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The Shared Reading and Children's Home Library Project: Increasing Book Ownership and Shared Reading Experiences in Low-income Families

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Abstract

This study reports on a pilot test of a book distribution and shared reading education intervention with low-income families to affect change at Bronfenbrenner's microsystem level of the family or caregiver. Shared reading has been demonstrated to be an effective means of increasing emergent literacy skills (Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998), and book ownership as a child has been linked to an increase in the total number of years of schooling as an adult (Evans, Kelly, Sikora & Treiman, 2010). As repeated and sustained interventions were not feasible, we developed the program to combine the distribution of a large number of books with an informal instructional session for caregivers to determine if change would occur with minimal intervention. Twenty-four families participated in the program that included one parent education class paired with an allotment of 20-25 children's books to help start a home library. We used pre-and posttests to determine if the intervention 1) increased the overall number of books in the household and 2) increased the reported number of times the caregiver read to the child. The discussion addresses change necessary to conduct program on a large scale.

Keywords: early literacy, family literacy

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In academic literature, the term 'emergent literacy' refers to a variety of skills that children develop starting at birth and that reach their pinnacle when the child begins to read independently (Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998). Rather than reading readiness skills such as letter recognition and knowledge of phonemes, emergent literacy includes motor and cognitive skills such as language recognition, the physical conventions of print, emergent writing, and general print motivation. While there is considerable research on emergent literacy skills, establishing an effective means of encouraging parents to develop these skills in their children remains unidentified.

The Shared Reading and Children's Home Library Project (SRCHLP) was developed to increase emergent literacy opportunities at the microsystem level. Bronfenbrenner (1979) described human development as occurring within a series of interrelated ecosystems. The smallest of these is the microsystem, which includes those relationships with the most direct impact or influence on the person. In childhood, the microsystem includes the family unit, school or daycare, and neighborhood.

The Shared Reading and Children's Home Library Project mirrored the goal of other book distribution programs by attempting to create a substantial home library for children at-risk for reading disabilities. The design was a book distribution and education program delivered in one session to families of young children. Evangelou, Coxon, Sylva, Smith, & Chan, (2013), noted that receptiveness to such programs increased when provided in a convenient, familiar, and welcoming environment. Therefore, the SRCHLP presentations occurred in community resource centers during meal times in an informal manner that encouraged parent and child participation. Researchers also conducted a 45-minute educational program on the importance of emergent literacy for young children, demonstrating effective reading techniques with the children who were present. The children's participation during the program served to illustrate the researchers' points and emphasized their natural interest in books.

During the SRCHLP presentations, the researchers first emphasized the importance of shared reading experiences to reading and school success. A demonstration of effective reading techniques and developmentally appropriate practices with books followed this informational period. Topics addressed in the discussions included letting infants handle and mouth books, toddlers' physical interactions with stories, the ages when children can sit through the reading of whole storybooks, and the use of repeated phrases in books as a means of engaging the children reading. Throughout the demonstration, we encouraged the active involvement of participants engaging them with questions and asking for personal reflections regarding their own process in learning to read. At the end of the program each family received a bag of high quality and developmentally appropriate books to build their own personal home library.

Literature review

Academic literature demonstrates the importance of having books in the home and the effect of various book distribution initiatives. Book ownership at the micro-system level was the basis of a worldwide investigation with a simple, yet powerful conclusion. Evans, Kelley, Sikora, and Treiman (2010) analyzed a 27-nation survey of more than 73,000 families, and found that children who grow up in homes with many books finish an average of three more years of schooling than those who have little or no books in their home. Drawing data from the World Equality Survey, a data pool of multiple country surveys, the researchers found that nearly 10% of respondents had no books in the home while they were growing up; 23 % had around 10 books; 16% had 25; 33% had 75; and 18% had hundreds of books in the house (Evans, et al, 2010). The researchers accounted for physical and political geography as well as the economic situation of the families, and examined the number of years of school completed by the children. They found a “very substantial effect” (p. 179) on the number of years of school completed by children who had many books in their home growing up. The study did not inquire into the types of books (for children or adults); the amount of time spent reading books by the children, or if the parent and child engaged in shared reading. The extensive study concluded that a scholarly culture has a “powerful impact on educational attainment” and home environments that are “book-oriented” provide children with skills such as word knowledge and imagination, examples of good writing, and information that supports school success (p.189). Lastly, the authors highlighted that the educational impact of many books in the home is greater on children of parents with lower education levels (Evans, et al, 2010).

Book distribution-only programs produce mixed results. Dolly Parton’s Imagination Library is a book distribution program started by the performer in her home county of Sevier, TN in 1996 (Dolly Parton’s Imagination Library, n.d.). The program’s mission to “foster a love of reading among her county’s preschool children and their families,” (para. 1) guided the program which provides one free high-quality developmentally appropriate book to each child in the county from birth until the age of five. Currently, Dolly Parton’s Imagination Library serves over 756,000 children worldwide through locally funded initiatives (Dolly Parton, n.d.). The program, considered a success in several research studies, is a simple distribution program and offers no caregiver support or education. Gordon, (2010) presented the results of an Ohio Imagination Library initiative started in January of 2009. The Middletown Community Foundation worked in conjunction with a local school district to gauge the success of the program. In 2010 incoming kindergarteners who participated in the program for 12-18 months showed a 4.2% higher level of performance than kindergarteners who did not participate. Furthermore, there was a 47% increase in overall reading scores for participants when compared to scores from previous years. An additional questionnaire sent to parents of participating children found that 81.8% of the parents who responded increased the frequency that they read to their child. Moreover, 92% of parents reported that their child’s “excitement and enthusiasm about books” increased (Gordon, 2010, p.13).

Other program reports indicate similar results with the Imagination Library. Ridzi, Sylvia, and Singh (2011) surveyed 170 participant families through self-administered questionnaires and phone surveys. The researchers contacted participants who had been in the program for a minimum of 10 months to determine if greater access to books leads to more

shared book reading. They concluded the “length of enrollment in the program was a significant positive predictor” for parents to read to their children and the number of months enrolled related to an increased frequency in parent-child discussions of the story. However, the results did not show an increase in other emergent literacy behaviors such as the child looking at pictures or looking at books independently, or in parents asking children about letters (Ridzi, et al, 2011). In a follow-up study published in 2014, the research group focused on the issue of shared reading by the participants and if the use of supplemental parent and family education with the Imagination Library would improve emergent literacy skills (Ridzi, Sylvia, and Singh, 2014).

Other studies also indicate limited results of the distribution-only book programs. Embree (2009) found that just receiving books was not sufficient to effect change in other emergent literacy behaviors at the micro-system level. Using standardized test results of 187 children who participated in the Imagination Library, Embree (2009) concluded that just providing a free book each month did not significantly impact initial reading levels in kindergarten, nor did it address the gender achievement gap of the participants. However, the researcher found that the mean reading achievement score of Imagination Library children was higher than that of non-participants, and that this difference, while not statistically significant, was greatest with those in the low socio-economic status category. The researcher recommended enriching the program with more learning opportunities for parents and distributing supplemental material on how to use the books effectively in the home.

The effect of providing a large number of books to classrooms all at one time on student achievement has also been the subject of numerous research studies. Called ‘book floods’, Elley (2000) discusses the design and outcome of numerous programs in impoverished areas of Singapore (Kee, 1984), South Africa (Elley, Le Roux, and Schollar, 1998), Fiji (Elley and Mangubhai, 1979), the Solomon Islands (Elley, Singh, and Lumelume, 1999), and other countries (Elley, 1980; Ng, 1994, 1996; Elley and Foster, 1996). Used for developing English language skills in elementary schools, each of the programs provided a large quantity of books (100 or more) to classrooms at one time in conjunction with teacher training on how to use books effectively to encourage the development of second language skills. The authors concluded that children participating in these studies made significant gains in English language development, presumably reflecting the benefits of training teachers in the use of those books:

If a set of suitable books is provided in the classroom and teachers are shown how to ensure that the children interact with them every day, the children become enthusiastic about the books, they learn vocabulary and grammar of the books readily, and appear to transfer their enhanced skill to other subjects of the curriculum (Elley, 2000, p. 205).

The success of book flood programs in non-English speaking countries suggests that similar programs could be useful in supporting young children’s emergent literacy skills in the United States.

Neuman (1999) conducted a significant study on book floods in the United States on the Books Aloud book distribution program funded by the William Penn Foundation. The program involved 337 low socioeconomic status (SES) childcare centers and served 17,675 children who ranged in age from shortly after birth to five years of age. The goal of the \$2 million initiative

was to “enrich the language and literacy opportunities for children in child-care [sic] programs” (p. 289) by flooding classrooms with five books per child. Similar to the English literacy programs discussed by Elley (2000), the reach of the program went beyond just the flood of books to classrooms. Books Aloud provided 102 public libraries with more than 54,000 books and funding for special programs to increase use of the collections by families. Also included was training for classroom teachers who received books and site visits by trainers to effect change in the classroom itself. Incoming kindergarteners who had been at Books Aloud centers showed increases in every aspect of early literacy abilities, including upper and lower case recognition, concepts of print, and word recognition. The researchers concluded that while physical placement of books is “critical” (p. 306) for early literacy, it is not enough to effect change. They found that placing the books within the sightlines of the children produced the largest gains in literacy-initiated activity. This allowed children to become “active agents” (p. 306) in their own literacy activities by exploring, choosing, and using books on their own. Also needed is high quality instruction for caregivers, but too often the caregiver’s own low level of education necessitated a complex system of engagement and instruction on using books effectively in the classroom (Neuman, 1999).

The foundation for the current research rests in the demonstrated importance of book ownership, the success of the book flood method, and the concomitant need for parental engagement to effect real change in the home literacy environment. Through the development of a self-administered questionnaire for participants, researchers can begin to understand how participants are feeling, thinking, or doing (Mitchell & Jolley, 2004). Developed for this study, the questionnaire surveyed parents and caregivers’ behaviors and beliefs of early literacy experiences: book ownership, shared reading, and engagement.

Methodology

Participants

We designed this program to support shared reading between parents and children in outreach organizations in South Central Mississippi. Participants were families who received services at a food pantry, a community outreach center, or an adult education program. These organizations serve families whose children are at-risk for later learning delays related to endemic poverty in the area. A convenience sample of 24 participants participated in the current study. Fifty-four percent of the participants were mothers, 29% were grandmothers, 12% were fathers, and 4% were either an aunt or uncle. Of the participants, 75% were African-American, 17% were White/Non-Hispanic, 4% were Hispanic, and 4% identified themselves as ‘other’. A majority of the participants, 38%, had a high school diploma or GED, 33% had some college, and 12% had a four-year college degree or higher. Sixty-two percent of the participants received Medicare or Medicaid support and 41% participated in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP).

A 10 item self-administered questionnaire assessed participants’ behaviors and beliefs about early literacy experiences. We used the software tool, Question Understanding Aid (QUAID), in the development of questions by improving the wording of each question used in the questionnaire (Graesser, Cai, Louwerse, & Daniel, 2006). The behavior questions used a 5-

point frequency scale with choices of none, 1 to 5 books, 6 to 10 books, 11 to 15 books, and more than 15 books. A five-point frequency scale was used to measure how often participants read children's books to their child: rarely, 1 or 2 times a week, 3 times a week, 5 times a week, and daily. The beliefs questions used a 5-point Likert-type scale with choices of Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Neither Agree or Disagree, Agree, and Strongly Agree.

Materials and Procedure

We conducted three shared reading programs lasting three to four weeks each. All participants had to attend a 45-minute information session that promoted shared reading with children five years old and younger. The session structure promoted conversation about the impact early childhood literacy experiences on young children and included a 15-min modeling session in which an early childhood literacy specialist demonstrated shared book reading with the children in attendance. Participants received a home library kit that included at least 20 developmentally appropriate books (see the Appendix for a list of representative titles), literature to reinforce the importance of early childhood literacy experiences, and information sheets that promoted shared reading experiences in the home. All participants completed a pre-test questionnaire before the start of the shared reading program. We administered a post-test questionnaire three to four weeks later. Table 1 (below) shows the results of the pre- and post-test questionnaire.

Reliability analysis, using Cronbach's alpha (α), assessed the consistency of the questionnaire. To improve reliability, we removed three items (numbers 5, 6, and 8 above) from the questionnaire. With the removal of those questions, the reliability of the questionnaire increased to $\alpha = .814$.

Repeated measures analysis evaluated the pre- and post-test data. There was a significant effect within subjects, Wilks' lambda = .101, $F(7, 17) = 2.920$, $p = .034$. However, Mauchly's Test of Sphericity indicated a violation of the assumption of sphericity. Further analysis indicated a significant difference in two of the test items; the number of books in the home and the frequency in which parents read children's books to their child; $t(23) = -3.72$, $p = .001$ and $t(23) = -3.00$, $p = .005$, respectfully. The remaining questions did not yield a significant difference between the participants' beliefs and behaviors from the pre-test and post-test. Pre-test data indicated 12% of parents read to their child daily; while post-test data reported 21% of parents were reading to their child daily. Pre-test analysis indicated that 37% of the participants had more than 15 books in the home while post-test data showed 63% participants had more than 15 books in the home. As each participant received 20 books as part of the research, it is unclear why some reported owning fewer than 20 at the conclusion of the project. We speculate that they may have been lost or destroyed, however, protocol did not allow for follow-up inquiries, and this remains a question for further research.

Table 1

Means and standard deviations for the results of the pre- post-test questionnaires

Questions	Pre-Test	Post-Test
	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)
1. How many children's books do you currently have in your home?	3.54 (1.318)	4.29 (1.042)
2. I check out books from my local library.	2.33 (1.204)	2.29 (1.268)
3. I buy children's books for my child.	3.04 (.908)	3.08 (1.100)
4. I read children's books to my child.	2.42 (1.139)	3.17 (1.167)
5. I do NOT find it easy reading children's books.	1.62 (.770)	1.46 (0.721)
6. I believe reading to my child supports his or her learning.	4.54 (.886)	4.71 (.464)
7. I enjoy reading children's books to my child.	4.33 (.917)	4.50 (.511)
8. It is hard to find time to read children's books to my child.	2.33 (.917)	2.29 (.995)
9. I put my arm around my child when we read books together.	4.08 (.974)	4.25 (.442)
10. When is the best time to read to your child?	4.37 (1.096)	4.54 (1.021)

Discussion

The results of this study indicate some positive results with this novel program design. The book flood method of distribution combined with one intensive lesson to caregivers on effective uses of the materials had moderate success, with some respondents indicating that they had increased the frequency with which they read to their children. Reading out loud is a skill recognized as important for children to obtain emergent literacy skills such as language recognition, understanding the conventions of print, and general print motivation (Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998). Furthermore, the book flood method, giving a large number of books to a family at one time was also successful in increasing the number of books in many of the participant's homes. In addition to increasing the number of years a child may stay in school, book ownership is also an indicator of reading achievement and positive attitudes towards reading (Clark & Poulton, 2011). Books in the home can also increase opportunities for shared reading and for children to practice skills such as picture reading and storytelling on their own.

To increase the effectiveness of a large-scale book distribution program the researchers found that some adjustments in the experimental design needed to occur. Altering the distribution methods used may achieve different and better results of the book flood. Rather than offering a large number of books in one book flood with just one opportunity for parent education,

providing additional educational experiences accompanied with the piecemeal distribution of five or six books per session over a five or six-month period may produce better outcomes of the program. This method would maintain the focus and attention of participants to the primary purpose of the study, to increase the likelihood of shared reading at home. It would also allow the facilitators to develop relationships with the caregivers and work with them closely over a period of months providing feedback designed to improve their skills at shared reading. Having several sessions on the importance of home literacy may also encourage caregivers to develop a sustained habit of daily-shared reading. Meeting with families several times would also allow the instructors to get to know the children's abilities and interests so that they could find books appropriate to each child. At the end of the project, each child would own a collection of books that were specific to their liking, increasing the likelihood of continued shared reading activities in the home. Finally, distributing books in a more measured manner would allow instructors to address effective reading of specific books in a group, making each instructional period more effective.

In June 2014, the American Academy of Pediatrics addressed the importance of emergent literacy to children's overall well-being for the first time (Council on Early Childhood, 2014). In a policy statement on literacy promotion, the Academy cited research studies demonstrating the value of early literacy experiences and their effect on the ability to read well later in life. The policy statement recommended that pediatricians advise parents on the importance of reading out loud to children and equated good literacy skills to good overall health throughout life. As the recognition of the importance of early literacy skills falls into mainstream conversations on health, it will become increasingly important to develop effective book distribution programs like the SRCHLP. These programs provide those without the means to acquire skills or purchase books to own them, thereby offering participating children and their families a possible path to increased academic achievement, an enhanced sense of self-efficacy and good health throughout their lives.

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Appendix

List of representative titles of children's books given to participants.

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