her daughter’s confidence in reading grow through the project and very glad that she was actively involved in this process. As a parent who was eager to be part of the learning process with her daughter, Tasha remarked that teachers need to do more in their efforts at helping parents know what to do and provide them with tools with which they can better support their children at home.

Similar to Tasha, Joseph also saw the growth of confidence and reading achievement in his son, in addition to his reading achievement. As Joseph put it, "He was very scared when we first came, but now look at him, all confident and smiling." Joseph emphasized that the project was "especially good" for his wife, Vivian, even though she does not speak much English. Joseph reported that Vivian understood the activities tutors demonstrated and they tried to do all the literacy activities at home as well. In addition, the Village also provided Vivian an opportunity to socialize with other Spanish-speaking moms who were learning alongside their children in the Village.

Thus, for Joseph and Vivian, the most important part of the Village was the community.

"It's like a place to go where everyone knows everyone and everyone is working for the same thing, and the best part is that the children are happy to come. I mean my wife [is] not so sure what to do or say when she goes to his school, but everybody here help [*sic*] her so much that she feels like we have a team on our side, you know? She feels like she can come here and everybody will help her with what to say or what to do. How you say? Is like a life line."

So it seems parental involvement was also supported by factors such as the "climate" of the Village that allowed parents to feel "belonged" and contributing to the project in some important way.

Motivations of Family Involvement

Based on the survey results, parents reported working with their children and the tutors on reading, writing, signing, and playing. We asked an open-ended question on the survey to inquire about families' motivation to be involved in the Village Project. Based on the responses, we observed that most of the families noted they continued to participate in the Village because they believed that it was crucial to support their children's education. For example, one participant commented, "I keep coming to the Village because it is very important for my daughter." Another parent said,

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[I attend] because from the first time we came, we saw that the program has positive results. My eldest daughter's knowledge in English was very limited because she has not been in the United States for long. [After participating in the program], she began to improve and had better scores in school.

In addition to learning opportunities for their children, parents also viewed the tutoring program as an opportunity for them to learn from the tutors. As one father stated, “[the program] not only involves the child, but also the father in accomplishing the activities including reading.” Several parents also commented that the program “offers space for families and the community to integrate.” Several parents pointed to their own hard work with their children after they experienced how diligently the tutors worked to make personal connections and to involve them in the language and literacy development of their children.

Discussion

Our efforts to involve parents in our after-school tutoring project taught us several important lessons. We learned from our parents' persistence, the energy they brought to the tutoring, the work they did at home, and their willingness to partner with us, that when we open wide our practice and let parents into the work we are undertaking with their children we begin to see important growth for all involved. This growth is not so much because of the work we are doing alone, but rather the work we, teachers and families, are undertaking together. We saw firsthand the overwhelming positive responses from parents as tutors worked hard to make personal connections with parents and involved the parents in the literacy development of their children. We learned from parents like Miss Jasmine and Lilly that when parents are treated as equal partners who bring their own expertise to the community of practice, that community is richer all around.

Perhaps one important lesson that emerged from the data that we were not looking for was just how crucial it is for us, as teacher

educators, to create spaces and places in our own practice that will allow for novice teachers to be able to experience the strength and depth parents can bring to their work. It might have been easy or maybe even sufficient for us to have our students read and research about the importance of parental involvement. However, having seen the benefits (to all of us) of having parents partnering with us side-by-side, we cannot imagine our teacher education practice without them. We have come to appreciate that when our preservice teachers begin to view family-school partnerships as a natural component of their curriculum and practice, they are forced to consider all the ways they must work to ensure parents are brought into the learning environment. At issue for us now is to figure out how to re-conceptualize our teacher education program in such a way as to make parental involvement an educationally and socially sustainable component of our practice.

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