

## Small Groups and Mentors Foster Relationships During Summer Reading Program—A Qualitative Analysis

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### Abstract

This study involved interviews with seventeen parents and twenty-six school personnel involved with children in a six-week summer reading and nutrition program, Energy Express. Quantitative studies of Energy Express show significant increases in reading scores. This study indicates that children develop relationships with their college student AmeriCorps mentors and with each other; parents develop relationships with the program. We conclude that the program provides opportunities for building relationships that enhance children's learning.

### Background

Low-income West Virginia communities face twin challenges each summer—the erosion of skills that makes summer-time costly for new readers and the nutritional decline faced by students accustomed to school meals (*USDE 1999*). When they return to school in the fall, many children show a decline in reading level and physical health compared to the previous spring. Energy Express was introduced in 1994 to address the two identified needs of summer reading and nutrition for low-income children.

Programmers know that, in addition to books and food, a successful summer program must afford opportunities for building relationships that will enhance learning. Ruby Payne, in *A Framework for Understanding Poverty (1998, 14)*, states, “The key to achievement for students from poverty is in creating relationships with them. Because poverty is about relationships . . . , the most significant motivator for these students is relationships.”

A 1997 national longitudinal study (*Resnick et al. 1997, 823*) addressed the importance of relationships in terms of “connectedness.” America's Promise (*Funkhouser and Gonzales 1997*) identified “a relationship with a trusted, caring adult” as one of the five resources for youth. Young people need adult relationships beyond their families; community-based programs, youth organizations, schools, and religious organizations can serve as agents for connecting.

Programmers also acknowledge the importance of parents in their children's learning. According to the U.S. Department of Education (*Funkhouser and Gonzales 1997*), thirty years of research confirms that family involvement is a powerful influence on children's achievement. Children of involved parents earn higher grades and receive higher scores on tests. Baker Serpell, and Sonnenschen (*1995*) contend that positive parental attitudes toward literacy can help children become more successful readers.

***Energy Express:*** A major outreach effort of the state's land-grant university, Energy Express is a six-week program designed to promote the school success of children living in low-income communities by maintaining their reading skills and nutritional well-being over the summer months. West Virginia University Extension Service provides leadership and partners with local and state agencies and organizations for program planning, implementation, and evaluation. College student AmeriCorps members serving as mentors work with groups of eight children, who attend for three and a half hours five days a week. A local teacher or principal hired by West Virginia

University Extension Service serves as site coordinator and guides the Energy Express site in a public school.

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Using literature related to weekly themes, mentors guide children through enriching experiences to make reading more meaningful in their lives. Activities include shared reading and writing, and creative arts projects related to their reading and writing. Three program components were designed to afford program

participants the opportunities to build relationships: the use of college student AmeriCorps members as mentors to children; the use of small groups throughout the entire summer experience; and the involvement of parents on an ongoing basis.

In Energy Express, mentor-child groups are kept small. The ratio of eight children to one college student mentor is intended to create opportunities for children to receive a great deal of individual time and attention and to build strong relationships with a significant, trusted adult. The opportunity to make strong connections is enhanced by eating two meals together and engaging in reading,

art, drama, and recreation each day with the same small group of children. Mentors are encouraged to build positive relationships by respecting, celebrating, and empowering children as they listen, work, and play together. They serve as positive role models for children as they engage in reading, eating healthy foods, solving problems, and cooperating.

Small groups are designed to help children become contributing members of a cooperative group. Children are grouped vertically, with at least three grade levels represented in each small group. This helps mask the differences in “grade-level appropriate” achievement and promotes cross-age interaction. Within the group, a noncompetitive environment is maintained to create a safe place where children feel comfortable taking risks and where children are encouraged to cooperate to achieve group goals.

Energy Express values parents and believes that they are important to their children’s learning. College student mentors make home visits the week before the program and then stay connected to families throughout the six weeks via phone calls, newsletters, “good news” notes, and visits. Through these personal contacts, parents are encouraged to visit and also to participate by volunteering. There are a wide variety of volunteer opportunities for parents in support of children’s learning. The site team works to create an environment that makes parents feel welcome in a friendly and relaxed atmosphere.

***Quantitative Evaluation Results:*** Since its inception in 1994, Energy Express has exceeded its goal of maintaining children’s reading skills over the summer months. Significant differences in the reading achievement of participating Energy Express children have been documented by Woodcock-Johnson Reading Achievement Subtest scores. Seventy percent of the children tested maintained or improved their scores with the average “hypothetical child” gaining one month in word identification and three months in comprehension skills at a time when nonparticipating peers are expected to lose reading skills (*Butera and Phillips 1998*). In addition, a before-and-after reading attitude survey with youths from three Energy Express case study sites found significant positive differences on twelve of sixteen items related to children’s attitudes about reading (*Butera 1998*).

Gains in reading scores attest to the program’s benefit to children’s reading achievement. However, does Energy Express provide opportunities for participants to develop relationships that can enhance learning? Do the children develop positive relationships

with the college student AmeriCorps mentors? Do the children learn to connect with each other and build important cooperative skills? Do parents connect with the program in ways that allow them to be involved in their children's learning? Following the 1998 Energy Express program, interviews were conducted with parents and teachers to answer these questions.

### Research Design

A qualitative evaluation research design was used to collect data through interviews with a sample of forty-three parents and school personnel from ten sites in seven counties. Interviewers included seventeen parents, twenty teachers, and six principals involved with children who participated in the Energy Express program during the summer of 1998. Two of the teachers and two of the principals also served as site coordinators during the summer.

The qualitative analysis method used involved the division of the data into relevant and meaningful groups while maintaining a connection to the whole (*Gredler 1996, 295–307*). A set of codes was developed to help identify initial categories of responses. The frequency of the code's occurrence helped to identify patterns and relationships emerging across the data.

### Major Research Findings

The interviews yielded information on the relationships that develop during the summer program—children's relationships with college student mentors, children's relationships with each other as they work in small groups, and parents' relationships with the program. Each of these themes is an important component of the Energy Express model, which recognizes the importance of relationships to enhance learning.

***Children's Relationships with Mentors:*** Teachers and parents described the value of the college student mentors to the program and the children.

“I love the mentors. They are young, enthusiastic, and I think it's a great idea, the college students.”

“. . . college students . . . can relate to these students. They don't look at them quite the way a teacher would.”

There was an overwhelming consensus from parents that children truly liked their mentors and became attached to them; parents liked

and respected them as well. Both parents and teachers saw the mentors as excellent role models for children. One teacher shared her ideas about mentors serving as role models.

“I think anytime there are students who are exposed to good role models, then they can pattern their behavior after those role models. I do know there have been here at Energy Express. ‘Well, do you know such and such,’ and they were talking about the mentors, and they were saying, ‘This is what that person did . . . and I’d like to be that person.’”

Teachers discussed the impact of Energy Express on children and credited the mentors for the changes.

“Their reading, their attitudes toward reading have improved [and] their self-esteem. The fact that they have a lot of one-on-one relationships with mentors is a real boost to them. It’s something they need that they don’t often get in this area.”

***Children’s Relationships with Peers:*** Responses from parents and school personnel indicated that they appreciated and recognized the benefits of the group configuration used in Energy Express. Many responses focused on the special attention that children receive when they are one of only eight in a mentor group. Typical of the responses is the perspective of one parent:

“Another thing I noticed that is just great for these kids is that each kid gets equal attention, equal time in everything they did. . . . It just amazed me. Because life is not like that. It’s not fair at all. . . . You know in classes there’s always kids who never get involved or get attention, because half the time they aren’t noticed.”

A Title I resource teacher described the same phenomenon:

With Energy Express, where they are in small groups and get a lot more attention, I believe it helps their self-esteem and helps them . . . come out of their shell, because Energy Express gives them the opportunity to do that. So then that carries over into their classroom the following year. I think that mostly it impacts the children that would fall in the cracks, had it not been for Energy Express.

School personnel also valued the impact of the noncompetitive environment maintained within the groups. The following responses from teachers illustrate the belief that because of Energy Express, children have learned to interact in cooperative ways:

“They can work in cooperative groups (in Energy Express) and most of these children can do that. And that is a skill that is sometimes hard for these children that are maybe lower in reading and math and receive Title I services—they have trouble socially interacting with other children.”

“I noticed that the children who attended are very social and cooperate more with others than some that did not participate. This was a rough group last year, and that was a goal we had—the Title I teacher and I—to get them to work in small groups. A pair would automatically be in a fight; three was impossible; and this is the first year I can say, ‘Okay, get into small groups,’ and I can put them in as many as I want and rarely have a problem. This was an added benefit.”

“I think the children in my room are more cooperative and helpful to other children. It doesn’t seem to be so much ‘me first, me-me-me’; rather it’s, ‘I’ll help you.’”

The principal at one site supported the teachers’ views:

“Those who did participate had a little edge with broadening their understanding of each other and the cooperation team effect; they were enhanced by having the opportunity.”

Both parents and teachers believed that children benefit when they work in groups composed of different grade levels and that the relationships that develop are supportive of children. Two teachers shared their observations:

“I think for our school situation, this fits in perfectly because we make the sixth graders be very responsible for things . . . they just picked up so much this year. . . . They have become a lot more responsible in helping the younger kids do a lot of things. And a lot of those sixth graders were Energy Express students last year. They deal well with children of a younger age, which is what we let them do in Energy Express.”

“All of the students I have from the Energy Express list are very willing to share. They are very accepting of others. They invite people into their social groups . . . if there is someone that might be left out.”

A parent also shared an appreciation for the situation experienced by her child as she participated in Energy Express with children other than those in her school year classroom:

“She [my daughter] learned to deal with a lot of children she hadn’t come in contact with before. Especially in her class they had a little girl that was deaf. She learned how to deal with a handicap and how to deal with that child. It was exciting for her. She was learning sign language and how to be a role model for that child.”

***Parents’ Relationships with the Program:*** Teachers comment that Energy Express is particularly successful in involving parents in volunteer efforts at the site. Many of these parents are not typically involved during the school year but seem to feel more comfortable with Energy Express.

“Some of the parents were not successful students when they were in school . . . and many times they are leery about being in school settings. Energy Express is an unstructured setting that has given them more confidence to become involved throughout the school year.”

Parents also make the observation that the parents respond to the environment created around Energy Express:

“I think with Energy Express parents feel more welcome in the school . . . and they feel a little more comfortable in coming into the school and they feel more confident in helping their children because a lot of times we have parents who do not have the educational background and they feel less adequate helping their child.”

Both teachers and principals attest to the long-term impact of Energy Express on parents:

“One of our parent volunteers became so involved in reading books . . . she has now decided [it] is important to have reading [in the school] and she is now coordinator

for a read-aloud program for the school. She not only works with the staff, she also works with parents and the community to get read-aloud volunteers into the school. She has been a tremendous asset, and it all started with her involvement in Energy Express!”

Perhaps the statement that captures the spirit of this program was made by the parent of one Energy Express child:

“We all became a community in the Energy Express program.”

### Conclusions

***Does Energy Express provide opportunities for participants to develop relationships that can enhance learning?*** The Energy Express mentor and small group model does provide important opportunities for children to build connections and relationships.

Parents and teachers confirm that the strong relationships that develop among mentors and children are critical to the success of Energy Express.

***Do the children develop positive relationships with the AmeriCorps mentors?***

Children who participate in Energy Express truly like

their mentors and become attached to them. Parents and teachers value the mentors as excellent role models who connect with the children in positive ways that support reading and social development.

***Do the children learn to connect with each other and build important cooperative skills?*** The small-group configuration is important to ensure that the children get enough individual attention and time to connect with their mentor and the other children. The children learn to cooperate in these small noncompetitive groups. They learn to interact in cooperative ways with each other and will include everyone in the group.

***Do parents connect with the program in ways that allow them to be involved in their children’s learning?*** The Energy Express environment is welcoming to parents, who are made to feel comfortable volunteering at the site. This summer involvement has carryover into the school year as parents are more involved in their children’s learning.

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## Implications

The following are implications for the extension service and school partners:

- Qualitative research is a valuable complement to quantitative data and a tool for understanding the perspectives of various stakeholders.
- Relationships are an important component of successful programs.
- The combination of college student mentors and small groups helps children form important relationships and is a useful model for other programs.
- Relationships developed with parents during summer educational programs can lead to continued parental involvement in children's learning.
- The qualitative data are consistent with the quantitative data. Both reveal the Energy Express program's positive impact on children.
- Energy Express should be continued as a program. Data suggest that it makes an important contribution to children's school success.

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