The Family Reading Program Project:

Student and Family Attitudes towards School and Reading

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Abstract

It has long been accepted in the realm of teaching and teacher research that the presence of parental involvement can positively affect students' academic achievement amongst other positive outcomes. It is also known however, that parental involvement, under the traditional definition (i.e., volunteering at school), is typically minimal amongst low socioeconomic status (SES) and English language learner (EL) populations. This pre-service teacher research study uses Epstein's (1995) broader definition of school, family, and community partnerships, as well as, Epstein's Framework of Six Types of Involvement to inform the development of school, family, and community partnerships through a "Family Reading Program." Behaviorist theory and current research, including findings from Hoover-Dempsey et al., (2005) on the reasons why parents get involved, were used to address common barriers that keep low (SES) and EL families from regular, active participation at their children's schools. These same theories were then used to purposefully develop a program attempting to overcome barriers in order to increase student and family participation and attitudes towards school and reading amongst 22 first grade students and their families. Details of the development and product of the "Family Reading Program" are included. This study concludes with recommendations for schools, and/or individual teachers, and suggestions for improvement.

Keywords: attitudes, barriers, parental involvement, pre-service teachers, read-alouds, reading program, school-family-community partnerships

Introduction to the Study

I am a pre-service teacher, co-teaching first grade at a K-6 school in a rural community in Northern California. I am a student in the Rural Teacher Residency (RTR) Program sponsored by California State University, Chico. This program gives Multiple Subject and Education Specialist candidates the opportunity to co-teach alongside a mentor teacher for an entire school year; and obtain either degree, as well as a Master of Arts in Education upon completion of all program requirements. One such requirement is completing an Action Research Project based upon a foundation of current educational research and the candidate's current teaching practice. My action research project pertains to a self-contained first grade general education classroom of 21-24 students that I co-taught throughout the duration of the school year while pursuing a Multiple Subject teaching credential and a Master of Arts in Education degree.

The school that I am teaching at has a large population of students from low socioeconomic circumstances. For example, in an initial orientation meeting, the principal shared that the percent of students qualifying for the free and reduced lunch program had been so high the last couple of years—ranging from 86.1%–94.1%—that all of the students at the school were now allowed to receive free meals (R. Gregor, personal communication, June 12, 2013). The school's student body is diverse and includes many populations such as: 61.8% Hispanic or Latino, 6.6% Asian, 3.6% American Indian or Alaska Native, 1.5% Black or African American. The remaining 27% of students are primarily White or classified as Two or More Races. Additionally, 11.5% of the population includes Students with Disabilities. Over half, or 56%, of the student population is English language learners (ELs) (California Department of Education, 2014). The school's principal also shared that he believed nearly 70% out of the approximate 500 students enrolled have parents who are also ELs (R. Gregor, personal communication, June 12,

2013). The high level of ELs and low socioeconomic status (SES) individuals are special factors for consideration at the school site (Durand & Perez, 2013; Edwards, 1996).

It was during this meeting with the principal that I began to consider parental involvement for my action research project. After explaining the demographics of the school, the principle said he "welcomed improvement" in the area of parental and community involvement (R. Gregor, personal communication, June 12, 2013). He extended an open invitation for any of the RTR students to pursue an action research project that studied it. His invitation was intriguing, yet intimidating, as I had little experience in this type of school. A timely presentation shortly thereafter in one of my MA classes provided me with the research ideas I needed and truly piqued my interest on the subject.

I have experienced firsthand, the benefits of parental involvement from the perspective of a student and a parent. I grew up in a traditional, white, middle-class home, where my parents were very involved in their children's education. My mother volunteered in the classroom, with fundraising, and as a member of the PTA. She even served as a yard duty for a while when I was in junior high. My parents were involved in their children's sports teams, the high school booster club, and served on committees to plan safe and sober graduation night celebrations for each child's graduating class. My mom was a stay-at-home mother with a flexible schedule and my dad worked long, hard hours, but tried to arrange his schedule to make school activities a priority. Because of their commitment to being involved, my brothers and I, along with countless other students, reaped the academic and emotional benefits of their service.

Following the example of my parents, I continued to serve in those same capacities as a parent in my childrens' schools. For the first eight years of my oldest son's life, I was a stay-at-home mom. I volunteered in the classroom, served on the PTA, and planned fundraising

activities and class parties without a second thought until I experienced divorce and became a single parent. Suddenly my eyes opened to a whole new world of life stressors, financial struggles, and demands on my time as it became necessary for me to work outside the home and return to school to support myself and my four children. My world was now like that of many of my students' parents in many ways.

Armed with my burning testimony of the importance of parental involvement, and a newfound understanding of the challenges parents in my school face, I set my sights on figuring out how to raise involvement in education among my students' parents and families in a fun and non-burdensome way. The aforementioned presentation in my MA class was exactly what I needed. It gave me the hope and research direction I needed because it truly spoke of the need to familiarize myself with, and understand, those children I was teaching and the parents with whom I would be working. Edwards (2004) expresses that this understanding is essential for pre-service teachers whose educational backgrounds differ from the students they are teaching (p. 122). Hence, the beginning of the idea for my Family Reading Program was born.

As a co-teacher in first grade, where the magic of reading typically begins, my intentions for a program of parental involvement naturally became focused around literacy. This idea was reinforced when I watched a brief video on parental involvement as part of a professional development effort at my school site. The video stressed the importance of planning parental involvement opportunities with a specific purpose in mind. I knew that this would be important to do considering the time constraints many families are under. While reading in one of my textbooks about ideas for family literacy activities, where better attendance, achievements, and higher-order thinking levels for students were cited as expected results, I solidified my plans (Tompkins, 2010; Jeynes, 2003).

The more I researched and made plans for my family reading program, the more excited I became for its execution scheduled to commence in February. This start time was strategic because in first grade this is when many students start to read at increasingly independent levels. Support for my intended project was high at the university level. However, concerns were expressed at the school site itself. The fears expressed by a few faculty members and administrators centered on the notion that students' parents were not likely to attend such a program due to their history of non-involvement. This history was assumed to be due to language barriers, lack of time available to attend such a program due to work schedules, possible lack of parental literacy skills, and lack of caring, among other things. These faculty concerns were mirrored in many current research articles pertaining to parental involvement (Ferrara, 2009; Taylor & Pearson, 2004; Hanafin & Lynch, 2002; Christianakis, 2011).

What these individuals did not fully understand was that these potential barriers were exactly what I was studying and intending to overcome through my program. If I never attempted the program, I would never even begin to know or understand how to reach those deemed "unreachable," or how to involve the "uninvolved" (Durand & Perez, 2013, p. 50). I had generated too many questions from my teaching experiences to walk away from the research.

I could also see from my experiences on morning yard duty that our students' parents cared for them and wanted to spend time with their children at school. Many parents brought their children for a free breakfast as early as 45 minutes before school began and would stay right up until the bell would ring. They would kiss their students and watch them line up for class, or even stand in line with them until they actually walked to their classroom. Many parents continued to stand around talking to one another after school began, building friendships among different families at the school. This behavior proved to me that while these parents may have

situational limitations, they did not have a lack of interest or caring. They loved their children, and this gave me hope that by incorporating the proper techniques, I could facilitate these parents to be more involved, and in turn enhance my students' learning experience.

As I strived to communicate with my students' parents as frequently as possible throughout the school year, even through broken Spanish, I felt a bond begin to grow with them. I believed that my students' parents could tell that I cared about their children and about them as well. All of my teacher instincts told me that I would be able to "make sense of [my] experience" (Lytle & Cochran-Smith, 1992, p. 4) and figure out how to serve these families through pursuing my research interests. Thus, my formal research question was developed.

Research Questions

The primary research question for this teacher research study is: How does participation in a family reading program affect student and parent attitudes towards reading and school? The answer to this question will be made known through the execution of the study, collection of data, and data analysis process. This research study serves multiple purposes and includes the following sub-questions: 1) How can I, as an inexperienced, white, middle-class, pre-service teacher organize a school, family, and community partnership activity that can overcome the potential low socioeconomic status, minority, or language barriers of the participants and encourage their repeated participation?; and 2) What would a program like that look like? The answers to these sub-questions must be discovered first in order to accurately answer the overarching research question for this study. The Literature Review section will serve to answer the first sub-question, while the Methodology section will explain the second.

Significance of the Study

This action research is significant to the realm of education in many ways, but none so significant as to me as the teacher researcher. Lytle & Cochran-Smith (1992), champions for the field of teacher research, stated "educators need to develop a different theory of knowledge for teaching," an idea "that regards inquiry by teachers themselves as a distinctive and important way of knowing about teaching" (p. 1). I know that as a teacher I will always seek for ways to include my students' families in their education. It is who I am. I believe in the power of family and of parents as their child's first educators. That belief is embedded in my teaching philosophy because it stems from the foundation of my own personal history and frame of reference.

I further agree with Lytle & Cochran-Smith (1992) that the action research I conduct can serve as "*local* knowledge and *public* knowledge about teaching" (p. 4). Regardless of the perceived success of my project, or my relative inexperience as a teacher, local knowledge will be obtained that will enhance my future teaching practice. The results of this project and the experience gained can also be valuable to the school site in which it takes place. In the smallest degree, by affecting existing faculty member attitudes towards parental involvement, and on a grander scale, to encourage and inspire further programs which would involve the parents there.

Once published, the completion of this project can serve as public knowledge by informing other teachers, administrators, and university professors in their own attempts to learn, tryout, or teach about building home, school, and community partnerships. This project can be especially useful to other teachers who desire to start their own programs of parental involvement in schools with similar demographics by outlining a specific plan they can carry out. There is currently a lack of available research that includes outlines of actual parental involvement programs by which teachers can glean ideas from or duplicate.

The research that is available on parental involvement and building home, school, and community partnerships focuses primarily on links to students' academic achievement. Many different aspects of parental involvement have been used in order to predict and measure achievement. This lack of consistency has contributed to some debate regarding the actual impact parental involvement has on academic achievement. However, two different meta-analysis performed by Fan & Chen (2001) and Jeynes (2003) have shown significant positive correlation between the two.

The need for pre-service teachers to learn about and gain field experience with parental involvement during their teacher training was another stand out related topic (Edwards, 2004; Epstein & Sanders, 2006; Ferrara, 2009; Christianakis, 2011). This teacher research study incorporated that suggested research practice by serving as my own pre-service teacher training, or "crash course," in parental involvement. According to Ferrara (2009), such training "is essential if the teachers of tomorrow—be it next semester or the next year—are to 'hit the ground running'" in regards to understanding that all parents care about their child's education and can play important roles in building school, family, and community partnerships (p. 141).

The significance of this action research is apparent in other current research as well. Fan & Chen (2001) discovered that parents' positive attitudes and expectations hold the strongest relationship toward student academic achievement. Taylor & Pearson (2004) suggest a need in current research to explore ways in which students' reading achievement can be benefitted by developing positive parent partnerships with schools (p. 179). Although this study does not seek to measure and study student achievement specifically, it is a likely byproduct of studying the attitudes linked to parental involvement in a reading program and thus, can reasonably be included in the research conversation. Additionally, in a study about a Family Involvement

Questionnaire (FIQ), Fantuzzo, Tighe, & Childs (2000), suggest that future research should investigate ways that positive parental attitudes can be promoted towards school and parental involvement. This study seeks to do just that.

The intent of this research is to measure the effect the Family Reading Program has on parent and student attitudes specifically. Hoover-Dempsey, Walker, Sandler, Whetsel, Green, Wilkins, & Closson, (2005) have identified multiple measures and data sources in parental involvement research to be lacking (p. 122). Including both parent and student attitudinal data will address this need. Hoover-Dempsey et al., (2005) further explained that triangulation of data (e.g., student reports, parent reports, observer reports) would be helpful in avoiding the misinterpretation of single source data (p. 122). By collecting feedback from parents, students, and volunteers; using my own teacher researcher observations; and recording attendance as evidence of participation in the program, multiple forms of data will be available for analysis and triangulation in this research study.

Theoretical Bases

The most basic premise of my action research project is based in B.F. Skinner's work with *Behavioral Learning Theory*. In the early 1900s, Skinner made it his life work to study the effects of using pleasant or unpleasant consequences to shape behavior, called *Operant Conditioning*. Skinner conducted hundreds of studies on humans and animals in order to conclude that individuals would repeat behaviors more frequently when pleasant consequences occurred directly following the behavior, and subsequently behaviors that were directly followed by unpleasant consequences decreased. In Operant Conditioning, pleasant consequences are referred to as *Reinforcers*, and unpleasant consequences are called *Punishers*. Broadly described,

anything that is desirable to an individual, and increases behaviors, can be described as a

"reinforcer" (Slavin, 2012, p. 118-122).

This teacher research project aims to study how students' and their families' attitudes are

affected after participation in a class-wide family reading program. In theory, students and

family members who participate in the program and enjoy themselves will feel "reinforced" and

will be likely to repeat their behaviors with subsequent attendance. It is also reasonable to

consider that increased participation in the family reading program would indicate it was a

pleasurable experience, and could lead to participants having increased positive attitudes towards

school and reading through building home, school, and community partnerships. According to

Operant Conditioning, these assumptions are relevant.

Another major source of contributing educational research to my action research project

is the work of Joyce L. Epstein. Her work is well respected and cited in just about every piece of

research literature that I found and used for my project. Epstein's (1995) *Framework of Six Types*

of Involvement and Sample Practices, otherwise referred to as *"Six Types of Caring"* was

essential to the development of my family reading program. Components to the framework

include: *Parenting, Communicating, Volunteering, Learning at Home, Decision Making, and*

Collaborating with Community. I strived to incorporate as many ideas and elements from this

research as possible within the constructs of my family reading program. Each element played a

crucial role in the planning and implementation of my project and will be discussed further in the

methodology section of this paper.

Finally, researchers Hoover-Dempsey et al. (2005) sought to discover some of the

reasons behind parental involvement. Knowing that parental motivation to participate would be

of great importance to my project, I also used their research to guide the planning and execution

of my family reading program. In the article, *Why Do Parents Become Involved?* Hoover-Dempsey et al., (2005) researched three main areas: *Parent's Motivational Beliefs, Invitations to Involvement from Others, and Parents' Life Context*. Understanding those you wish to involve is critical to a program's success. I wanted to involve all of my students' parents, those who had a history of parental involvement, as well as, or especially, those who had not been involved in the past. This research identified what motivates family members to get involved; the value of proper invitations, as well as being inviting; and that creating an inviting environment that will welcome instead of deter hesitant parents and family members away from building home, school, and community partnerships.

The aforementioned educational research was used as the framework to build my family reading program, however, many other pieces of research contributed to my project's entirety. I needed to do additional research in order to specifically answer and address the two main sub-questions of my research project: "How can I, as an inexperienced, white, middle-class, pre-service teacher organize a school, family, and community partnership activity that can overcome the potential low socioeconomic status or language barriers of the participants and encourage their repeated participation?" and "What would that program look like?" Committed to my project's success, and what it could mean for my first grade students and their families, I resolved to learn as much as I possibly could from related research literature and answer these two questions.

Literature Review

In order to effectively plan a program that would develop home, school, and community partnerships with my students and their families, and create or reinforce positive attitudes towards school and reading, I needed to first understand the role that attitude plays in what the

research suggests about such partnerships. This meant exploring and researching not only what

to do with students and their families, or in other words, the purpose for our partnership, but also

how to make such a program accessible to a variety of families and varying circumstances. With

a majority of my students being from low income families, and/or English language learners, I

knew that I needed to be able to address their specific challenges and needs in order to create a

partnership that would maximize the amount of families who would be able to participate, thus

benefitting more of my students.

Accordingly, this literature review explores the overarching impact that attitudes have on

the development of home, school, and community partnerships, the importance of familial

reading support, and parental involvement participation. Additionally, it reviews what the

research literature says about potential challenges in meeting the cultural needs of participants

and ideas for overcoming such challenges. Specifically amongst low socioeconomic status and

English language learner populations like the one in which I am currently teaching.

Attitude is Everything

Merriam-Webster (2014) defines *attitude* as a noun that means: "the way you think and

feel about someone or something; a feeling or way of thinking that affects a person's behavior."

Thus, our thoughts are very powerful ideas framed by our attitudes that can lead to our actions.

Attitudes are the dispositions people choose to embrace in each given moment of their lives. In a

famous and often quoted sentiment passed along to me by my father about attitude, Charles

Swindoll declared "I am convinced that life is 10% what happens to me and 90% how I react to

it. And so it is with you . . . we are in charge of our attitudes." Another catchphrase that has been

made popular is "Attitude is everything!" Although attitude might not actually be everything,

according to Ryan Eliason (2014), a professional business coach of 20 years, it is "the single

most significant determining factor of success in many situations" (p. 1). Eliason (2014) further explains that when a person changes their attitude they can effectively change their perspective, the way they interpret things, the decisions they make, actions they take, and ultimately, the results that they get.

Attitude is an overarching theme in this research because it appears in every aspect of the work. Parental involvement at schools includes the attitudes of teachers, staff, and administrators at the school site; the attitudes of the students affected; and the attitudes of the parents involved. Each one affects the others. This action research project is directly tied to my attitude as a pre-service teacher and the research I have performed that supports my theory. I believe that parents love their children and want to help them be successful. I believe that students, especially young students, enjoy having their parents' academic support. Therefore, I believe that participation in a family reading program is one way that parents can share in their children's learning process and become supportive partners in literacy instruction (No Child Left Behind, 2001). Accordingly, I am acting upon my own attitudes and opinions about the importance of building strong avenues of parental involvement by embracing this new challenge and inviting parents to learn along with me as suggested by Ferrara & Ferrara (2005).

Home, School, and Community Partnerships

Educational research over the years has shown that parental involvement is of value, though the extent of which remains uncertain because of varying research methods, results, and the lack of a consistent definition of parental involvement. However, current research does discourages a traditional definition of parental involvement because this can restrict involvement to narrow constructs such as volunteering at school, fundraising, and participating on parent advisory boards. These methods traditionally have been utilized by mainly white, middle class

parents (Hanafin & Lynch, 2002; Christianakis, 2011; López, Scribner, & Mahitivanichcha, 2001).

The diversity in schools today is great. In order to include all types of parents and families, a much broader view of how parents can be involved and how teachers can reach out to parents is paramount. This study utilizes Epstein's (1995) theory of home, school, and community partnerships in a way that strives to connect schools and families by expressing a welcoming "let's do this together" attitude, rather than a "you need to do this" attitude (López, Scribner, & Mahitivanichcha, 2001). The research shows that schools work together with parents and build relationships of trust and partnership best when they seek to invite and communicate regularly (Ferrara, 2009).

Invitations. Invitations play an important role in promoting parent involvement. In an article by Rutherford & Billig (1995) a parent shared this experience, **"**I wanted to be involved but I just didn't know how to get involved. If it hadn't been for one of the teachers calling and personally inviting me to come to the school and help, I wouldn't be here today" (p. 68). When parents are invited, they feel welcomed, needed, valued, and overall more comfortable performing aid at school and at home (Hoover-Dempsey, 2005; Durand & Perez, 2013; Vera, Susman Israel, Coyle, Cross, Knight-Lynn, Moallem,…Bartucci, 2012). Invitations can come from teachers, staff members, administrators, and other parents. Student invitations are of great worth as well, though Wiseman (2010) warned can sometimes occur "at the last minute" (p. 121), so it is important that teachers do not rely solely on this type of communication.

Communication. Taylor & Pearson (2004) noted that effective schools value bidirectional communication with parents because they found that just as students benefit from teachers and administrators talking to parents about their learning, teachers and administrators

benefit from listening to parents' insights about their students (p. 179). Participants in a recent study by Cardona, Jain, & Canfield-Davies (2012) on home and school relationships expressed that common courtesy and respect shown by school personnel had an effect on the confidence they felt at their child's school (p. 16). When teachers and administrators show respect and interest for parents by listening and being willing to try suggestions parents have for their children's education, effective partnerships are established.

Reading Programs

Children learn to read at school and in a myriad of other places where they encounter print. Literacy learning can occur in public places such as at the library, in a bookstore, in the grocery store, on a bus, at church or in any other print-rich environment (Taylor & Pearson, 2004). It is feasible then to consider that reading instruction can occur at home as well. In an effort to investigate the role that homes can play in students learning to read, Taylor & Pearson (2004) found that frequent communication between parents and teachers was a contributing factor to students' reading success. Taylor & Pearson (2004) also noted that the most effective schools they studied made reading a priority and included reading modeling and active engagement in literacy lessons through utilizing literacy activities as dimensions of their reading instructional models. Thus, it can be gleaned from this research that a reading program that includes parental involvement in lively, hands-on activities would be beneficial in effectively teaching reading.

Read-alouds. Read-alouds are one way to model reading and can be interactive and engaging. In the now seventh edition of his book *The Read-Aloud Handbook,* Jim Trelease (2013) states an old education adage: "What we teach children to love and desire will always outweigh what we make them learn." He further expresses that:

"We must take care that children's early encounters with reading are painless enough so they will cheerfully return to the experience now and forever. But if it's repeatedly painful, we will end up creating a school-time reader instead of a lifetime reader" (Trelease, 2013, p. *vi*).

Since reading is at the very core of education, the skill must be acquired in order to achieve in any other subject matter. If students don't enjoy reading, they are not likely to practice the skill, thus improving attitudes about reading is legitimately important. There is notable support for reading to children as being a great way to increase needed positive feelings towards reading. Additional benefits to reading aloud to students can also include improvements in reading, writing, speaking, and listening skills (Trelease, 2013, p. *xxiv*).

Additional support for read-alouds is expressed by Depree & Iversen (1994):

"Reading to children is fun, simple, and cheap—and as such, it is the most effective advertisement for reading. Many children learn to read, but never become regular readers because they see no purpose in it. Children *need* to see a purpose in reading. If you believe that you learn to read by reading, you must learn to *want* to read. Reading to children, therefore, models both the "how" and "why" of reading" (p. 31).

When children see their parents and teachers enjoying the act of reading, they are likely to follow suit. Reading has many purposes indeed, but reading for enjoyment and entertainment is likely to be the most appealing purpose for young children and students and is an appropriate place to start. Reading to children is a very effective form of advertising because the more a child is read to, the more they are likely to enjoy books. If a child likes books, they are likely to want to read them. Then, as they learn to read they will find that the more they practice reading, the better they will get at reading. The better they are at reading, the more they will like doing it, which will then increase the amount of time that child spends reading (Trelease, 2013).

Overcoming Barriers of Participation

Perhaps one of the most difficult challenges schools and teachers face in implementing home, school, and community partnerships is planning opportunities for involvement that are accessible to a diverse group of parents with differing needs and availabilities. Recognizing these special factors in parental involvement is essential to a program's success. As previously mentioned, two dominant features of my classroom are a high level of English language learners and a majority of families from low socioeconomic situations. Available research sheds light on potential barriers and possible solutions.

English learners.

Barriers. Vera et al. (2012) identified three main categories of English learner parents: school-based, individual, and logistical. School-based barriers include that of unfriendly school environments, teachers, and staff. Individual barriers primarily deal with the complications of dominant language deficiency. While the third type, logistical barriers, involve issues such as the need for childcare or a lack of time available to volunteer or attend school activities due to difficult work schedules (Vera et al., 2012, p. 184).

Solutions. School-based barriers for ELs can be decreased through increased awareness of cultural norms and differences. Proper training can help schools and teachers cut through assumptions and navigate through creating culturally sensitive, welcoming environments for ELs. For example, Vera et al. (2012) noted that a teacher might think an EL parent is uninvolved in their child's education because they do not ask questions in a parent-teacher conference, when in reality questioning a teacher's professional authority may culturally be considered disrespectful. Agirdag (2009) expressed that language barriers can be reduced by making all languages welcomed at school. This can be done by providing translation services,

bilingual staff members, and including home languages in the classroom through bilingual books, labels, etc. Logistical barriers of childcare can be overcome by providing this service during school activities and meetings or by welcoming the involvement of entire families in participation. Additionally, Epstein (1995) suggests that home, school, and community partnership activities be offered at varying times and days in order to accommodate parents' varying work schedules.

Low socioeconomic status.

Barriers. Parents with low incomes are often stereotyped at schools to be "uninvolved," "uneducated," or "lazy" (Christianakis, 2011, p. 172). When teachers make negative assumptions about parents and harbor negative attitudes towards them, they are less likely to invite or promote parental involvement. Additionally, if parents attempt to become involved and feel excluded or unwelcomed, they are likely to give up trying (Hanafin & Lynch, 2002). Feelings of inadequacy at school are common among parents from low SES and can prevent parents from confidently participating. In addition, a carryover of negative feelings about school from parents' childhoods can be a contributing factor in lack of involvement (Tompkins, 2010).

Solutions. Feelings of inadequacy can be overcome when teachers look beyond stereotypes and welcome parents' varied contributions. Hanafin & Lynch (2002) found that working-class parents want to be involved and are capable of being involved. Teachers can change their attitudes about low SES perceptions and in doing so can tap into a wealth of parental involvement potential. Jeynes (2003) discovered that parental involvement makes a difference amongst students regardless of parent education level, socioeconomic status, or racial groups. Accordingly, it behooves teachers build strong relationships with all parents.

Methodology

As previously discussed in the Theoretical Bases section, I developed the Family Reading Program following Epstein's (1995) *Framework of Six Types of Involvement* and the Hoover-Dempsey et al. (2005) research findings on *Why Parents Get Involved*. My goal was to incorporate at least one aspect from each type of Epstein's involvement as well as elements from Hoover-Dempsey et al. The six types included: *parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision making, and collaborating with community*. The reasons parents get involved were listed as: parent's motivational beliefs, invitations to involvement from others, and parents' life context. In order to incorporate all of these important aspects and suggestions of home, school, and community partnerships into the program, I had to plan carefully.

Epstein's framework was incorporated within the Family Reading Program by finding ways to implement each type of involvement. Examples of this include: offering tips for reading with young children in program newsletters and modeling read-aloud strategies for parents at the family night in order to include both the *parenting* and *learning at home* types, or the *communicating* type through bilingualism in invitations, newsletters, handouts and flyers. Efforts to address the *volunteering* type included inviting parents to help distribute donation request letters to local businesses requesting prize, food, and book donations, gathering donations once granted, setting up before family nights, and helping with other tasks at the family nights. I encouraged and supported parent involvement in the PTO, participating myself, along with two other parents from my class. Together we helped plan many fundraising and school activities during the Family Reading Program and throughout the school year, thus incorporating *decision making*. The final type, *collaborating with community,* occurred through collecting donations from many local businesses and a local service organization, as well as through distributing local

library information packets to students' parents about upcoming classes and services. Following

Epstein's (1995) framework provided an impetus for promoting "a variety of opportunities for

schools, families, and communities to work together" (p. 704), which Epstein accredited as a

universal sign of a successful program.

Parent's motivational beliefs were addressed by encouraging parents to understand the

positive effect their involvement can have on their children's education. This was done by

modeling ways to improve literacy at family nights and teaching through newsletters ways to

effectively help their students (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005, p. 108). Also, I made invitations

frequently throughout the program and school year to create a welcoming environment for

families. Additionally, I enlisted the help of my students by getting them excited about the

program so they in turn would invite their parents and family members to participate. Hoover-

Dempsey et al., (2005) identified these inviting techniques as important to getting parents

involved so each was included in the plan (p. 110). The final element described has to do with

parent's life context, which in the demographic I was teaching, was most commonly low SES

and English learner. Taking this population's needs into consideration, I developed the program

while seeking parent input and considering time constraints and special needs. I did this by using

program data measures, restricting Family Reading Nights to an hour, providing multiple

opportunities to participate, and providing snacks, books, and prizes.

Participants

The participants of this teacher research study were the students in my first grade

classroom. Nineteen out of twenty-two students returned parent permission slips allowing them

to fully participate in data collection and analysis. There were 7 EL students and their families,

and 12 English-speaking students and their families that participated. The 19 class participants

consisted of 9 boys and 10 girls. The 48 other family members that participated in the Family

Reading Night aspect of the program were made up of mothers, fathers, grandparents, aunts,

uncles, and cousins.

Measures

Students and parents participated in separate pre-program attitudinal feedback forms

before attending family nights or receiving any supplemental program weekly newsletters or

activities. Participants filled out the same corresponding attitudinal feedback forms as a post-

program measure at the completion of the last family night in order to compare average scores

from the attitudinal data and analyze the affect, if any, the program had on participants. Students

filled out the student version in class as the teacher read it aloud while the parent feedback forms

were sent home for completion and then returned to school.

Both student and parent versions of the attitudinal feedback forms were developed by

combining ideas for questions from two existing questionnaires: the Family Involvement

Questionnaire (FIQ) (Fantuzzo, Tighe, & Childs, (2000) and a Reading Attitude Survey found in

a course packet for reading instruction (Justeson, R., 2013); as well as from specific questions I

wanted to investigate. The feedback forms' questions were reviewed by a group of five other

teacher researchers and then voted upon in order to make up the existing 15 parent feedback

form questions and 20 student feedback form questions on the final measures (as noted in Table

1 and Table 2).

Table 1

Parent Feedback Form

_____
Please circle the response that best represents your attitudes regarding the following questions:
1= I strongly disagree   2= I disagree   3= Unsure   4= I agree   5 = I strongly agree

1. I participate in parent/family activities at my child's school.
        1   2   3   4   5
2. I spend time working with my child on reading and writing skills.
        1   2   3   4   5
3. I review my child's schoolwork.
        1   2   3   4   5
4. I feel welcome at my child's school.
        1   2   3   4   5
5. I feel comfortable contacting my child's teacher.
        1   2   3   4   5
6. My child has their own collection of books in our home.
        1   2   3   4   5
7. I feel confident helping my child with reading.
        1   2   3   4   5
8. I know how to help my child when they get stuck on a word while reading.
        1   2   3   4   5
9. I ask my child questions about the books that they read.
        1   2   3   4   5
10. I enjoy reading with my child often.
        1   2   3   4   5
11. I like my child's school.
        1   2   3   4   5
12. I believe that communicating with my child's teacher is important.
        1   2   3   4   5
13. I feel well informed about what my child is learning in school.
        1   2   3   4   5
14. I like to read.
        1   2   3   4   5
15. I talk to my child about the importance of reading and being successful at school.
        1   2   3   4   5
_____

An oversight occurred on the Student Feedback Form in which Q8 is repeated at Q17. Nothing was done to correct the mistake because this error went unnoticed until after the pre- and post- feedback forms were completed. Students did not notice the repeated question when filling out the forms. This might have been because a first graders' capacity for attention was taken into consideration when planning to answer feedback questions as a class activity. Students were not expected to fill out all 20 of their feedback questions at one time so they would not lose

interest in the task at hand. The student form was broken into four parts of five questions, or 6

including bonus questions as seen in Table 2, and administered to students over a four-day time

period.

Table 2

Student Feedback Form

_____

1. How does it make you feel when your teacher reads stories to you?
   ☺   ☺   ☹
2. How do you feel when you read out loud?
   ☺   ☺   ☹
3. How do you feel about taking trips to the library?
   ☺   ☺   ☹
4. How do you feel when you see a new word in a book?
   ☺   ☺   ☹
5. How do you feel when you're in your reading group?
   ☺   ☺   ☹

***How many books do you have at home? _____

6. How would you feel if someone gave you a book for a present?
   ☺   ☺   ☹
7. How do you feel when you read at home?
   ☺   ☺   ☹
8. How do you feel about attending a Family Night with your family?
   ☺   ☺   ☹
9. How do you feel about school?
   ☺   ☺   ☹
10. How do you feel when you can't understand a word in your book?
    ☺   ☺   ☹
11. How often do your parents and family members help you with homework?

    ☺All the time   ☞Sometimes   ⊘Never

12. How often does someone read to you or with you?

    ☺All the time   ☞Sometimes   ⊘Never

13. How often do you read at home?

    ☺All the time   ☞Sometimes   ⊘Never

14. How often do you see your parents reading?

    ☺All the time   ☞Sometimes   ⊘Never

15. How often do your parents come to school activities?

    ☺All the time   ☞Sometimes   ⊘Never

16. How do you feel about your parents and family coming to school?
    ☺   ☺   ☹

17. How do you feel about attending a Family Night with your family?
    ☺   😐   ☹
18. How do you feel when you read with your family?
    ☺   😐   ☹
19. How do you feel about your teachers?
    ☺   😐   ☹
20. How do you feel about your parents helping you read?
    ☺   😐   ☹
***Anything else?_____

_____

Parent Comment Cards were created and made available at the second Family Reading Night (see Table 3). Parents were encouraged to leave feedback as a measure of program improvement, an opportunity to open the lines of communication between parents and teacher, and a way of gauging how the program was being perceived thus far by participants. A Parent Written Feedback Form was developed as a post- program measure, in lieu of time consuming parent interviews, and included at least four nearly identical questions as the comment card (see Table 4). Tickets for door prizes were given to each parent who filled out the comment cards and final feedback forms.

Table 3

Parent Comment Card
_____
What do you like the best about the Family Reading Program?

If you could change something about the program, what would it be?

What do you think is the most helpful to you and your family?

Any Other Comments/Observations:
_____ _____

Table 4
Parent Written Feedback Form
_____
What did you like the best about the Family Reading Program?

If you could have changed something about the Family Reading Program, what would it have been?

What do you think was the most helpful to you and your family?

What did you think about the newsletters that were sent home?

Did you participate in any of the suggested activities included in the newsletter?

What activities did you try?

Do you think that any of the activities helped your child in any way?

Did you find the ideas listed in the newsletter to be helpful?

What ideas or tips were the most useful to you and your family?

Would you add anything to the newsletters or take anything away? If yes, what?

Any Other Comments/Observations:

_____

Additional measurements for data collection and analysis included student journal entries, program attendance records, and participation tickets. Multiple measures of data were collected in this research study in an attempt to triangulate the results and make a stronger case for research findings.

Procedures

Parent-teacher conferences. Parent-teacher conferences were the first step in developing the Family Reading Program to reach out to parents for interest and input. This was done by talking to parents during the first parent-teacher conferences of the year, which occurred in the fall, about the possibility of a family night program that would begin after winter break, and then finding out the interest levels of parents in participating in such a program. I asked for additional input as to what days and times would work best for each family in order to plan accordingly. This was done while recognizing that there would never be one perfect day or time that would suit every family's diverse needs, but there would be a day and time that could work for many families. The result was a plan to host the class family nights from 4–5pm on three separate Wednesdays during February and March. A general description of The Family Reading

Program will be included in this section. The Appendix contains a week-by-week detailed outline of the program plan.

Pre-program attitudinal feedback forms and program packets. Pre-program attitudinal feedback forms and program packets were collected prior to the first week of the program. Program information packets were sent home to parents that included several forms to be filled out and returned to the school, such as, a letter explaining the purpose of the teacher research study, two parent permission slips, a pre-program Parent Feedback Form, and a notice explaining all of the ways to participate in the program and earn tickets for prizes. When parents returned their permissions slips and feedback forms, their child received a participation ticket in the jar. Students received tickets for completing their Feedback Forms in class after I explained the research study to them, and they agreed to participate in helping me with my "homework."

Invitations. Invitations played an important role in the Family Reading Program. Parents are more likely to approach and communicate with teachers who they feel want to listen and talk with them (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005; Ferrara, 2009). I started as early as November talking to parents and students about the project and inviting their input. I invited a couple of parents to volunteer by distributing donation request letters to local businesses and then gather donations. I invited general participation by mailing out formal invitations, sending home flyers, newsletters, and reminders, both in English and Spanish. I also used posters on the outside of the classroom door as a way of inviting through advertisement. Finally, I tried my best to be an inviting teacher. I always tried to have a smile on my face and to say 'hello' to my students' parents, to learn their names, and to seek communication frequently in English, as well as in my broken Spanish.

The family reading program. The family reading program consisted of 8 weeks of home, school, and community partnership activities: 3 family reading nights and 5 weeks of

"*Our Little Readers*" program newsletters. Every written notice, invitation, newsletter, and feedback form for the project was sent home in both English and Spanish, translated by the school's secretary. A volunteer took attendance at each family night at a sign-in table. Each family member that came earned a ticket just for coming and signing in. Another first grade teacher from the school came and served as a translator in order to provide access to ELs. After the interactive read-alouds and performances, book related crafts, and literacy activities, snacks, made possible by community donations, were available. Additionally, over 200 free, gently-used books donated by a thrift store were laid out on tables for the taking at each family night. The donated books were in a variety of reading levels in order to suit the needs and ages of each family that came. Two sisters (one in high school and one in middle school) and their mother planned and prepared the book-related crafts. They did it as a church service project. For each craft or literacy activity completed, students and family members received additional participation tickets for the door prize drawing. At the end of each family night, a series of prizes, collected through community donations, were given away by drawing tickets out of a jar. The rest of the tickets, not drawn, accumulated throughout the duration of the program for the grand prize drawing offered on the final night of the 8-week program. The program offered access to participants by offering students and families multiple ways to participate.

Interactive read-alouds. Interactive read-alouds modeled reading instruction practices for parents at the family nights. The same book read-alouds were repeated in the classroom during school for students who were unable to attend the family nights. This was done in order to provide access to all students and to create a foundation of understanding for the related literacy activities and craft packets that were sent home. When students returned completed activities and crafts they were able to earn tickets.

Literacy activities and crafts. Literacy activities and crafts were created to serve as extension activities to the read-aloud books. The book-related activities chosen were to provide fun, engaging activities for families to do together, further students' learning and comprehension of the stories, and provide ideas for parents to implement at-home literacy opportunities after reading with their children. Activities and crafts were sent home in envelopes in order for all students to have the opportunity to finish and return them for tickets.

Class performances. Class performances were offered at the first and third Family Reading Nights. In an effort to make the program accessible to all of my students regardless of whether or not they were able to attend the family night, everyone participated in learning and practicing the performances. The whole class participated in class by preparing their own individual props (crafts), learning the chosen song, and practicing it repeatedly. Songs were chosen to reflect unit themes students were learning about in class or the applicable Family Reading Night book theme. Classroom performances were strategically offered at only two of the family nights in order to analyze whether or not performances had an effect on attendance.

Newsletters. Newsletters were sent home with students on weeks when there was no family night. Each newsletter contained three main sections: 1) A section devoted to making home and school connections regarding current unit themes in order to enhance learning, 2) Tips for supporting young readers, and 3) Ideas for crafts and literacy-based activities that could be done at little to no cost to families (see Appendix for week-by-week topics and additional details). Tickets were also offered to students who tried out newsletter activities and had parents send a note reporting on the activity tried.

The first section—home, school, and community—was included in order to increase communication and make learning connections between school and home. I introduced current

classroom learning and suggested ways for parents to talk to their students, ask questions about, and share experiences with the given topics.

The next section, ideas for tips in supporting young readers, came primarily from two literacy instruction textbooks: *Literacy for the 21st Century: A Balanced Approach* (Tompkins, 2010, p. 31) and *Children's Literacy Development: Making It Happen through School, Family, and Community Involvement* (Edwards, 2004, p. 270). Tips included ideas for overcoming common challenges parents have with finding time to read, literacy activities to try, and the importance of reading to children for at least 10–15 minutes a day.

In the last section, ideas for inexpensive family fun activities, like Alphabet Pretzels and The Sock Snake, were provided to me by a good friend and mother of 7 children who has used them time and again in her home (M. Staples, personal communication, January 8, 2014). Activities were chosen to match current unit or reading program themes.

Parent comment cards. Parent comment cards were made available at the second Family Reading Night for data collection purposes and program improvement efforts. The questions asked on the comment card were intended to be answered in order to detect what parts of the program were working for families and what areas parents would like to improve upon. Opening the program up to suggestions from participants was another effort to build partnerships between home and school. Participation tickets were awarded once the comment card was filled out and returned.

Parent written feedback forms. Parent written feedback forms were collected as a final extension to the information gained from the comment cards at the close of the program. Parents filled out the written feedback forms on the last family night. Each parent that filled one out was awarded with a participation ticket before the final door prize and grand prize drawing.

Post-program feedback forms. Post-program feedback forms were used to provide a final measure of students' and parents' attitudes towards reading and school. Post-program feedback forms were identical to pre-program feedback forms. Parents who attended the last family night were able to turn their forms in for the grand prize drawing that night. Feedback forms were sent home to parents who did not attend the last family night and then returned to school. Students filled out post-program feedback forms in class again, this time over the space of the two days following the last family night. Students answered 10 questions, instead of only 5 at a time. This was appropriate given the students' prior experience and understanding of the questions.

Data Analysis Plan

Parent and student feedback forms will be analyzed by finding the average Likert score responses to each individual question. Then, corresponding pre- and post-feedback form questions will be compared side by side to show any increase or decrease in question responses since the time the program began. All written types of feedback will require a different type of analysis. These written measures will include a two-step process where each document will be read or "skimmed" for interesting or repetitive items and then "interrogated" for occurrences of common themes (Sagor, 1992). Recurring themes will be color coded and counted for further analysis. Findings within the different types of data will be compared and combined with other types of data in an effort to find the triangulation characteristic of solid research results.

Data Analysis and Findings

As suggested by Hoover-Dempsey et al. (2005), multiple sources of data can be used in conjunction with one another in order to produce triangulation of data that will lead to a "more precise determination of its influence on student outcomes" (p. 122). Multiple sources of data for

analysis in this research study included student pre- and post-attitudinal feedback forms, parent

pre- and post-attitudinal feedback forms, student journal entries, parent written feedback,

teacher-researcher observation journal, attendance records, and participation tickets. Written

feedback from program volunteers was also collected as an additional point of data.

The variety of data collected required a variety of analyzing processes. Data from Student

and Parent Feedback Forms were entered into Microsoft Office Excel spreadsheets. The

numbered responses of the feedback forms worked nicely in Excel, where individual questions

on the pre-form could be averaged and then compared side by side with the corresponding

responses on the post-form. Attendance records were straightforward, either participants came or

did not. Written forms of data were analyzed using a coding method described in Sagor's (1992)

book, "*How to Conduct Collaborative Action Research.*"

Student Feedback Forms

Analysis. The pre- and post-feedback forms were scored on a three-point Likert scale.

One is the lowest possible score and three is the highest. The average student answers for the 19

participating first graders to the 20 questions of the pre-program Student Feedback Form before

the Family Reading Program began were as follows: 2.9, 2.6, 2.9, 2.7, 2.8, 2.9, 2.7, 2.8, 2.9, 2.9,

2.7, 2.6, 2.4, 2.5, 2.3, 2.8, 2.7, 2.5, 2.7, and 2.8. The averages from the post-program Student

Feedback Form taken after the final Family Reading Program night were as follows: 2.9, 2.7,

2.8, 2.8, 2.9, 2.9, 2.7, 2.9, 2.9, 2.6, 2.6, 2.6, 2.6, 2.6, 2.8, 2.8, 2.9, 2.8, 3.0, and 2.8.
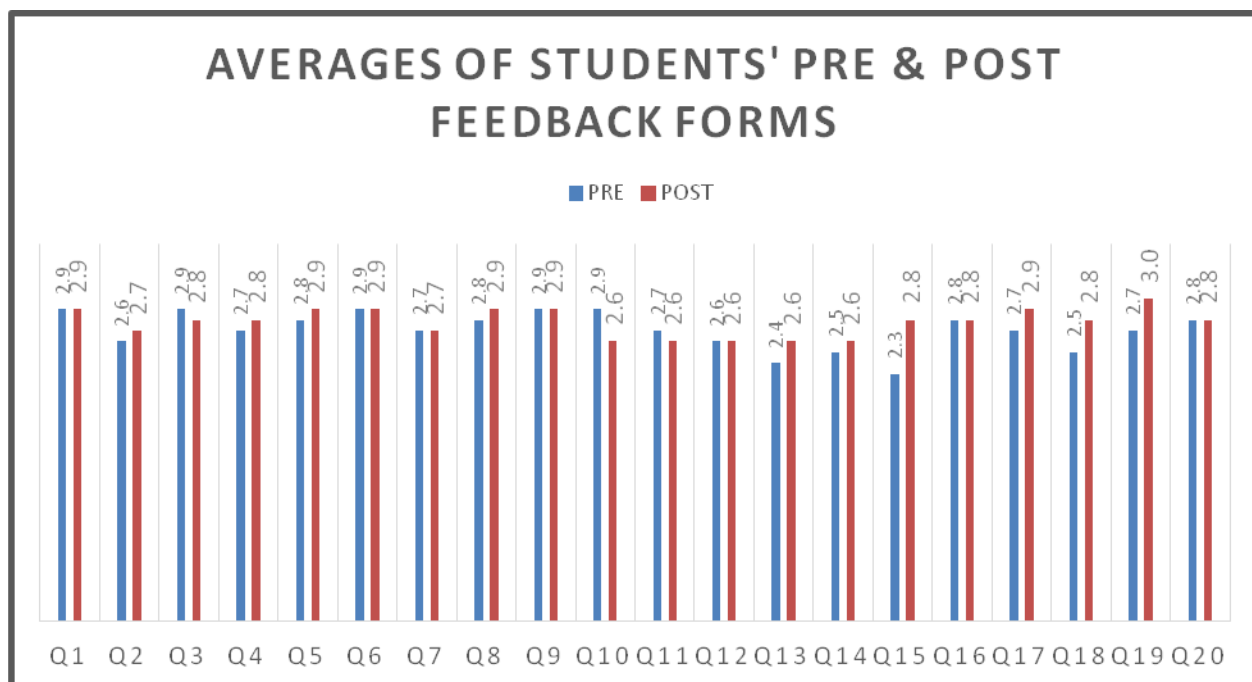
Figure 1. Average Likert score comparisons of pre- and post-student responses to Student Feedback Form questions.

Findings. The pre- and post-Student Feedback Form averages were compared side by side and showed increased scores on half (10) of the questions (Figure 1).

The question that showed the most increase was Q15, which asked, "How often do your parents come to school activities?" This data point can be triangulated with Family Reading Program Attendance data (Figure 3) and by teacher observation. Many students had family members come to the Family Reading Nights that I had never seen or met before, and 12 out of 19 participating students attended family night two or three out of three times. This finding is also confirmed by Statement 1 data from the Averages of Classroom Parents' Feedback Form (Figure 2).

Both Q18 and Q19 increased by 0.3 points each. Question 18 asks, "How do you feel when you read with your family?" and Question 19 reads, "How do you feel about your

teachers?" Both of these pieces of data can be confirmed by additional sources as well. Recurring

themes on the students' feedback forms in the only blank line for "Anything else?" were

expressions of love for family and for reading. Each expression appeared four times. There were

five comments expressing, "I like school" or "I love to go to school" and one comment that even

stated, "Ms. Cherry's homework is fun!" (I called the feedback form "my homework"). It is easy

to like school when you enjoy your teachers.

Q10 showed a decrease in score by 0.3 points. It asked, "How do you feel when you can't

understand a word in your book?" I didn't find any additional data in student written comments

or journal entries that would explain this decrease. Further inquiry would be needed to confirm,

but as their teacher, I would deduce that the increase in frustration with new unknown words

might be correlated with an increase in time spent reading in class, as our schedule changed and

more independent reading time was incorporated into our classroom. This would have been a

good question to bring up in targeted student interviews.

Two other questions had minor (0.1) decreases in average scores as well. They were Q3

"How do you feel about taking trips to the library?" and Q11 "How often do your parents and

family members help you with homework?" Both would have been good for targeted interviews.

Parent Feedback Forms

Analysis. The pre- and post-feedback forms were scored on a five-point Likert scale. One

is the lowest possible score and five is the highest. The average parent answers for the 19

participating parents to the 15 statements on the Parent Feedback Form (pre-test) before the

Family Reading Program began were as follows: 3.3, 3.6, 3.8, 3.8, 3.5, 3.6, 3.6, 3.6, 3.6, 3.6, 3.7,

4, 3.3, 3.6, and 3.9. The averages from the Parent Feedback Form (post-test) taken after the final

Family Reading Program night were as follows: 3.6, 3.7, 3.9, 3.8, 3.8, 3.5, 3.7, 3.6, 3.9, 3.8, 3.7,

4.2, 3.3, 3.5, and 4.1.
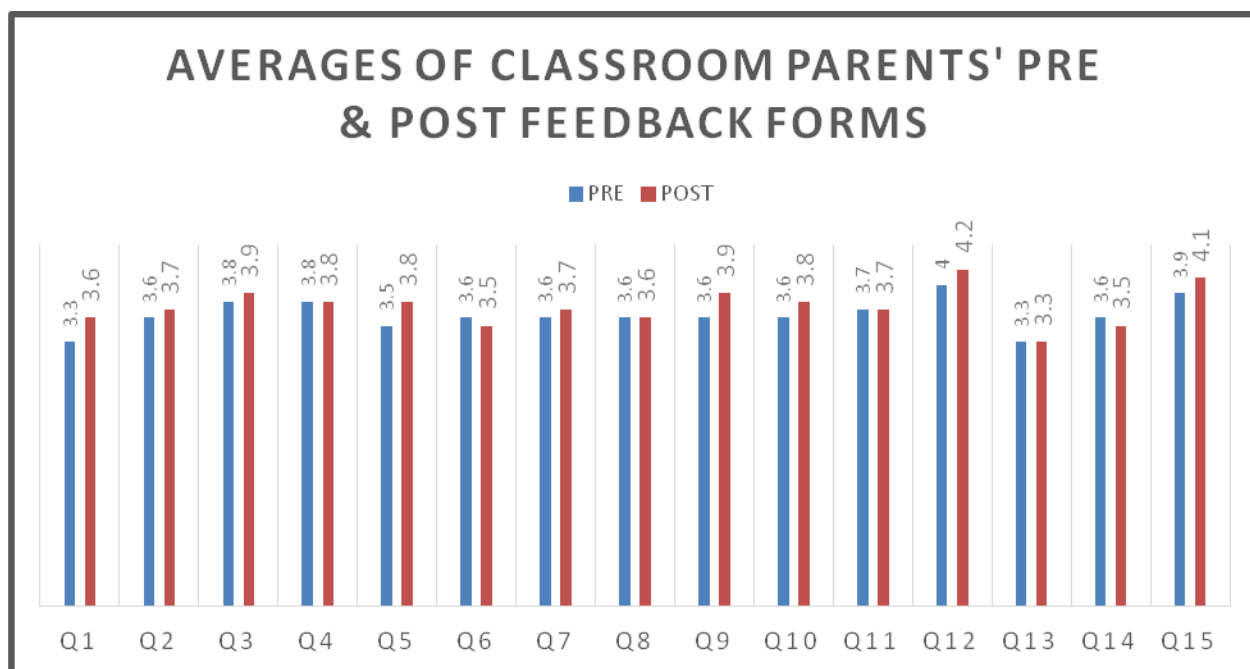
Figure 2. Average Likert score comparisons of pre- and post-parent responses to Parent

Feedback Form questions.

Findings. The pre- and post-parent feedback form averages were also compared side by

side to show increased scores on 9 out of the 15 statements (Figure 2). Four scores for statements

remained the same, while two scores decreased.

The two that decreased read: Q6 "My child has their own collection of books in our

home" and Q14 "I like to read." The data I collected does not back up these responses.

Pertaining to Q6, members of each student's families were given two to six free books each of

the three family nights. Even the students who never came to a single Family Reading Night

were given three brand new books from our program sponsor, a local Rotary Club. Thus, the data

I collected contradicts this comment change. One possible reason for this could be that a

different family member filled out the feedback form the second time around. In at least one case that I know of, a father filled out the post-feedback form when the mother originally filled it out, and he confused the Likert scale answering it backwards (1 = I Strongly Agree instead of 1 = I Strongly Disagree). It is reasonable to believe that something like that could have occurred.

The biggest increases in parent responses were for Statements 1, 5, and 9 at 0.3 in each case. Statement 1 states, "I participate in parent/family activities at my child's school." The average score went from 3.3 to 3.6. This data point triangulates with the increased report in the students' similar responses to Q15, as well as the Family Reading Program Attendance data (Figure 3).

Statement 5 relates, "I feel comfortable contacting my child's teacher." This is definitely an expected increase. I would only imagine that increased exposure to a child's teacher would increase their ease and comfort in communicating with them. I definitely observed this increase in comfort in communicating with my students' family members before and after school and at the Family Reading Program. Even my very limited Spanish speaking abilities did not deter any of the students' parents. They were very patient with me, I believe, because they knew I wanted to understand them and be able to help in any way I could, so they were willing to try.

The increase in Statement 9, which reads, "I ask my child questions about the books that they read" is a highly desired result from a teacher's perspective. Many parents mentioned on their written feedback forms that the newsletters were helpful and they were trying the different tips and family literacy aids. This is evident in this feedback form question result. Most of the parents stated that the best thing about the Family Reading Program was doing the reading activities and learning with their students as families.

Student Journal Entries

Analysis. On the day of the last family night, students were given the journal prompt, "I can't wait for Family Reading Night because…" in order to gain perspective on what part of the family night students were looking forward to the most. Journal entries collected were color-coded into four categories according to themes that appeared such as; *"prizes/presents,"* *"food/eat,"* *"family/fun,"* and *"performance/reading/activities."*

Findings. *"Prizes/presents,"* as one might expect, was the theme most often written about in the students' journals. Journal entries also included comments about food, family, fun, and performances, but it was the promise of presents and prizes that was prominent in their thoughts. Entries included:

- "At the family night I want to win the [Leap Pad]."
- "I can't wait for Family Reading Night because I'm going to get a prize and I'm going to sing *Pete the Cat: I Love My White Shoes* and it is going to be fun…"

   One student went so far as to predict the prize they thought they would win:

- "I want to get a prize because I'm going to share it with my brothers what I got and I predict it is Mega Blocks Skylanders…"

Parent Written Feedback Forms and Comment Cards

Analysis. A total of 16 written feedback forms were collected at the close of the program. The feedback was read and comments were categorized and color-coded into five separate categories according to themes that appeared such as, *"free books,"* *"family/friends/fun,"* *"student performances,"* *"great idea/thanks,"* and *"literacy/reading/helpful or useful."*

Findings. Parent comments about the program were promising and positive. Some general comments included:

- "I like it because everybody comes with their sons and daughters."

- "You gave me ideas to do activities from the stories."

- "I felt like you were connecting with the parents."

- "Thank you for this idea. I felt it helped out with wanting to read more to my kids and do fun activities."

Overall, parents made the most comments about the *"literacy/reading/helpful or useful"* category. That theme had a frequency of 54, with the next highest category of *"family/friends/fun"* only receiving a frequency of 17 times mentioned, then *"great idea/thanks"* with 13, *"student performances"* with 5, and *"free books"* with only 4 comments. The high frequency of the first category necessitated a more specific division of comments in order to uncover greater insight into what the main theme was. Accordingly, I renamed and recounted categories to see what theme would be the dominant one once divided. The result surprised and delighted me. *"Helpful or useful"* was the most commented on theme from parents with 24 times mentioned. When reviewing responses to the question, "*What do you think was the most helpful to you and your family?"* some of the parents gave the following answers:

- "Having a good time with my children and their friends and families."

- "Watching my daughter do new things."

- "That my child is excited about learning."

- "How to read with my daughter at least 15 minutes."

- "Showing the children that we as parents [believe] reading is important."

Parent responses were overwhelmingly positive. In fact, the only negative comments from parents came in regards to the question, "*If you could change something about the Family Reading Program what would it have been?"* Only three responses were offered, each one

having to do with the time. Two responses explained that it was hard for working parents to get there on time and the third expressed a desire for the program to have started on time. This finding expresses the difficulty involved in planning a program's date and time. Lessons learned include: it is impossible to please everyone all the time and accommodations made for late comers might very well upset those who are on time. This might be the best case for varying program activity times.

Teacher Observations

Analysis. As the teacher researcher, I was constantly taking mental notes about the program and making notes for things to do for the program, but periodically I also took notes about experiences that I had. I believe the most relevant observations for sharing are those that came unexpectedly.

Findings. The biggest difference I noticed through my own observations was in my relationships with my students. This was an unplanned effect of the Family Reading Program. I had expected a better relationship with my students' parents, but for some reason the thought never crossed my mind how it would affect those relationships with students too. The day after the first family night I was greeted with hugs, high fives, and showered with presents. One student whose family came the night before brought me a teddy bear holding a bouquet with five lollipops, one for myself and each of my four kids whom they had met. Another student gave me a quarter along with at least eight hugs throughout the day, which was cute and sweet, and yet another gave me one of her own special books from home. No doubt she was touched by being given several free books at family night and wanted to reciprocate. I was deeply touched by her gesture and it reminded me that it is that kind of reciprocation, the give and take between

students, families, and teachers that builds into the kind of strong home, school, and community partnerships that Epstein's (1995) work describes.

Another unexpected result was how excited students who were never able to go to a single family night could be about the program. It warmed my heart to see some of my students, whose parents never even turned in the permission slips, be so excited about family night when we did in-class program activities. It affirmed to me that the efforts I was taking to create as inclusive a program as possible were paying off.

Receiving money for brand new books for each of my students played a great role in this as well. I would never have guessed that I would receive such support from the community. As it turns out, I discovered that all you really need to do is ask when it comes to donations. Every student and family benefitted because over $610.00 in cash and gift cards were donated from local businesses and a Rotary Club in order to purchase new books, prizes, craft supplies, and snacks for each family night. I was repeatedly overwhelmed with gratitude throughout the program.

Volunteer Observations

Analysis. I asked program volunteers to share some of their observations of the program. Only three of the five that were given forms responded, but these volunteers were able to offer their thoughts from an outside onlookers' perspective, which I felt would be useful to my learning, as well as, possibly supporting the data collected from actual participants to the program. Additionally, I felt that it would benefit the volunteers to be able to reflect on the service they rendered in creating, preparing, and helping students and families with each of the family reading night crafts.

Findings. Volunteer comments were overall very positive and informative, some of which are included here:

- "Nothing brings more joy than seeing friends and family work so closely together. I personally loved being a part of this. I felt a greater desire to encourage these types of activities into my own school setting. I am excited to help again!" –M. Jacobson (Volunteer/Middle School Librarian)

- "I really enjoyed myself helping out with this marvelous program!... Overall, it is a wonderful opportunity for kids to bring their families to their schools and to participate in fun activities! Great Program! I had a load of fun!" –E. Jacobson (Volunteer/Middle School Student)

- "As far as I could tell the students were really excited and enjoyed themselves. More than one child mentioned that they had fun and it's exciting to come. I really enjoyed volunteering for this." –D. Jacobson (Volunteer/High School Student)

Participation Tickets

Analysis. Participation tickets were collected in a large jar throughout the program. Participants wrote their names on the back in order to keep track of participation and for ease of door prize drawings. The majority of tickets were earned at the Family Reading Nights through attendance and participation in literacy activities and crafts. Some of the tickets were earned by students and parents filling out necessary permission slips and forms, while only a few were earned through outside literacy activities suggested (i.e., visiting the county library, getting a personal library card, or completing projects sent home for those not in attendance at family night).
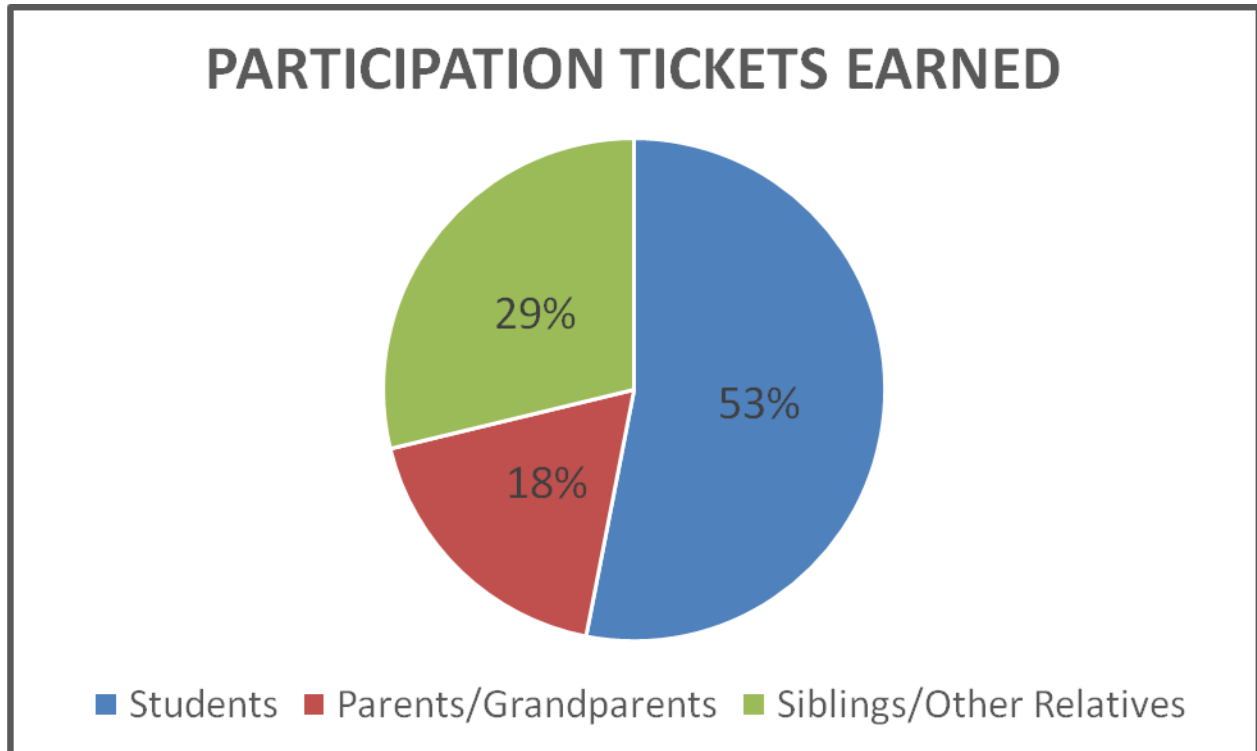
Figure 3. Graph of Participation Ticket distribution between students, parents, and siblings/other relatives.

Findings. In total 358 participation tickets were collected over the course of the program. When the program was over, tickets were tallied up according to each name in order to count how many tickets each participant had earned. Fortunately, throughout the program and collecting data, I became familiar enough with my students' relatives to be able to color-code tickets into three categories: students, parents/grandparents, and other relatives. Out of the 358 total tickets, 190 tickets were earned by my students, 65 tickets were earned by their parents or grandparents, and the remaining 103 were earned by siblings, cousins, and a young aunt and uncle. As seen in Figure 4, only a little over half, or 53%, of the tickets earned were by actual students. This result shows that parents (18%) and families (29%) combined participated almost equally in the program to the students. This result can be considered successful from the standpoint of participation.

Attendance Records

      Analysis. Attendance was probably the most important, or at least personally significant, data point for me to track given my research question, theoretical bases, and lack of research support. Students and their families signed in and received tickets upon arrival at each family night. Data was compiled for the three family nights to show the results seen in Figure 4. As described in the methodology section, student performances occurred on the first and last family night only to see if it would make a difference in attendance. Another aspect of the procedures that I varied in order to test attendance was the method of invitations used for each night. I mailed a formal invitation for the first night, only did newsletter reminders for the second, and had a separate flyer sent home for the third night.
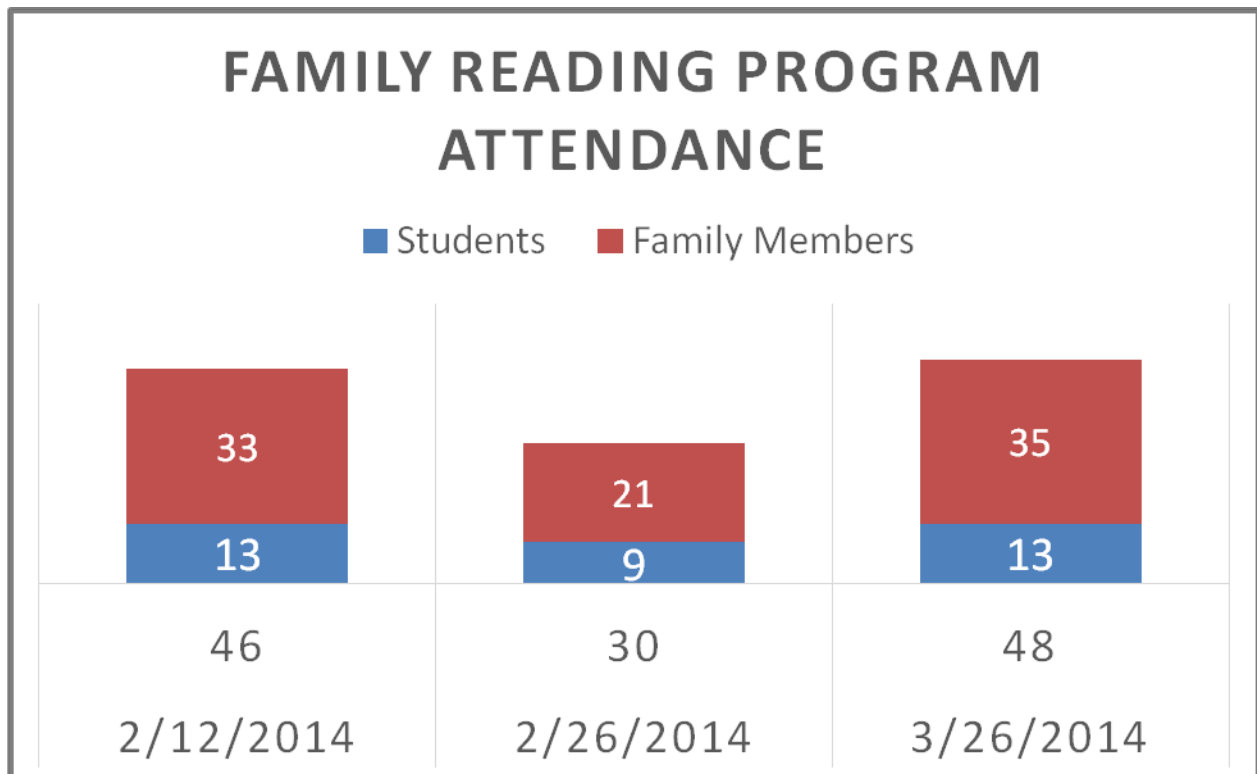
Figure 4. Student and parent attendance record for Family Reading Nights.

Findings. Results show that attendance was highest on the first and third nights with 12 and 14 more people in attendance than on the second night. The easiest answer to accept would be that less people came because there was no performance that night and neither a formal invitation nor separate flyer was sent home for it. However, my anecdotal notes remind me that there was steady rain that day and many of the students and their families walk to school. It was not plausible that many families would return to school in the evening after walking home in the rain after school. Considering the fact that parents' written comments put very little emphasis on the performances, I believe that given better weather, there would have been better attendance.

Another important finding is in the frequency that parents and students attended. Of the 19 participating families, 13 of them attended the first family night. Of those 13 who attended the first night, 12 attended at least two nights, and 7 attended all three nights. In contrast, of the 6 who did not attend the first night only 3 went on to attend either the second, third, or both. These results suggest that those who did attend were reinforced by participation, thus they returned again and again. I believe that parents' attitudes towards reading and school were positively affected by attendance at the Family Reading Program. This was the expected result given Skinner's theory of operant conditioning.

Conclusions

Overall, the data showed mostly increases in positive attitudes and feelings towards school and home. The attendance alone was well beyond expectation and perhaps the most significant of the results. Attendance data was triangulated through attendance records and parent and student feedback forms, in which an increase was discovered within the self-reporting nature of the forms.

Another significant finding was that of being inviting. Through the many language sensitive invitations extended throughout the program, my own observations of increased contact

and communication with both English and Spanish speaking parents, and the increased results from the pre- and post-program parent feedback form statement regarding feeling comfortable talking to the teacher, it is clear that it worked. The Family Reading Program was inviting.

The Family Reading Program also succeeded at being helpful and useful to parents and families. This result was also triangulated with data points showing strong and relevant conclusions. The statement "I ask my child questions about the books that they read" increased by 0.3. The program being helpful and useful was the most commonly expressed theme in all of the parent written feedback forms, and was made evident by one of my lowest readers.

Karen (name has been changed to respect participant privacy) was never able to attend any of the family nights, but her mom made a point to read and apply ideas from the newsletters as reported in her program written feedback. Karen was being considered for retention in the first grade and after a conference with her mother, they put the program's ideas and new books to use. Karen started carrying one of her free program books in her homework folder and reading it repeatedly for fluency. I am not suggesting that the program itself is what kept Karen from retention. That would be a stretch. I can confidently report, however, that the Family Reading Program played a role in her reading success, and parents that have never been "involved" before became active teachers for their children.

Recommendations

For My Own Classroom Practice

There are several things that I have identified to improve upon in my own continued teaching practice. I found it hard to try and do everything the research suggested all at once, especially as a new teacher. It reminded me of becoming a parent for the first time. A new expecting mom can spend nine months reading about how to become the "perfect parent" only to have all of her wonderful thoughts and notions fly out the window when the mayhem of

motherhood and sleeplessness actually sets in. Likewise, I tried to incorporate ideas and

procedures from as much of the research as I found possible, but a few techniques remain

untried. This is largely due to the constraints on my time to perform such a program while

student teaching and attending to my coursework, not to mention my inexperience with

conducting teacher research. Though there are several improvements I would like to make, some

of them are really only slight tweaks here or there. Accordingly, I will only address three in this

research.

In the future I would seek out more input from parents regarding the types of family

literacy activities they do at home and incorporate their ideas into the program in an effort to be

more culturally responsive and collaborative with parents (Tompkins, 2012, p. 30). Family

literacy activities as described by Edwards (2004) can include the ways in which children,

parents, and extended families interact with literacy in their homes and communities and

naturally go about their business (p. 282). Activities can include making lists, writing notes,

drawing or sharing stories to express ideas, etc. I believe that drawing specific attention to the

ways that parents are already teaching their children will: 1) Celebrate each family's strengths

and literacy efforts, 2) Offer ideas for other families to try, and 3) Help to build stronger

partnerships with parents and families, in which the teacher also plays the role of the learner.

Another area of improvement would be to conduct actual student interviews instead of

only collecting journal entries. This would help to gather more specific feedback from students

and assist in the triangulation of data collection. I think verbal feedback would be more valuable

to the study considering first graders' inexperience with writing. I believe they would be able to

express more of their thoughts in a conversation type setting. The importance of student

feedback is truly significant in this study considering the lack of such input in current research (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005).

Finally, I would like to expand the program by offering it year round rather than for 8 weeks. I would include monthly newsletters and I would offer family activities that occurred at varying times of the day, possibly on an every other month or quarterly meeting schedule. Expanding the program into a full-year effort would allow for continuity in building partnerships and more opportunities to offer support to parents in learning how to use literacy procedures (Tompkins, 2012, p. 31). Offering activities for the Family Reading Program at different times would serve those parents who commented on their written feedback forms that a different time would make it easier for them to attend more frequently. It would also reach out those parents and families who were never able to attend in the early evening. I would like to try at least one family night meeting later in the evening, possibly with a "Bedtime Story" theme, and one family program meeting in the morning before school that could be centered on breakfast and books. Considering how popular the book-related snacks were at our Family Reading Nights, and the fact that most of the students attend school for breakfast anyway, I believe that a "Breakfast and Books" event could be very successful.

For Other Teachers, Classrooms, and Schools

The greatest success of doing this Family Reading Program Project for me was really in just trying it, by taking that first scary step. It can be overwhelming to try new things especially as a new teacher, so it is important to remember that every mountain climbed began with a single footstep. The biggest thing to remember is there is no one-way to involve parents and families into school settings and activities. There are countless ways to involve parents and families at school. Rather than asking "How do I start?," perhaps a better question for teachers to ask is,

"What is of the highest importance for my students to learn this year?," and then go to work

planning ways to invite parents and families to participate in learning about and teaching those

new skills and concepts.

As I discovered through current research, the most dominate theme in determining

whether or not parents become involved at school has to do with one root word: *Invite*. This was

true in a myriad of ways, but perhaps the most significant was creating an inviting environment.

When parents feel welcomed at school by office staff and administrators, school becomes a place

where parents want to be and feel comfortable leaving their children (Ferrara, 2009). When

parents feel welcomed by teachers, they feel valued at school. A parent who feels valued at

school is much more likely to initiate communication with teachers, participate in school

activities and on parent councils, and accept a teacher's invitation to volunteer in whatever

capacity their partnership deems helpful and reasonable considering the parent's life context

(Taylor & Pearson, 2004, p. 179). It is imperative for teachers and schools to remember that a

"parent's decisions about involvement are influenced by schools," and largely based on

invitation. So, fellow teachers, in all you do—invite, invite, invite! (Hoover-Dempsey et al.,

2005). Recognizing that home, school, and community partnerships benefit everyone involved,

and most importantly influence the current and future success of the students affected by the

partnership, will make inviting that much easier. (Epstein, 1995).

I also highly recommend that schools seeking to improve in this area follow Epstein's

(1995) Framework of Six Types of Involvement and Sample Practices, otherwise referred to as

"Six Types of Caring." I further offer a caution for individuals and schools that create a plan for

parental involvement on paper only, for the sole purpose of following a No Child Left Behind

mandate to have such a plan in place (No Child Left Behind, 2002). Plans without actions are

like words without meanings. How will anyone really benefit from them? Schools that do this are truly missing out on the many blessings that come from school, home, and community partnerships, and denying opportunities to better the lives of countless individuals, students, parents, teachers, staff, administrators, and community members.

Final Thoughts

I can hardly begin to express the joy I feel, and how grateful I am, that I stuck with this action research plan despite the initial lack of support received at the school site. In staying true to my teacher instincts, I was able to touch lives. My relationships with my students and their families grew stronger. Good times and learning were shared, home libraries were increased, and community members and businesses experienced satisfaction about the services they granted in donating and helping.

Many times throughout the project I was inspired by the famous movie quote from *Field of Dreams* that said, "If you build it—They will come." I think of this Family Reading Program as building a bridge for home, school, and community partnerships. Even though the beginnings of such a bridge may start out as only a couple of boards bridging the gap, every time connections are made, knowledge and respect are shared, and additional resources are donated, the structural integrity of the bridge will grow stronger and stronger. I believe that through my continued efforts in parental involvement, no matter at what school or the demographics of students I serve, eventually the bridge of partnership between home, school, and community can be beautifully built and well-traveled. Perhaps the best part will be to know how many workers it took in cooperation to create such a bridge and the individual pride each person can have in the planks they personally laid.

That is my dream in education, to build bridges. So when my action research Family Reading Program project came to an end and my mentor teacher asked, "Well? What do you think? Would you do it again?" (Owen, J., personal communication, March 27, 2014), I confidently answered, "Absolutely!"

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Appendix

Outline of the Family Reading Program

End of First Trimester

- Parent/Teacher Conferences: Present program idea, gather interest and input

One Month Prior

- Prepare and distribute program donation request letters to local businesses

Two Weeks Prior

- Pre-Program Packet: Introduction to research study, permission slips, parent feedback form, explanation of program and participation ticket opportunities

- In-Class Student Discussion: Oral agreement, student feedback form

- Performance Prep: Learn and practice performance song, make props to be used while singing

- Fill out and submit Rotary Club application for book donation

One Week Prior

- School-wide Family Literacy Night: Advertise for and participate in school-wide family night, offer bonus participation tickets for attendance

- Performance Prep: Learn and practice performance song, make props to be used while singing

- Formal Invitations: Mail invitations to students' homes

Week 1

- Newsletter:

  o Home & School Connection Program welcome message

- o Tips for Reading With Children: Overcoming "I don't speak English," "I am learning to read," and "I have a disability" challenges with possible solutions listed

- o Family Fun Idea: Recipe for alphabet pretzels

- o Schedule: Family Reading Night dates and times

Week 2

- Family Reading Night: Class performance of "*You Are My Sunshine,*" Interactive read-aloud of *Froggy's First Kiss* by Jonathan London, book-related literacy activities for students to do with their families to earn participation tickets, a frog card craft provided by the Jacobson sisters, snacks and door prizes courtesy of Walmart, information packets from the county library, and free used books from Deseret Industries thrift store

- Reread story in class, send home activities and crafts in envelopes to encourage participation of those unable to attend Family Reading Night

Week 3

- Newsletter:

- o Home & School Connection: Making "Journeys" unit connections

- o Tips for Reading With Children: Overcoming "I don't have time" challenge with possible solutions listed

- o Family Fun Idea: Chocolate Pudding Bears

- o Schedule: Family Reading Night dates and times

Week 4

- Family Reading Night: Interactive read-aloud of *If You Give a Mouse a Cookie* by Laura Numeroff, with a cause and effect group activity, book-related literacy activities, mouse

puppet and cookie bookmark crafts provided by Jacobson sisters, snacks courtesy of

Sam's Club, door prizes from local businesses (i.e., El Taco Naco, Video Express,

Cinemark Movie Theater), and free used books from Deseret Industries thrift store

- Distribute and collect parent comment cards for program improvement and data collection purposes

- Reread story in class, send home activities and crafts in envelopes to encourage participation of those unable to attend Family Reading Night

Week 5

- Newsletter:

    o Home & School Connection: Making "Keep Trying" unit connections

    o Tips for Reading With Children: Overcoming "I am tired" challenge with possible solutions listed

    o Family Fun Idea: Sock Snake

    o Schedule: Reminder of last Family Reading Night date and time

Week 6

- Newsletter:

    o Home & School Connection: Additional making "Keep Trying" unit connections

    o Tips for Reading With Children: Limiting the amount and type of screen time kids are allowed at home in order to promote more reading

    o Family Fun Idea: M&M Graphing

    o Schedule: Reminder of last Family Reading Night date and time

- Performance Prep: Learn and practice performance song, make props to be used while singing

Week 7

- Newsletter:

    o Home & School Connection: Making home/school connections

    o Tips for Reading With Children: Opportunities for "Reading is everywhere!" ideas and suggestions (e.g., Go on a reading sign walk)

    o Family Fun Idea: Musical Games (e.g., musical chairs, freeze dance, making music)

    o Schedule: Reminder of last Family Reading Night date and time

- Performance Prep: Learn and practice performance song, make props to be used while singing

Week 8

- Distribute reminder flyer for students and families

- Student journal entry in class with the writing prompt: "The best thing about Family Reading Night is ..."

- Family Reading Night: Class performance of "*Pete the Cat: I love My White Shoes*," written and performed by Eric Litwin; book-related literacy activities for students to do with their families to earn participation tickets; scrapbook pages and music shaker crafts provided by the Jacobson sisters; snacks by Grocery Outlet, Raley's/BelAir, and Ellyson Chiropractic, Inc.; and door prizes and grand prize (Leap Pad with extra games and accessories) courtesy of Target; information packets from the county library; and free used books from Deseret Industries thrift store

- Post-program parent feedback form, written feedback form

- Fill out post-program student feedback form in class, students sign thank you cards for

  sponsors and volunteers before mailing and distributing

Post-program

- Mail and distribute thank you cards to sponsors and volunteers

- Data collection and analysis

  - Tally participation tickets

  - Review and verify attendance records

  - Find and compare averages of pre- and post-program feedback form questions for

    students and parents

  - Code parent comment cards, parent written feedback forms, student journal

    entries, and volunteer written feedback forms