Reshaping Literacy in a High Poverty Early Childhood Classroom: One Teacher's Action Research Project

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Abstract

This research explores an action research project conducted by the first author focused on supporting her preschool students' literacy and language development. Using observations, interviews, artifacts, and assessment, this research documents the first author's process of conducting an action research project over the course of one year to support literacy and language skills in her students. This work is anchored in Epstein's framework (2010) for effective preschool pedagogy. Quantitative analysis revealed an increase in students' language after participating in a literacy program focused on incorporating students' backgrounds, families, and interests into the program. Qualitative analysis of parent surveys and student reflections suggested a positive impact on students' literacy abilities. Implications for teacher educators, in-service educators, and administration are discussed.

Keywords: early childhood, action research, literacy and language skills, parents, parental engagement, and parental involvement

When a three or four year-old child crosses the threshold of a preschool classroom door, that child carries a backpack filled with school supplies, a consoling stuffed animal, and three to four years of varied experiences. These experiences are the groundwork from which preschool teachers build their literacy curriculum. For many preschool children, they are entering into an environment that may be structured very differently from their home or daycare. Some children adapt quickly to these changes, and others take longer to adjust to the school environment and expectations (Guralnick, 2001). One essential ingredient in structuring literacy instruction to support students' cultural, linguistic, and personal strengths is to include students' lives and families into the classroom (Vaughn, 2014, Vaughn et al., in press). As Bridge (2001) states, "…learning is most beneficial when it creates and facilitates links between children's home lives and their related play and learning in preschools" (p. 20). In this way, preschool classrooms are in a unique position to serve as a space between home and school. This "in between space"

(Bhabba, 1994) is a rich space where teachers can build upon to structure meaningful literacy activities (Moje, Ciechanowski, & Kramer, 2004; Gutiérrez, 2008).

As a preschool teacher of fifteen years, I (first author) support my students and invite their families into my classroom each year. However, as I (first author) teach in a high poverty early childhood context, many of my students face homelessness, hunger, and live with parents who have substance abuse problems. These situations present a myriad of challenges for the students I teach. For example, students come to school hungry and without the beginning literacy, language, and social skills other preschool students from more affluent homes possess. Although these variables present challenges, scholars have demonstrated the need for early childhood settings to focus on supports, such as curriculum (Gestwicki, 2013), classroom discourse (Siry, Ziegler, & Max, 2012), and inviting and inclusive classroom spaces (Souto-Manning, 2013) to support students in high poverty settings; however, the problem that initiated this action research, and consequently, the statement of the problem is how can an early childhood educator better support students' and parents' involvement in the literacy curriculum? To explore this, I developed a strength-based approach to literacy, or one where students' lives outside of school were invited into the curriculum. I examined my practice over the course of one year and explored the relationship of this literacy curriculum on students' attainment of literacy and language skills. The following research documents an action research study conducted in a high poverty preschool classroom in a small, rural town in the Pacific Northwest. The research questions guiding this study include: a) what is the relationship between the level of parent participation in literacy-linked activities and student growth in literacy and language skills? and b) how does participation in family literacy-linked activities promote positive parent attitudes about their children's schools?

Related Literature

The challenges students who live in poverty face when entering school have been well documented in the literature. Students living in poverty face compelling risk factors (i.e., emotional and social challenges, acute and chronic stress, cognitive lapses, and health issues) (Jensen, 2013) that greatly reduce their chance of success in school. For young children, in preschool, Duncan and Magnuson (2013) state, "On average, poor US Kindergarten children have lower levels of reading and math skills and are rated by their teachers as less well behaved than their more affluent peers"(p. 57).

Scholars highlight the extent to which contextual variables (i.e., language, culture, parent literacy levels) affect students' success and preparation for school (Hart & Risley, 1995; Hoff, 2013). Many studies focus on the differences of development between children from different socio-economic backgrounds. Weizman and Snow (2001) measured lexical input toward young children to examine the quantity and quality of interactions between parents and children to look for patterns of communication behaviors on children's vocabulary. They found that mothers who used more low frequency words and explained the meaning to the child were more influential on the child's vocabulary development. Their findings showed a wide range of lexical input by families in poverty. Their research supports the notion that parent interactions can be a powerful force for supporting language development.

Additionally, preschool teachers can be instrumental in structuring literacy opportunities that include parents. In their study, Arnold, Zeljo, and Doctoroff (2008) examined the relationship between 163 preschool students and parents and parental involvement in preschool and children's early literacy skills. They found that parental preschool involvement was positively correlated with children's pre-literacy skill development in the areas of vocabulary and

phonemic awareness, more strongly than socio-economic status. Arnold and colleagues (2008) concluded that parental involvement within schools cannot be the sole responsibility of the parent. Involvement happens within a complex social context where schools must work to build, "…a family-school collaboration framework in which schools take responsibility for engaging parents" (p. 87). When teachers, administrators, and other school personnel create an atmosphere that encourages collaboration and provides the necessary supports (i.e., childcare for younger children, flexible scheduling of conferences, etc.), parents may be more likely to become more involved in their children's schools.

Parent involvement, along with teacher support, is critical for greater academic achievement of preschool children. Powell, Seung-Hee, File, and San Juan, (2010) confirmed that teacher responsiveness is a key element of reciprocity in parent-school relationships. Nzinga-Johnson and Baker (2009) found that when teachers frequently used involvement techniques, they were less judgmental of less educated, low-income, and single parents. Similarly, Hilado, Kallemeyn, Loew, Lundy, and Israel (2011) found that funding related program resources targeted toward parents, while important, were not found to be the most important link to parental involvement. The relationships that were cultivated between school staff and parents were the best indicators for parent involvement. For example, a teacher making a personal invitation to a parent to become involved increased the parent's perception of feeling valued by the school and, in turn, was more likely to participate in educational activities. Such findings demonstrate the importance of including parents in preschool classrooms.

Epstein's Framework of Six Types of Involvement

Research of best practices in early childhood highlight principles of developing a comprehensive program for creating partnerships between schools and parents. There are many parental involvement models available for schools to employ. Epstein's framework (2010) addresses six types of involvement early childhood settings should employ. These include understanding the roles of: (a) *parenting*—helping all families understand child and adolescent development and sustain caring and supportive home environments across the grades, (b) *communicating*—establishing two way exchanges about school programs and children's progress, (c) *volunteering*—recruiting and organizing parent help at school, home, or in other locations, (d) *learning at home*—providing information and ideas to families about how to help students with homework and other curriculum-related learning, (e) *decision-making*—having parents from all backgrounds serve as advocates for their own children and representatives and leaders on school committees, and (f) *collaborating with the community*—identifying and integrating resources and services from the community to strengthen school programs and students' experiences.

Best practices when working with young children indicate that teachers should work from these tenets, as they build upon student strengths. Since preschool students come to school from varying home and family contexts, it is important for teachers to include parents, as parents are the first teachers. When programs are well-implemented, students will receive more support from their families and will be more motivated to work harder (Epstein, 2010). As a result, it is even more imperative to investigate preschool classrooms that successfully support and prepare young students for early schooling success in Kindergarten and the ways in which curriculum undergirded by frameworks like the Epstein Framework (2010) can support student literacy achievement.

Methods

Context

This action research study took place in a rural town of 4,800 people in the Pacific Northwest region of the United States. The eastern portion of this town is located near a Native American Tribal Reservation. As a result, many of the students who attend this preschool are of Native American origin. Because universal preschool is not yet included in the basic education funding for many states in rural regions of the country due to funding constraints, the school district sought grant money and had a sliding scale tuition program. The school receives federal funding for students who have significant developmental delays and qualify for special education. The number of students receiving these services varies from year to year. This funding covers 59 slots in preschool for students whose families are living at or below 110% of the federal poverty rate. Tuition from families who did not qualify for the other two programs covers the cost for 40 additional students.

Participants

The district hosts five preschool classes comprised of 15-17 students each. In those five classes, approximately 40% in any class are students with identified special education needs. There were 14 participants in this study which were equally divided between male and female. Of the 14 participants, 57% were self-identified as Caucasian, 28.6% were Hispanic, 7% were Native American, and 7% were self-identified as Other. In this study the term 'parent' is used for any primary custodial caregiver of the student, whether or not he/she is the biological parent. The names of all people in this paper are represented by pseudonyms.

Data Collection

Literacy Curriculum

The literacy curriculum was informed by Epstein's Framework (See Table 1 for an alignment of the framework and the literacy curriculum). In the following, each aspect of the framework (i.e., parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, and decision-making) is discussed in relation to the curriculum developed by Author 1.

Epstein Framework Component: Parenting and Learning at Home

Parent participation at home was encouraged through three different activities that included reading books from a classroom lending library with their children, helping their children with interactive homework, and using learning unit language cards with their children. Each of these components is discussed below.

Classroom lending library for home reading. To facilitate student choice of books to use at home, a home lending library of 300 books was established. The classroom lending offered students a variety of fiction and non-fiction titles in a wide variety of books in English and Spanish. Parents and students completed a login sheet to document their reading behaviors

and progress. The home reading program participation was tracked through a frequency chart in each classroom while using a check out/check in system and students' login sheets.

Interactive homework. A multi-sensory language arts, interactive homework activity was developed. This was a popular phonics based program where letters were taught using zoo animals. The students instantly responded in a positive way to the program and were excited that the animals were going to help them learn to read. As a result of their excitement, the first author developed interactive homework pages containing two animal letters for each week remaining in the school year for parents and students to complete together at home.

Language cards. Using thematic units, related to the local environment (i.e., forest animals, evergreen and deciduous trees, seed and plant lifecycle, and insects), the first author created language cards to share these local resources with students and to promote language skills. Each card contained information and small graphics related to that week's topic, which included interaction prompts with newly learned concepts. These language cards were sent home each week for parents and students to review together.

Epstein Framework Component: Volunteering and Communicating

Literacy events. To encourage parental involvement and to support literacy and language development, literacy events were structured outside of school and in important places in the community, and parents were encouraged to volunteer and share their experiences about the events. Based upon parents' responses in a parent questionnaire, these events were at different times and days to accommodate parents and families. These events were structured to engage parents in literacy and to support the connections between students' outside lives and the classroom. For the literacy events during and outside of class time, an attendance chart and tally sheet was used to keep track of frequency of participation by adult members of student families. Parents shared their reflections about these literacy events by completing a handout after each event.

Epstein Framework Component: Decision-making

Because the nature of the literacy curriculum was based on the students' interests and ideas, the students were active in making decisions about the direction and focus of the topics used in the literacy curriculum. For example, students were interested in playing outside and being outdoors. As a result, the literacy events were outside at a local national park where students could experience the park's resources. For many of the students and parents, this was the first time they had been to the park and heard stories about the different animals and habitat.

Observations and assessments. Teaching Strategies Gold (TSG) (Lambert, Kim, & Taylor, 2010) is a commercial assessment program adopted by the district that was used to track growth and proficiency of the students. The TSG tracks student growth and proficiency of income qualified program students for reporting data to the Department of Early Learning (DEL). DEL, in turn, reports statewide results to the state legislature annually. The local early childhood program also chose to use TSG along with individualized education plans (IEPs) for the students receiving special education services who were transitioning to kindergarten. Ongoing observations and in-class assessments were used to gather and record data on 38 objectives in six developmental areas into the online TSG system (See Appendix A for the

outlined developmental areas). Within this assessment, language measures how a child listens to and understands increasingly complex language, uses language to express thoughts and needs, and uses appropriate conversational and other communication skills. Literacy measures track how a child demonstrates phonological awareness, knowledge of the alphabet, knowledge of print and its uses, comprehends and responds to books and other texts, and demonstrates emergent writing skills.

Observations were conducted by the first author throughout the year. Each child had 2 short, formal observations and 14 informal observations with Author. Author 1 took anecdotal records of these observations.

Epstein Framework Component: Communicating

Parent questionnaires. Parent attitudes about connectedness to their child's school and participation in literacy-based activities were conducted through questions and follow up phone interviews about the activities and parent feelings about their children's school (Appendix B). Parent responses were reviewed to look for trends of parent connectedness and for types of participation that were most meaningful for the parents when reflecting about their participation in the various literacy-based activities. Responses were also reviewed for their level of connectedness to their children's classroom and school.

Conferences. Teacher, parent, and family services conferences were conducted throughout the year to support communication between parents and the school. These conferences were mainly structured around students' literacy and language development but also focused on any ideas or concerns parents wished to share. These conferences were mainly structured on supporting students' literacy and language development but also focused on the community resources available to students and families.

Results

In the following section, the results are shared with a discussion of how the results relate to each component of the literacy curriculum developed by Author 1. Additionally, attention is focused on how these results related to Epstein's Framework (2010).

Classroom Lending Library for Home Reading

Participation in the classroom lending library was measured by the number of times a student brought books back to school and checked a new book out from the lending library. The majority (6 families, 42.9%) participated 0-1 times per week for the classroom lending library for home reading. In addition, four families (28.6%) participated 2-3 times per week, and four families (28.6%) participated all four days each week.

It must be noted that all the families (n = 14) reported reading at home with their children using other resources. Half of the families (n = 7, 50%) reported reading to their children at least once per day, while five families (35.7%) reported reading to their children 4-6 times per week. Only two families (14.3%) read to their child 1-3 times per week using materials at home or other school materials.

Parent Participation in the Lending Library Program for Home Reading

The result of the participation in the home reading program and its correlation (Spearman rho) to appreciating books was diverse. That is, parent participation in literacy related activities at home were measured. In the Fall, there was no significant correlation ($r = .413$, $p = .142$), while there was a significant correlation in the Spring ($r = .609$, $p = .021$). The correlation between participation in classroom read alouds and conversations and home reading program from Fall to Spring was the exact opposite. In the Fall, the results were significant (r = .623, p = .017), while there was no significant correlation between participation in the home reading program and retelling stories in the Spring (r = .623, p = .014).

Qualitative responses revealed that parents were in support of the home reading program. For example, Emma's mother noted a benefit for herself and her child, "Emma loved bringing the books home to read. It was nice to have a break from the ones she always wants to read over and over every night." Such a response indicates that an intervention like this could potentially increase parent and student motivation to participate in literacy linked activities. The home reading books benefited children who already had access to books from other sources. Cali's mother noted, "We go to the public library every week, and Cali checks out a pile, a literal pile, of books from there, but she always likes to add the book from school to the reading every night." These findings suggest that, in terms of the component within Epstein's Framework (2010) Parenting and Learning at Home, this aspect of the literacy curriculum served to support students and parents reading time at home.

Interactive Homework

Participation varied in the13 offered interactive homework activities. The majority of the families did not return homework assignments (n = 5, 35.7%). However, three families (21.4%) returned two assignments, and one family (7.1%) returned six assignments. A two-tailed Pearson Correlation was calculated to identify whether there was a correlation between the use of interactive homework focusing on alphabet sounds and student ability to identify letter and sound relationships as measured by TSG. At the beginning of the study in November, there was no correlation between the two (r = .301, p = .296); however, by the end of the study in June, there was a significant correlation (r = .77, p=.001). Participation in the interactive homework focusing on alphabet sounds significantly increased the student's ability to identify letter and sound relationships. Such findings suggest that, through the interactive homework component of the literacy curriculum, students' literacy abilities greatly increased. Moreover, in terms of Parenting and Learning at Home, a component of Epstein's Framework (2010), initiatives like these involving parents at home with literacy activities served to support students' recognition of letter and sound relationships.

Observations and Assessments

A paired sample t-test was calculated to determine whether there was a significant increase in the students' language on the TSG measures after receiving family literacy linked interventions (language cards, literacy events, etc.). Results were found to be significant, $t(13) = -17.883$, $p < .001$, $d = 4.78$, large). Family literacy linked interventions (language cards, literacy events, etc.) significantly increased students' language (See Table 2). These findings highlight the ways in which the literacy linked interventions increased students' language skills. Observations revealed that students appeared more active and engaged during literacy related

activities in class and often made connections to something in their lives outside of school to share in class during literacy instruction (Teacher observation, May 2013).

(Insert Table 2 here)

Parent Involvement and Overall Literacy Skills

A paired sample t-test was calculated to identify whether there was a significant increase in the students' literacy skills after receiving family literacy linked interventions and was found to be significant, $t(13) = -18.914$, $p < .001$, $d = 5.06$, large). Family literacy linked interventions significantly increased the students' literacy skills. An ANOVA (See Table 3) was calculated to identify whether participation in the home reading program significantly affected student overall literacy as measured by TSG literacy index and was found to be significant. The effect size was large ($\eta^2 = .44$). A Tukey Post Hoc test was calculated to identify where the significant difference lay. The families who participated in the home reading program who read three to four times per week ($M = 6.54$, SD = .91) were significantly higher in their overall literacy (as measured by TSG) than the families who participated less than one time per week ($M = 4.69$, SD = .99). Much like Epstein's Framework (2010) states, Parenting and Learning at Home, as seen in the results of this dimension of the literacy intervention, resulted in an increase in these preschool students' literacy skills.

Parent Questionnaires

Of the eight parents who provided feedback about their children's school through surveys and interviews, all reported feeling positive or very positive about the school and the services and activities that were associated with the school. When asked to identify their experiences as parents, they were more specific about how they felt about the particular activities (literacy events, interactive homework, and home reading program).

During one literacy event, five students and parents attended, along with students from other classes. One student's mother shared, "It was so much fun to do something with just my daughter. We do so much as a family that I almost didn't come, but I'm glad we did. We don't usually have time together, just the two of us." Hannah's mother echoed that sentiment, "I loved spending time together. I was surprised to see how she was behaving with the other kids. She was taking turns and helping with these kids more than she does with her sister."

Rowdy's dad kept thanking the staff during one of the literacy events and then gave this feedback about the trip, "We always enjoy the outdoors, but the field trip with his friends made it all that much better. We enjoyed it very much!! The book is great, because Rowdy loves to have me read it to him at bedtime, and he remembers going to the park with everyone." Parent reading volunteers increased, from 1-2 per month at the beginning of the year to consistently yielding 5-6 parents per class per week as the study progressed.

Amber's dad stated, "We read a lot at home too, but it is really neat to meet Amber's friends and get to see who these kids are that she talks about so much." Additionally, Sean's mom asked, "Who buys all these books? It is so nice of them to do this for the kids." For some of the families, it was important to receive bilingual books. Diego's mom let me know that Diego's dad wanted to volunteer, but he didn't read or speak English very well. About 20% of the books are bilingual to accommodate bilingual children. When I (first author) let her know that we would have Spanish language books available, she said that she would let her husband know. Diego's dad came and read with Diego and another Spanish speaking student. Later,

Diego's mom stated, "It meant so much to my husband that he could come and read with Diego at school and then take a book home that they could share."

Parents had varied reactions to the homework aspect of the curriculum. Cali's mom stated, "She was so excited that she got to have real homework, just like her brother. That paper came out of her backpack as soon as she got home, and then she would get the scissors and glue. She wouldn't stop until she had the paper filled." One parent reported, "Preschoolers shouldn't have to do homework. It is bad enough that kids get homework in kindergarten." Even though the parent responses like this one were not as positive, students valued the word wall that was created from the homework pages in class.

Volunteering and Communicating, core principles within Epstein's Framework (2010), appeared to foster somewhat positive views on homework from parents. For those parents with supportive responses about this aspect of the curriculum, this seemed to foster positive responses about their child's literacy development. In other words, by including these aspects into the literacy curriculum, parents appeared to feel more comfortable and able to share their perspectives and opinions about their child's literacy habits and skills.

Conferences

Overall, parents responded positively about the opportunities for parent conferences and participation in the classroom. They framed their own connection to their child's school in relationship to the children's feelings about the teaching staff and the school activities. For example, Lily was a second year student during the study. During her first year at preschool, Lily was reticent to separate from her mother and had an attendance rate of 60%. This year, Lily's attendance rate was above 90%. Lily's mother stated, "Lily loves school so much. She loves you and the other adults. I hope she loves her kindergarten teacher too, because if she don't, it will be hard to get her to want to go to school." Austin's mother also reflected this sentiment when she said, "Austin loves school. He really loves Manuel (class assistant). He tells me Manuel did this…Manuel did that… I hear about Manuel every day it seems like." The most meaningful activities in this study that affected student growth were reading at home and the classroom lending library for reading at home. While the interactive homework related to activities at school was also statistically significant in affecting student growth, the low participation rate warrants further research. Results like this suggest that communicating, a central component within Epstein's Framework (2010), was a key ingredient in increasing students' literacy skills. Other activities which did not show effect in academic growth but related to parent positive attitudes about school were reading volunteers and joint activities, such as field trips, for parent and preschoolers.

In this study, providing a classroom lending library increased likelihood of parents reading at home with their children, which supported findings in past research by Madrigal, Cubillas, and Yaden (1999) and Stahl (2004). The lending library allowed easy access to books for home reading and had a high impact on students' overall literacy skill development. By lowering the barrier to families' ease of access to children's books, the lending library increased the opportunities to read with their preschool children at home. This activity not only increased preschool skills of using and appreciating books, it also was demonstrated in the classroom through greater participation in classroom read-alouds and book discussions.

While the initial findings of interactive homework were that it was an effective learning tool for students to work with parents, the number of families that participated was small. Even so, the emerging data from this study suggests that interactive homework with phonics based letter-sound activities was successful. Moreover, homework that encouraged students to return

some sort of product to school had more effect on student growth in skills than the homework items that did not have any expectation of return, such as the learning unit vocabulary cards. Further research on interactive homework with a larger mandatory population would help understand the effects of the large numbers of participants that chose not to participate in the interactive homework in this study.

When parents participated in activities at school, they developed relationships with the staff and the other students in their children's class. The parents' experience of participation in school activities often reflected their children's ongoing experience and relationships at school. Parental attitudes about their children's school were closely identified with their children's relationships to school, especially the teaching staff. The activities allowed parents and staff members to interact with one another and build on the relationship already established by the children and the teaching staff. It follows that teachers can influence student outcomes not only by what they teach in the classroom, but also through the relationships they cultivate with their students' families. Preschool teachers have a special role in the academic life for students in that they are often the first teachers in a school setting and can help set the stage for parent involvement for the K-12 system.

When parents understood the learning goal of the assignment, they were more likely to be involved with their child in the specific activity. This supported the findings of efficacy of interactive homework by Battle-Bailey (2006, 2012). For those students who had high levels of participation, their understanding of letters and sounds showed more growth than for those whose participation was low. The extra outreach through individual phone calls to parents was effective in ensuring that parents understood what was envisioned for the assignments. It was important to make personal contact for relationship building around the activity, as well as to increase the possibility of parents checking backpacks and understanding the assignments. The assignments were made to be predictable and easily understood by parents, but also engaging for children, suggesting that components (i.e., communicating, parent and learning at home) of Epstein's Framework (2010) were essential factors in increasing students' literacy skills.

Parents and students alike showed a high enjoyment of the "Stop, Drop, and Read" days at school. Students enjoyed having their parents come to school and meet their teachers and classmates. Parents enjoyed the opportunities to enter into their children's classroom and help with the educational activities for their children and their children's friends. Volunteering to read was often one of the only classroom activities that could be managed with tight work schedules. This was also a time when parents could learn one or two strategies beyond reading the text to use with their children at home.

Activities jointly shared by parents and preschoolers were well received. Two book fairs, a storytelling evening at school, a literacy fair at the public library, and curriculum nights were attended by many preschool families. However, the parent and preschooler field trip to the state park was easily the favorite for the families who participated. The time spent with other parents, students, and staff outside of the classroom allowed all participants to experience one another outside of the more formal roles at school. This environment allowed for fostering relationships in a way that does not happen as easily in more formal parent teacher conferences at school.

The amount of parent conference time helped to build relationships with parents and students. It also was a time when individualized parenting information could be passed on according to the parents' needs; however, the conference time did not have an effect on the growth in language skills from November to May. A correlation between parent conference time and academic growth might be significant as children enter into kindergarten.

Student language skills showed growth overall, but when discussed in relation to the statistics regarding parent involvement, there was not an associated effect from the interventions that were implemented for this study.

Parent participation in literacy linked activities showed significant effect on student literacy skills in the areas of understanding of letter and sound relationships, use and appreciation of books, and participation in class read-alouds and book discussions. High participation in the home-reading program correlated with significantly higher overall literacy scores as well. There was no correlation, however, between parent participation in the literacy linked activities and language growth in any area as measured by TSG.

There was no statistical significance established regarding language and literacy skill growth and self-reported levels of library use or self-reported levels of home reading. There may be no link between these factors. It is possible, however, that because reading is commonly known to be a highly valued support for young children, parents may have reported a higher level of participation than the actual participation to reflect larger societal expectations upon parents reading to their children.

Discussion

In this action research study, the goal was to gain insight about whether parent participation in literacy linked activities was related to student growth in language and literacy skills as well as whether parental participation was linked to parental attitudes about school. The overall findings support the understanding that parents matter in their preschool children's education. Moreover, the findings suggest that Epstein's Framework (2010) is an essential component in structuring literacy curriculum in support of preschool students and their families. This action research study supports the findings of Siraj and Blatchford (2008) that schools and parents partnering in meaningful activities can positively affect the education of preschool children. It also supports the findings in previous research that parent partnerships should be cultivated and supported by schools in a variety of ways that include parenting, communication, volunteering, and learning at home (Epstein & Jonsorn, 2004; Epstein, 2010). Results from the perspective of a preschool teacher, teaching in a high poverty rural school, with limited resources is insightful. In sharing this research, we echo the words of Cochran Smith and Lytle (2009) who stated that the importance of "Recognizing that teachers and other practitioners are critical to the success of all efforts to improve education is clearly an idea whose time has come- or should have come long ago" (p. 7).

This action research project found that addressing preschool student academic growth was connected to parent participation. When schools address the potential barriers to parent involvement, it is more likely that parents will desire to participate in activities offered by the school. A variety of opportunities also allows parents to try different activities with their preschool children. Those parents who participated in a wide variety of activities had more opportunities to develop relationships with the teachers and other school staff.

Rowdy's father drew a connection between the relationships with staff and the literacy linked activities that were held. He stated, "The added interaction with the class in all the activities helps get a better connection with the school and staff." This statement, along with the research previously mentioned, reinforces the need for schools to make intentional efforts to reach out to student families in a variety of ways. By reaching out to parents as critical players in the education of their students, preschool teachers can increase the educational impact on students. Teachers can be a valuable link between home and school to help parents learn

additional strategies to use at home which can help preschoolers develop their early academic skills.

Findings highlight how reading at home regularly with an adult is a key element for children to grow into readers as seen in the lending library data. Classroom lending libraries within preschool classrooms can make books more easily available for children whose families may have difficulty with schedules, finances, and reliable transportation to buy books of their own or access books at the local public library. The classroom lending library also allows students to develop agency in their identity as early readers through choosing and caring for the books that interest them. Lending libraries with books in different languages honor reading in home languages.

While the initial findings indicate that interactive homework is an effective learning tool for students to work with parents, the number of families that participated was small. The emerging data from this study suggest that interactive homework with phonics based letter-sound activities is successful. Moreover, homework that encouraged students to return some sort of product to school had more effect on student growth in skills than the homework items that did not have any expectation of return, such as the learning unit vocabulary cards. When parents understood the learning goal of the assignment and how to help with the assignment, they were more likely to be involved with the student. Further research on interactive homework with a larger population would help understand the effects of the large number of families that chose not to participate in the interactive homework in this study.

When parents participated in activities at school they developed relationships with the staff and the other students in their children's class. The parent's experience of participation in school activities often reflected their children's ongoing experience and relationships at school. Parent attitudes about their children's school were closely identified with their children's relationships to school, especially the teaching staff. The activities allowed parents and staff members to interact with one another and build on the relationship already established by the children and the teaching staff. It follows that teachers can influence student outcomes not only by what they teach in the classroom, but also through the relationships they cultivate with their students' families. Preschool teachers have a special role in the academic life for students in that they are often the first teachers in a school setting and can help set the stage for parent involvement for the K-12 system.

Conclusion

Families in poverty often have many compelling risk factors affecting young children's later success in the education system. While it is optimal to address these factors prior to age three, preschool teachers can use strategies within their programs to help mediate the impact of risk factors and help build the skills needed for a strong academic foundation from which to build. One essential ingredient in supporting preschool students and their families is to restructure literacy instruction to support the students' cultural, linguistic, and strengths and to include students' outside of school lives and families into the classroom. Preschools programs rich in developmentally appropriate literacy activities and parent involvement provide an opportunity to support children in poverty to develop the necessary early academic and social skills needed to be successful in preschool and beyond. When schools conduct outreach to encourage family involvement and leadership in classrooms, children are more likely to become invested in the learning process.

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