Supporting Parents as Reading Teachers Through Collaboration

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Learning to read is a challenging quest. Kindergarten teachers get to see students make great gains in this endeavor each year. Those gains, however, are not isolated to what students experience in the classroom. Children develop early literacy skills in every context of their lives; parents and families play a powerful role in this process. The way in which parents support early literacy skills at home is incredibly important. However, many parents feel unsure of how to support and teach these crucial skills to their children. The goal of this report is to discuss how a partnership focused on early literacy skills between home and school impacts the attitude of parents about supporting and teaching these skills at home.

Review of the Literature

Early Literacy

Teaching children to read is no simple task and involves the development of several sub-skills. According to the National Early Literacy Panel (2008), “There is strong evidence for the importance of alphabet knowledge, phonological awareness, rapid naming tasks, ‘writing or writing name,’ and phonological short term memory as predictors of later reading and writing skills” (p. 78). Others classify early literacy skills into two sub-sets: oral-language skills and written language skills (Sénéchal, LeFevre, Thomas, & Daley, 1998; Scarborough, 2001). Each of these variables contribute to the ultimate goal of the child being able to fluently identify printed words and create meaning from those words as well as to communicate their own ideas and thoughts through written language. The importance of developing strong early literacy skills is widely accepted by educators and researchers alike. For example, Sénéchal et al. (1998) found that the reading ability of children at the end of 1st grade was mediated through the oral- and written-language skills. The reading level of a child in first grade was further found to directly impact the child’s reading ability at the end of 3rd grade (Sénéchal & LeFevre, 2002), which has been shown to be a major predictor of educational success in 8th grade, 9th grade and into college (Lesnick, George, Smithgall, & Gwynne, 2010). While the extent to which
the various sub-skills contribute to the success of the reader in the long term is still in question, the fact that the development of early literacy skills predicts future educational success is well documented.

The Importance of Parental Involvement

Early literacy skills are not introduced to children when they walk into their first classroom. The experiences they have had at home in regards to literacy greatly contribute to the experience they will have with literacy in the classroom. For the purpose of this study, the term “parents” and “parental involvement” will be broadly used to mirror the broad use being used by many researchers. This broad use includes parents, guardians and other significant adults or caretakers who may play a role in a child’s life and education. Anderson (1995) found that children began developing perceptions of literacy that matched those held by their parents before they entered formal literacy programs at school. These initial perceptions about literacy greatly impact how students interact with literacy learning at school. Parents truly are a child’s first literacy teacher. However, the extent to which they continue to support these skills at home after children begin school is still of great importance.

No educator will deny that parental involvement is important. Of particular importance when it comes to early literacy skills, is the extent to which parents engage their children in literacy related skills such as reading together (Sénéchal et al., 1998; Sénéchal & LeFevre, 2002; Leseman & de Jong, 1998; Tizard, Schofield, & Hewison, 1982) and directly teaching reading and writing skills such as alphabet knowledge, print concepts, spelling, etc. (Sénéchal et al., 1998; Sénéchal & LeFevre, 2002; Leseman & de Jong, 1998). These experiences that students have at home contribute to their academic success at school (Sénéchal & LeFevre, 2002). For example, Tizard, Schofield, & Hewison (1982) found that children who receive parental help with reading have higher reading attainment than their peers who don’t receive help.

While educators seem to be in agreement that parental involvement, especially in regards to literacy, is important, the way that teachers involve parents is not as easily agreed upon. Linek, Rasinski, & Harkins (1997) found that many teachers’ views of parental involvement was limited to in-
school volunteering and completion of homework. Very few had an understanding of parental involvement that included a partnership between home and school that worked together to support student acquisition of skills. Those who did recognize the benefit of at-home involvement in literacy skills often emphasized how this involvement worked to facilitate modeling and motivation rather than contributing directly to the development of the various skills being taught. On the other hand, in this same study, it was found that parents wanted to be actively involved in the learning that their children were engaging in (Linek, Rasinski, & Harkins, 1997).

**Program Versus Partnership**

There has been a lot of research done recently around how to engage parents in early literacy skills at home. Many programs, which encourage home engagement with early literacy skills, have been put in place and researched to determine their effectiveness. For example, Reutzel, Fawson, & Smith (2006) studied the *Words to Go!* Program, a parent involvement program which trained parents in how to support students in “making and breaking” words at home, thus supporting the teaching being accomplished at school. Parents who participated in this program shared that they liked knowing how their children were being taught at school and being told how to support this learning at home; however, the model used did not meet the needs of all students and not all parents found it to be a beneficial use of their time.

Programs allow schools to implement parent involvement across various grade levels, however, the reality is that there is no single early literacy program that will meet the needs of all students. Thus, there has also been a great deal of research focused on partnerships and collaboration between home and school and its connection to early literacy development. In this study, partnership and collaboration is defined as a relationship in which parents and teachers work together and dialogue regarding the strengths and weaknesses of individual students. St. George (2010) studied the use of “Collegial Circles,” a model where parents and teachers participated in small group professional development and were able to engage in meaningful dialogue about how each party can support the
child’s development of early literacy skills most effectively. Additional methods for collaboration include the use of journals to communicate observations, questions, and concerns about reading at home and school (Lazar & Weisberg, 1996). Partnerships allow parents to bring the wealth of knowledge they possess about their child and their experiences with literacy at home to the table, allowing the teacher to tailor classroom and home support to the needs of that child rather than requiring that parents implement a cookie-cutter program which may or may not support their child’s development of early literacy skills. This kind of collaboration is time consuming; and because of limited hours in a day, this method does make it a challenge for teachers to attain, but the impact it has on student learning is significant. Collaboration like this has been found to be effective for all children, regardless of their initial performance level (Tizard, Schofield, & Hewison, 1982).

Parents like knowing how to support their child’s learning at home (Reutzel, Fawson, & Smith, 2006; Lazar & Weisberg, 1996). Their estimations of their child’s literacy ability play a crucial role in the way that they engage with their child. However, teachers have been found to have a more objective view of a child’s ability (Korat, 2011). When parents and teachers work as partners, parents are able to express their observations, concerns and questions while receiving individualized support. Ultimately, teachers begin teaching parents how to be teachers. This kind of relationship has been found to promote the confidence of those parents and positively increase their attitude when it comes to supporting literacy skills at home, thus increasing the support children receive at home (Sukhram & Hsu, 2012).

**Analysis**

It is agreed upon that early literacy and parental involvement are both crucial factors in the future educational success of children. However, the way in which these two factors are most effective has been debated. There are additional questions regarding how the quality of involvement comes into play. Further research is needed to determine the full effects of parental involvement on early literacy
development and how the quality of parental involvement affects students’ reading ability. However, it cannot be denied that the role parents play in a child’s development of reading skills is crucial.

Parents are their child’s first teacher. For better or worse, the way that they engage their child in literacy affects the way that child will engage with literacy in the future. As a teacher, this is an important reality to acknowledge and employ. The way that parents are engaged in collaboration around literacy directly impacts their confidence and understanding of how to support their child’s early literacy development at home. Selecting an approach that supports parents as literacy teachers ultimately facilitates students’ learning in a more holistic manner than instruction in the classroom alone can provide. Furthermore, support at home has been shown to have a greater long-term impact than in-school interventions alone (Tizard, Schofield, & Hewison, 1982).

Multiple approaches to collaborating with parents have been researched from journals to small group meetings. All of the research, however, stresses the importance of providing a place for meaningful dialogue to take place that centers on student skills and success (St. George, 2010; Lazar & Weisberg, 1996; Sukhram & Hsu, 2012). Small group meetings and trainings were the most successful in terms of participation and satisfaction rates. Small group collaboration has the added benefit of allowing teachers to not only dialogue with parents, but also provide training in how to support the literacy skills students are currently working on developing in class and how those skills support overall reading ability.

Conclusions

In conclusion, parental involvement in teaching and supporting early literacy skills is an incredibly weighty factor in student development of these skills. The way that schools and teachers engage parents in this endeavor has shown to benefit student ability. Parents want to know what their child is learning in school and how they can support this learning at home. Their attitudes toward supporting early literacy skills have been positively affected through meaningful partnerships focused on early literacy skill development with their child’s teacher.
References


