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How Can An Effective Parent Outreach Program Impact Literacy Achievement And Foster A Community Network At An Urban Charter School?

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HOW CAN AN EFFECTIVE PARENT OUTREACH PROGRAM IMPACT LITERACY
ACHIEVEMENT AND FOSTER A COMMUNITY NETWORK AT AN URBAN CHARTER
SCHOOL?

By

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A capstone submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
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Chapter One:

Introduction

I can officially say I am a reader. I read for pleasure, I read to learn, I read to get lost in my own imagination, to refresh my soul, to “waste time,” to enjoy all that print has to offer, I am a devourer of books. This hasn’t always been the case. My journey into reading could be better compared to a roller coaster rather than an escalator going up to the next floor. But through every twist and turn of this crazy journey, I have had strong community of women holding my hand and supporting me along the way. I owe my love of reading to them.

Thinking of my own students, a diverse group of fourth graders, at an urban elementary charter school, I wondered how they would describe themselves as readers. How do their experiences and mine vary? I wonder how much their reading journeys and my own have in common. I was struck by the idea that they might be missing a key component to their literacy experience. Questions such as, do their parents know how to help them or how to encourage positive literacy experiences? Do they have access to quality literature beyond school? Do they read with their parents? Do they share stories as a family? How can we as a school help build positive relationships that benefit literacy growth in our students? All those questions and more brought me to my own research topic, *How can an effective parent outreach program impact literacy achievement and foster a community network at an urban charter school?*

Some of my earliest memories in my own literacy journey involved my mother. Sitting on the lap of my mother in an oversized rocking chair is one of my earliest memories. Not only was it quality time with a woman I adored, but it was a time to listen to her read aloud as we

rocked. Her voice was mesmerizing; she always gave each character a unique voice that brought the story to life. As I followed along looking at the pictures and trying to learn the words, I would doze off into sleep. The last thoughts of my day relating to the story I was being told. Looking back I can't think of a better way to fall asleep; nestled between my mother and a good book.

As I grew older, memories of the public library grow more prevalent in my memory. My mother would take my sister and I weekly. I was allowed to get as many books as I could carry, what a sight it must have been. I learned how to treat books and how to return them, as not to be fined. My mother would write down all the titles so we were sure to return them. She made every trip to the library special. She encouraged giving me time to get lost amongst the stacks of books. Knowing full well, she would eventually find me looking at the picture books. My mother always got just as many books as I did, if not more. She devoured books often two or three at a time. In my house, reading wasn't just done for school it was something I was surrounded by. Throughout my childhood the library was an escape from the everyday.

Coming from a family of readers, I always thought I was one. When I started school I thought I was an average reader. I didn't know that I wasn't on the level I should be. It wasn't until I moved schools in second grade that I started receiving special services. At first it was exciting, being able to go to a different classroom with a different teacher. It made me feel special, but as time went on I felt ignorant. I knew some kids in my class could read chapter books, they were always being told to put them away. I couldn't read a chapter book, I could barely get through picture books. When it came to fluency, I had so much trouble decoding words that I lost understanding, let alone read at an acceptable rate. Reading became such a

challenge that I decided I wasn't a reader.

Mrs. White changed my views quickly. She celebrated my tangles and encouraged me with kindness and compassion. It was good to know that when I read with her, I would be able to succeed. I might not have been on the level I should have been at second grade, but she chose books that matched where I was at. She taught me to be proud of what I could do, and to work hard at what I struggled with. Mrs. White worked with me for three years; I still remember her smile, gentle voice, and the sparkle in her eyes when I met a new challenge. I owe a lot of my reading success to her, she changed my view and empowered me to succeed.

In third grade I had a teacher who was able to bring stories to life much like my mother. A teacher who knew the power and craft of a quality read aloud. I always believed Mrs. Sauerman enjoyed a good read aloud as much as her students. She had a way of reading that brought you into the story. An escape into a story that was at a much higher level than I could read independently. As a struggling reader, I loved stories and yearned to read chapter books, but found it too challenging to do so. Mrs. Sauerman's choices for read aloud always seemed to be exactly what her students needed. We started the year off with Roald Dahl's *Matilda*, followed by C.S. Lewis' *The Lion the Witch and the Wardrobe*, from there we slid into Louis Sachar's *Sideways Stories from Wayside school*, and finished the year with Christopher Paul Curtis' award winning *The Watson's Go to Birmingham- 1963*. Here we are 22 years later, and I can still remember the stories she read us, and the excitement I felt as it was time for read aloud. My world became ablaze with quality literature. Even though the books were beyond my level at the time, I sought out the sequels and other books by the same authors. When a person is passionate about literature, especially quality literature, it is hard not to get the spark just by

being around them. My whole little world glowed because of one teacher's love for read alouds. I started to grasp the power of story, and knew that I wanted to be a better reader, I knew I wanted the power to read stories that brought the same fire as those read to me by my beloved teacher Mrs. Sauerman.

My reading journey took its final turn as I entered middle school. It was around this time that we stopped hearing read alouds in class. Middle School seemed too busy or too cool for read alouds. It was disappointing; I loved hearing stories read aloud, it was a way to escape into the story without having to struggle. At home, I also felt too old to have my mom read to me. That awkward time where I was still a child and wanted to be read to, but felt I was supposed to be more adult. I was supposed to be able to read on my own, so one day I wandered into the library at school. I found a book, honestly based on the cover alone, called *Weetzie Bat* by Francesca Lia Block, that book was the cog in the roller coaster that brought me to new heights. I was hooked! I was finally able to devour books like my mother. I was able to get so lost in a book that the time would fly by. I could read whole books in one night; my world opened up. Since I was too cool to read with my mom, we began to find conversations about books as enjoyable as we did the shared reading. I would finish a book and pass it off to her, she would read it and we would talk about it. From my early book love of Sharon Creech's *Walk Two Moons* to more recent book choices such as Laura Hillbrand's *Unbroken*, this tradition continues on today. She has always supported me through my struggles as a reader. Today we still share books, we still share a passion for reading, and we celebrate our success in reading.

I have not always claimed to be a reader, it has taken many passionate teachers to get me to where I am today. Where would I be without the support and coaching of my classroom

teachers, reading teacher, and my own mother? Without them to push me forward, accepting me for the reader I was, and celebrating each little victory, I would not be a reader. Becoming a reader has been an interesting journey, one filled with a strong supporting network of readers. People who shared their own love of reading with me and pushed me to become my own reader. I would do it all again, knowing full well I had passionate loving women by my side cheering me on the whole way. I am a reader. I am a devourer of books.

As an educator, I see and understand the importance of a strong literacy network. My connections helped me form my own reading identity, I had adults both in and out of school who loved literacy. Their passion and expertise helped me even as I struggled. How can I take my own personal experiences with a support system and help my students build their own? Had it not been for my mother, my third grade teacher, my amazing reading teacher, would I have become the reader I am today? I am not so sure. So many of my students come from home situations that can't always support what they learn in school. Through no fault of their own, my students face many challenges. Parents that work late or work several jobs, siblings to look after, limited English spoken at home, parents who do not understand what students are learning in school and so on. It is these students who need the most support in their literacy endeavors. It is in reflection that I was brought to the idea of building close relationships with students' families to help boost their literacy foundations. *How can an effective parent outreach program impact literacy achievement and foster a community network at an urban charter school?*

My question stems from the ever-evolving relationship between home life and school life. How can we as educators work to build better relationships with the other people in our student's lives? How can that relationship better a student's academic success?

If I, as an educator and as a community member truly believe that literacy is the most important aspect of education, how can I help promote best practice; not just among my peers but to the families of my students. Understanding ways in which I can create, foster, and grow strong relationships with my students' families, will not only help my students, but will help improve my own practice as well. I believe that each student's reading identity is shaped and molded by the experiences they have with text and the individuals that directly impact their experiences with literacy. I know it truly takes a village to help all children reach their potential. It is my goal to help each and every one of my students build strong literacy support systems that help them discover their own reading identity. So each of my students can identify themselves as readers.

Summary

Reading role models are very important in children's lives. Without adults around me that were readers, had a passion for reading, or were teachers, I would never have become a reader, much less a teacher. Finding ways to connect my students to their own literacy communities is important to me. Allowing them to interact with books, writing, and new media with a positive role model can only help them blossom as readers and as learners. I am looking forward to learning how to incorporate effective parental involvement in the literacy classroom. I am excited to see the results of my hard work.

The research in chapter two will dive deeper into the role of parental involvement in literacy education. To support my question of, *How can an effective parent outreach program impact literacy achievement and foster a community network at an urban charter school?* I will focus on the research behind family literacy programs and what makes them effective. We will

then look more closely at literacy communities, how they can be created and enriched. Another important aspect is parental buy in, how and why it is important to get parents involved in their child's education. Finally, we will look into best practices for teachers when it comes to incorporating parents into literacy education. .

CHAPTER TWO:

Literature Review

Introduction

This chapter will outline and review relevant literature related to family literacy programming. This review will focus on several aspects of building a literacy community for students which supports the research question: *How can an effective parent outreach program impact literacy achievement and foster a community network at an urban charter school?*

It will begin by talking about what a literacy community is, as developing a common understanding will benefit the rest of the research for the reader. Then I will outline why building a literacy community is important, which supports the reasoning for creating a curriculum in the first place. Following this, I will describe the importance of parental buy in and how to help that process be most effective. Next, I will describe proven ways in building family literacy programs that will best promote successful outcomes. Finally I will describe ways in which teachers best help the process for the greatest gains for students.

Family Literacy Programs

For the interest of this capstone, literacy communities are defined as groups of people who work together to promote lifelong literacy in others. There are many ways in which the members work to foster growth in children. Literacy communities support language learning and acquisition, understanding of print, and a love of the written word. Literacy communities are

webs of support that encourage growth and learning in students and individuals. As Rousculp and Maring (1992) stated, "literacy communities are dynamic ... environments that are rich in social relationships, in partnerships, and in collaborations involving talking, reading, thinking, and writing" (p. 384). Educators need to go one step further to focus on the many individuals that make up a child's literacy community, or those that impact how a child learns and connects to literacy. Building these communities help not only the students, but also allow families to come together to support their students' growth. Li and Christ (2007) stated, "For parents who do not have strong social networks, school and teachers are often the most critical sources of information about support for their learning and how to involve their children in school-literacy activities at home" (p. 33). There are many ways to build such communities, one is to be the role model, whether a teacher or as a parent, it is their responsibility to practice what they teach. Children will inevitably learn to value what they see others value. If parents do not place value in literacy activities when their children are young, there is a good chance their child will have challenges when it comes to reading. However, there are opportunities to reverse this process, programs where the whole family can come together to learn about literacy and strategies that can be used to promote reading.

One way to build literacy communities for children is through family literacy programs. Hannon (2003) defined family literacy programs as "programs to teach literacy that acknowledge and make use of learner's family relationships and engagement in family literacy practices" (p. 100). These programs take place over the course of weeks and months. They focus on skills and activities related to reading and bringing the family together. These programs can be led by community members, parents, librarians, or teachers. There are benefits for all of these parties to

participate in family literacy programs, but it is important that all parties have buy in. Li and Christ (2007) concluded, “Such institutional supports, together with efforts to help parents network among themselves and build stronger connections between school and home, will enable parents to engage in home literacy practices that are effective in supporting their children’s school-literacy development” (p. 34).

There is a difference between parental involvement and family literacy programs, although they have similar goals. Compton-Lilly (2011) found:

Parent involvement has focused on how parents are involved in their children's' school experiences. Family literacy casts its attention on the home literacy interactions and experiences of children within families. The common ground between these two fields is not difficult to identify—both fields address families and schooling. Both focus on the role of parents and both share the goal of helping more children to succeed in school (p. 11).

The biggest goal of building a literacy community is to help foster a lasting impact on a child’s literacy journey.

Importance of literacy communities. Literacy communities promote lasting positive literary experiences. A child's literacy community can be made up of teachers, parents, nannies, mentors, librarians, family members, even neighbors. "Literacy communities," is preferred over terms such as families, because there are many people involved in a child's care and development. As Mui and Anderson (2008) stated, "We . . . need to be aware that family members other than fathers and mothers support young children at home. We believe we need to be much more inclusive-- for example, when we invite "parents" to school for "parent-teacher" conferences-- and indeed reconsider the terminology we use in thinking of home--school interactions and support" (p. 242). A literacy community is different for every individual, no two literacy communities are the same. Rousculp and Maring (1992) reiterated what most educators already know, "Literacy processes and course content can be learned best in a dynamic . . . community that is rich in social relationships, in partnerships and in collaborations involving talking, listening, reading, thinking and writing" (p. 284). The role of a literacy community is to provide support, guidance, and exposure to the literary world, not just in a traditional classroom but in students' everyday lives. Literacy communities often begin to form in the early years in a child's life, they are not necessarily formed by the reading of books at bedtime, but by songs, storytelling, games, and communication that happen every day in a home.

Barriers of Effective Literacy Communities and School Relationships

There are many barriers that can hinder the growth of meaningful parent and school relationships. Some barriers go beyond the the abilities of educators (family situations, work

schedules and sick kids), but other challenges are more malleable with a little patience and flexibility from all parties involved.

The first thing teachers can do to help the relationship process is to check their own bias. As Helmen, Rodgers, Frederick, and Struck (2016) stated, “A strategy that will go a long way towards helping teachers improve their relationships with families is for teachers to continually examine their personal assumptions around parental and family engagement” (p. 88). Educators must remember that there are many ways that parents and families support the growth of literacy at home beyond just reading to their children (Mui & Anderson, 2008). Educators need to appreciate and understand where families are coming from, while also acknowledging that parents will have their own ways of supporting literacy growth at home, even though it may not seem so obvious to educators initially. Mui and Anderson (2008) stated, “As we communicate with and build relationships with families, it is important to recognize, value, and build on the different ways that families are constituted on the different ways that literacy is learned, practiced, and taught across cultural and linguistic groups” (p. 241).

Importance of participant buy-in. Parents are the first and often the most influential teachers a child will ever have. Their views on education and literacy hold more weight than many parents realize. What they say, do and their views on the world, quite often are passed on to their children. Epstein (1987) stated, “Parents lay the groundwork for students’ success in school by building their children’s self-confidence, self-concept, and self-reliance. If these aspects of home training are not completed by the time the child starts school, they become the mutual concern and shared responsibility of the family and the school” (p. 121).

There is a lot of research that states as students move through the school years, the involvement of parents' declines. There are many factors to this, but the idea that parent involvement is key to building motivation and academic success this fact is startling. The fact remains that many parents want to be more involved, but many are unsure of how they can help or even if teachers want their help. Epstein (1987) noted, "Almost all parents remain interested in their children's schooling and success, and would like directions and information from the schools about how to help their children" (p. 129). It is up to educators to communicate with parents, to help them understand the role in which we wish them to play. Without explicit communication and instruction, educators cannot expect them to practice strategies students learn at school. Other barriers parents and families may encounter. Truesdell and Del Prado Hill (2015) remind us to, "Plan how to overcome two potential barriers to parent participation in a community family literacy program: parents' perceptions of their own literacy and the cost of participating in a program" (p. 433). The best way to combat this is to help parents understand their own literacy and understanding. The skills and strategies taught in a community literacy program should also be transferable to the caregivers as well. Educators should look to build parents' confidence and skills along with their students. As for cost, educators need to find a place that is central and easily accessible for participants to get to. Food or snacks are also an important (not only to help families for programs that may take place around a meal time, but also because food builds community.) Beyond the cost to get to a program site, and the case of missing a meal, it is important to find a time (or several times) that fit the schedules of families as many have varied work hours (Truesdell & Del Prado Hill, 2015). The program needs to be accessible and accommodating in order to be inclusive to all families.

Important Aspects of a Family Literacy Program

Beyond parental buy in it is important to understand that both parents and teachers are on the same side. Educators need to foster partnerships built on mutual respect, interest, and needs. Griffith, Beach, Ruan, and Dunn (2008) summarized, “Effective partnerships are based on the needs and interests of the families. Control is shared between parents and schools. This means decision making is joint and that both parents and teachers may bring issues and concerns to the table. There is mutual respect between parents and the school, with parents viewed as having valuable expertise and the ability to guide their children's learning. Partnership activities build on family strengths rather than focusing on perceived deficits” (p. 175). We need to give parents tools and strategies that encourage their children’s literacy growth as well as make their jobs as parents and caregivers easier to help support their children. Parents already have a lot on their plate, if educators want their help, support, and they want them to be involved, educators must make their role one of support and ease.

It is also important to remember that each parent and each partnership in this community need different things. Just as teachers differentiate for their students, they need to differentiate for their literacy community groups. “Good partnerships are based on the people and programs involved; no two partnerships are the same, for they grow and develop to fit the partners rather than some arbitrary model” (Griffith et al., 2008, p. 175).

All partnerships also need open communication. All sides need to be heard and their views acknowledged.

Baker, Scher and Mackler (1997) state, Variations in parental beliefs about reading also

need to be acknowledged by teachers. Home and school influences on the development of motivations are likely to be synergistic. When both parents and teachers communicate that reading is interesting, enjoyable, and valuable, the child should benefit enormously. When the messages are incompatible, however, difficulties may arise” (p. 80).

Teachers can be telling parents that they should be reading to their children, and they may be doing so, but educators really need to focus on *how* caregivers are reading to their child (Li & Christ, 2007). The more explicit teachers get, the better it will be for all members of the literacy community. Li and Christ (2007), discuss teacher and parental roles in the process, “Both explaining a student’s academic progress in a way that parents understand and providing explicit suggestions that parents might use at home to support their child’s school literacy development are important steps for teachers.” They continue, “Likewise, parents should ask teachers for clarification when they do not understand a teacher’s statements about their child’s progress, or cannot utilize suggestions made by the teacher for their home practices” (p. 34). Not only do parents and teachers need to be on the same page, but the ideas, expectations, and goals they each have, need to be understood by both parties.

Along with communication, “[s]chools [should] welcome parents and community members as partners in their children’s academic and social development by tapping into their funds of knowledge to support students’ academic success” say Louie & Davis-Welton, p. 59, (2016). While educators spend most daylight hours with students, caregivers and parents usually know the child best. They offer background, other ideas, and needs assessments that educators may not see at school. Louie & Davis-Welton go on to state, “Partnership transforms the interaction into a systematic two-way communication between community or family members

and schools.”

Community literacy programs offer many advantages for parents and caregivers as well. One of the greatest is the growth of social capital. Social capital refers to a person's ability to attain resources or social benefits by being associated with others (Portes, 1998). Social capital can be built by creating community experiences for families, where parents and caregivers can connect and share ideas which benefit all members of the community. Literacy communities should be based around shared social capital, much like Louie and Davis-Welton (2016) stated, “A relationship built upon partnership [that] recognizes shared responsibility, resources, and expertise for students’ learning” (p. 605).

As the definition of family is evolving, the ideas of strong social structures are not always in place. When caregivers do not have strong social capital, they have to rely on their own experiences. Sometimes these practices are out of date, or perhaps not effective in helping their child succeed. Not every family has strong social connections, but by building a place where families can meet and foster relationships, we can help all members even after the program takes place. The ability to rely on social capital, allows families who might not have the means to connect to literacy resources and share ideas with others (Li & Christ, 2007). Learning from family, friends, coworkers, and others in the community allows parents the ability to connect with their children in ways that foster literacy, that work with similar strategies and practices that also take place at school. When parents and caregivers have these strategies, they are able to help their students make greater strides in their learning (Li & Christ, 2007).

Best Practice for Teachers

How do teachers' best support parents and students? How can they help their students build their own literacy communities. As teachers, they have extensive experience with not only best practice in literacy, but also in teaching. It is important for educators to remember that they are the experts when it comes to sharing what they know. Sure, they want their students to learn, but, they must remember that they need to teach parents how to be effective in what educators ask of them. Teachers must discuss, model, and practice each step of their community literacy programs.

Teachers cannot expect a parent whom had difficulty in school to be at a place where they feel comfortable helping their children. While they may very well have the skills and the interest, their own personal experiences can affect if and how they feel they are able to help their child. Taylor (2006) reminds us that the other side isn't much easier, "parents who found school to be easy may not have the background to assist a struggling student. For parents for whom school was easy, it may be difficult to break their comprehension into the small chunks that can assist their students" (p. 90) We cannot assume parents know how to help their children, we need to communicate with parents and help them bridge their needs with the needs of their children. The best way to help here is to ask questions and build relationships with all parties involved in the child's literacy community.

Another important aspect of making a learning community work is to understand bias and negative thinking and how that can affect a school atmosphere and learning community. As Christensen (2004) notes, there are many ways communication can break down the community

building process, “For example, responding only in a crisis, defining (and labeling) the family solely by structure (e.g., “single parent”), and viewing the family as deficient are far too common examples of school practices that result in an uncomfortable atmosphere for discussion and interaction between families and school personnel” (p. 90). It is here that we need to flip the script on deficit based thinking to a more positive asset based thinking as educators. Each and every one of our students have a different story, different experiences, and different strengths. We need to look at the whole child, along with their backgrounds to help create a positive learning experience for them. To build on this we need to invite families and parents as they are, welcome them when they can join in on their children's educational journey as well as allow them to not be there as well. Every person has their own story. As educators, we need to help students find success, if their families are unable to be at all functions or support their children's educational experience, we need to help students find other mentors to raise them up.

Education is not for the faint of heart, literacy especially, is such an important aspect of life that requires us to examine how educators teach and what outcomes they are looking for. Educators must look to their student, to push them in the right direction. Educators must then foster a literacy community around each child that can support who they are, what strengths they possess, and how to help them grow as literacy learners. In summary, Gregory, et al. , (2004) concluded, “These representations of teaching and learning are rooted in convictions about overturning stereotypes, redefining what counts as literacy, expanding notions about who counts as teachers of literacy, capitalizing on children’s ability to negotiate meaning and take control of learning, learning from and through first languages while developing bilingual and bicultural capabilities, nurturing home and community networks of teaching and learning and seeing to

understand others by looking beyond surface attempts to appreciate culture and language” (p. 221). Students need supportive literacy communities that offer positive, nurturing, places for them to develop their own individual literacy identities.

Effects of Family Literacy Programs on Literacy Achievement

Even though it is well documented that parental involvement in education, especially literacy, often leads to greater literacy achievement; it is hard to find significant data that supports gains in student achievement scores after participation in family literacy programs. Obtaining data that promotes lasting effects on achievement can be difficult, especially because each school or program adapts to the needs of the population in which they are working with, which may or may not align with the data points (Hendrix, 2000). Several meta-data studies conclude that while there is often some positive correlation between literacy growth and family literacy programs, it is often smaller than original gains and targeted goals (Van Steensel, Et. al. 2011; St.Pierre, Et. al., 2005). That’s not to say these programs are completely ineffective, as Anderson, Anderson, & Teichert (2013) offer, “Researchers have tended to focus on the effects of family literacy programs on participants’ literacy or more general cognitive development and, although these are obviously important, the results of this study suggest the impact of family literacy programs go beyond these, at least from the perspective of participants” (p. 49). Families gain social capital, build positive relationships, connect with the school as well as the community, learn tools to support their child and improve their own personal views on education, which in turn benefits their children (Anderson et al. 2013; Hendrix, 1999; Morrow & Young, 1997.) It is clear that there are many benefits of family literacy programs beyond literacy growth. Researchers, teachers, and program coordinators need to be cognizant of the goals they

have for their program and their participants. Programs need to be organized in a way that best supports these goals using best practice.

Summary

This literature review focused on family literacy practices and how it affects student performance which supports my research question: *How can an effective parent outreach program impact literacy achievement and foster a community network at an urban charter school?* The research suggests that building connections between home and school help support students learning over time, but do not always match target growth goals. There are other positive outcomes attained by family literacy programs that can last longer and affect literacy experiences. Parental involvement in education, especially literacy promotes lifelong learning and literacy skills. Family literacy programs promote the building of community as well as provide a place where families can immerse themselves in a positive literacy environment. Important aspects of an effective program include clear communication between all members, as well as using gradual release when introducing new ways parents' can interact with their children. Barriers that can hinder a successful program, include bias from teachers, financial costs of the program, and parents own beliefs and experiences about education. Best practice for teachers including positive modeling, clear communication, and the ability to accept all members as they are. The research helped me understand best practice and critical aspects of a family literacy program.

In the next chapter, I will describe the methods used in creating my family literacy program curriculum which correlate to my literature review. The family literacy program's

intended outcomes are based upon building a literacy community to support student growth. I will describe the project in terms of its intended participants, setting, and pertinent background information. I will then explain the curriculum frameworks including standards, structure, and theories that support the creation of the program's curriculum and goals.

CHAPTER THREE:

Methods

Introduction

In the previous chapter I reviewed the literature related to building literacy communities in order to answer my research question, *How can an effective parent outreach program impact literacy achievement and foster a community network at an urban charter school?* In this chapter I will use the common themes and ideas from my research to describe the methodology of my capstone project. My research suggested that family literacy programs are a positive way to build connections and community between home and school which in turn has a positive effect on literacy development. The focus of my research then turned to best practice of building family literacy programs that promote literacy communities. Areas of importance included breaking barriers, building communication between all sides of the partnership, and promoting a positive, welcoming culture that builds the literacy community. The final idea from the previous chapter was that the process of family literacy programs need to be well planned, organized and explicitly taught to all participants for the best possible outcomes. This research helped shape my curriculum by building background and providing best practice for an effective community literacy program.

In chapter three, I will identify my participants, setting and then I will discuss the process used to answer my research question with the capstone project. The purpose of my capstone project is to create a curriculum that can be used in an urban charter school setting to help build a positive literacy community for my students. These literacy communities are formed by making

connections through literature and literacy activities in a social context. This curriculum will help bridge the gap between teacher and parental involvement in literacy practices, by fostering social capital while building literacy communities for each child involved.

Project Description

When I initially began to think about this project, I was reflecting on issues I saw in my own school relating to literacy. Our school's state test scores for reading were lower than we had hoped, in addition parental involvement in school seemed less than ideal. These two issues together helped me formulate my research question. After researching my topic question, I found that there are many important aspects to creating a successful literacy community and decided to create a program to be used in my own school. The best way to create this program was through a curriculum to be used at the school in which students, their families, caregivers, and community members that would foster community, build literacy interest, expand literacy skills and improve student motivation.

As I stated in chapter two, a literacy community is a group of people who work together to promote lifelong literacy in others. Those around us are our first teachers, this usually is the role of families, and often our family members continue to be our models for learning as we grow. By building a community that models positive literacy behaviors, we give students strong foundations to grow from by seeing themselves as readers and writers. Literacy role models pass on their values and show their excitement for students growth, which encourages them and motivates them as their schooling progresses.

To reach these goals, the literacy community curriculum will be broken up into six, two-and-a-half hour long sessions, spread out over six months.. These sessions will take place in

a time that allows for the most participation and in a location that is accessible to the greatest number of families. A 30-minute meal time is planned for each session, as food has a unique way of building conversation, culture and community. Childcare for non-school age children is also offered to support families participation in the program. The focus of these sessions is to build literacy communities by having students, parents, caregivers, and community members working together on literacy activities and discussions. The first session is all about understanding that we are all readers and writers as well as members of the same community. The second session focuses on building a toolkit to be used at home to assist families and caregivers in supporting their students. Tools and ideas will be taught and questions asked by families will be answered. The third session is focused on digital literacy, teachers and school technology coordinators will be brought in to discuss safety, security, digital citizenship, and tools that can be used at home to promote good digital literacy skills. The fourth session is focused on storytelling and the power that comes from celebrating our stories. These stories are digitally recorded and used in the fifth session. The fifth session is focused on writing and creating, we will work on poetry as well as sharing our personal stories from the previous session. The final session is a celebration of literacy and community. Together we will create "Little Free Libraries," which promote literacy by getting books out into the community for people to read. These libraries will be designed, built and maintained by members of the literacy community program. Each session is designed to give participants tools and ideas to use at home and in their own communities. The overall goal of the family literacy program is to build positive home school relationships that foster literacy growth, while allowing families to work together and learn from one another.

Participants. I developed a program curriculum model that could be used with families in an urban charter school setting to promote literacy communities. While creating this family literacy curriculum, I was guided by my own students and their needs. I work at an urban charter school in a large metro area, located in the Midwest. My students and their families come from four surrounding communities. These communities are mostly working middle to lower class neighborhoods filled with rich diversity.

Most recently my classroom consisted of 16 students. Of those students, 10 were Hispanic, four were African American, two were Caucasian. The gender breakdown of those students was four females and 12 males. 14 of those students qualified for free or reduced lunch. Six students qualified for ELL services and five students qualified for Special Education services. English, Spanish, and Somali were the predominant languages spoken by these students and their families.

I used this particular class because they were a strong representation of the school as a whole. The main focus of my project was to build a literacy community among individuals that had a vested interest into the school and the students that attend it. By using this class snapshot as a model for the program, I was able to formulate session plans that would not only interest these students and their caregivers, but also help create interest and build buy-in into the program. The point of the program is not just to build gains in literacy achievement, but to also build literacy communities that support student growth. This extended participant base includes not only parents, but other family members including grandparents, aunt, uncles, and siblings. By expanding our lens on our idea of “family” we increase inclusivity and build support to foster literacy communities (Hendrix, 2000).

Family participation. Families are encouraged to participate in the Family Literacy Program on a voluntary basis. All families in the school will be sent flyers and information via digital sources through the school. Additionally informative posters will be posted. Families are encouraged to participate in all six of the sessions, but it is understood based on the barriers that were mentioned in chapter two, this is not always possible. Families will be welcomed whenever they can join, they will be celebrated for their attendance as well as all that they bring to the program.

After initial interest for the Family Literacy Program is collected, families will be given a general interest survey that asks questions to guide the program. They will be asked what they would like to get out of a program, their approximate availability for the next six months, transportation questions, and location information. Once this information is collected, it will help inform the trajectory of the program, when it will be scheduled and where is the most convenient location.

Setting. I teach in an urban suburb of a metropolitan city. The school is a new charter school that opened this past year. The building is currently K-4, and will expand over the next few years. Currently there are 160 students enrolled at the school. 73% of our students qualify for free and reduced lunch. The demographics of the school consist of the following: 29% of students identify as Hispanic, 29% of students identify as Black, 29% of student identify as white, 3% identify as Asian, and 10% identify as other. Approximately 30% are English Language Learners and 30% of students fall under the special education umbrella.

The actual location for this family literacy program is adaptable based on the needs of the participants. My research show location and availability of transportation could be a barrier

preventing participation in successful family literacy programs, if we do not meet the needs of our participants, we won't have any in the first place. While the school has the space and tools needed, the curriculum was built with the idea that the program could take place anywhere.

Local community centers or public libraries are other good options to reach the greatest numbers of participants if the school is not a central location for the greatest number of families.. The other benefit of having an adaptable location means we can break down community barriers. We can have school families explore new locations and get to know other participants in their own neighborhoods which can be a wonderful way to build community and break social stigma.

Location and setting of the program needs to be seriously considered when starting an effective family literacy program.

Curriculum Framework

My curriculum focuses on fostering literacy communities by offering families and community members ways to interact socially while building positive literacy experiences. Two theories that influenced my curriculum are Vygotsky's theory of Social Development and the Social Capital Theory. I decided to create my curriculum with Vygotsky's (1978) theory of social development in mind, as I have seen in my own practice and in my research that social interactions help cognitive development. Vygotsky viewed parents as important components of their child's development. He believed that children learn by interacting with others who are more knowledgeable in skills and practice. Caregivers often transmit their own feelings, views, and cultural identity either directly or indirectly, and children internalize these and eventually form their own identities based on the world around them. In addition to learning from interacting with those around them, children also need time with support to be successful in

learning. Vygotsky's' theory of the Zones of Proximal Development, supports the idea of instructional scaffolding, which gradually releases control of new skills and information. Each time something new is introduced in the Family Literacy Program curriculum, participants will be guided through instructional scaffolding, so they feel confident with their new skills and tools. Additionally, support for families will be given throughout the program to continue to build positive literacy outcomes.

Another guiding theory of my curriculum creation is the idea of Social Capital. The Encyclopedia of School Health (2013) defines Social Capital Theory as, “a set of concepts that collectively describe the degree of connectedness individuals feel within a group, a community, or a society.” They continue by describing the five guiding concepts that make up social capital which are: networking, reciprocity, trust, social norms, and personal and collective efficacy. How humans interact with one another affects learning and community effectiveness. What we place value in is often learned from others. By building social capital in my curriculum, participants are able to share information, experiences, values, and help build a more effective literacy community.

Standards. Rather than create a program that is focused on raising achievement alone, (that we know based on the work of researchers such as Hendrix(2000); Van Steensel, McElvany, Kurvers, & Herppich(2011), is hard to do) I decided to work towards building literacy communities that give students positive literacy experiences. Finding standards that align to such outcomes was quite challenging. State standards are mostly focused on the content side of literacy education, which does not fit the overall goal of the program. Another struggle was the broad range of abilities and needs by participants, which lead me to find the PTA's National

Standards for Family-School Partnerships (2007). The focus of these standards is on building positive partnerships that help students succeed. The six standards the PTA focus on are: Welcoming All Families Into the School Community, Communicating Effectively, Supporting Student Success, Speaking up for Every Child, Sharing Power, and Collaborating with the Community. After reviewing these ideas, I felt they were strongly aligned with my own personal ideas of what the program should be and what the research stated successful family literacy programs were.

Curriculum lesson design. I used the “Understanding by Design (UbD)” framework to create my unit plan. UbD is a backwards lesson plan format, created by Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe (2012). I started by planning my unit by thinking about my desired results of the program. From there I had to decide how I would assess understanding throughout the program by creating my assessment evidence. Finally I created the steps to reach my intended outcomes, by creating a learning plan. I created an overall unit plan using UbD as well as creating each individual session using the same format. Overall this was a challenging method to use for the format of my program as the intended outcomes can be hard to measure. However, UbD is a wonderful way for educators to create valid lessons. UbD gives educators a chance to think first about what we want our participants to know at units end, and work backwards to create assessments, and then plan.

Summary

In this chapter, I have described the format of my family literacy program curriculum. Connecting to my personal experiences as a classroom teacher working within my school, I described the participants, setting, and data which guided the development of my curriculum and

goals. I discussed the theories that support social learning which support the activities and organization of the curriculum. Together with my initial research on *How can an effective parent outreach program impact literacy achievement and foster a community network at an urban charter school?* I was able to create a family literacy program that supports literacy growth through social learning.

In chapter four I will discuss my personal conclusions based on my own reflection of the capstone project, in an effort to answer my research question, *How can an effective parent outreach program impact literacy achievement and foster a community network at an urban charter school?* I will reflect upon what I have learned about myself as a researcher, writer, and learner during the capstone process and how it will relate to my own practice going forward. I will describe implications and limitations of my project in an attempt to better understand my own thoughts on my project. I will also reflect on where this paper will take me in the future of my teaching career.

CHAPTER FOUR:

CONCLUSIONS

Introduction

When I first began the capstone process I looked toward challenges I faced as a classroom teacher to find my research question. After spending these past two years studying literacy education, I decided it was advantageous to focus on issues related to literacy. Unfortunately, one of the biggest focus' in education right now is test scores, which lead me to see a disconnect between what my students needed to be able to do and where they were actually at. I thought of all the factors that lead to low test scores and then compared my students' experience to my own. I wondered about their home lives and how they were supported outside of the classroom to become better readers and writers. I wondered who were their literacy role models and who belonged in their literacy communities. Eventually I was lead the the question, *How can an effective parent outreach program impact literacy achievement and foster a community network at an urban charter school?* In this chapter I will reflect on what I have learned about myself as a researcher, writer, and learner during this capstone process. I will also reflect on the implications and possible limitations of my research and curriculum. Finally, I will discuss the overall capstone experience and how it will support my teaching practice in the future.

Personal and Professional Discoveries

Overall I found the whole capstone process to be very rewarding. I was able to rediscover my love for learning and discovery. While a bit overwhelming at times, I found the research

portion of my capstone to be one of my favorite parts. I enjoyed learning new ideas and reading about what others have used in their teaching roles. I also appreciated finding my own understandings were not always backed by research. Often it feels as though we as educators teach into a vacuum. It is nice to know that all around us others are working to make our jobs more effective and to back up our practices with research and hard data. It is up to us as educators to review this information to influence and improve our practice.

Literature review. My literature review focused on family literacy programs and practices and how it affects student performance which supports my research question: *How can an effective parent outreach program impact literacy achievement and foster a community network at an urban charter school?* The research suggests that building connections between home and school help support students learning over time. However, there was a strong disconnect in data between family literacy programs and measurable growth in literacy achievement. This is not to say that family literacy programs are not effective, but it reminded me that it is important to plan specific and realistic goals for the program backed by supporting data.

Parental involvement in education, especially literacy promotes lifelong learning and literacy skills. The research helped me understand that best practice relates to avoiding the deficit model and to celebrate knowledge and existing connections that already promote literacy in a home setting. These critical aspects of a family literacy program, helped me foster the idea to not only teach parents new skills and strategies to help their students succeed as readers, but to also celebrate a love of reading and literacy in the home and community. When communities work together, we all send the same message to our students: That reading is important and that

there are many people who care about them and want them to be successful.

Implications

Overall this project has opened my eyes to data and research that support community building in schools. I have learned new ideas to use in my own classroom and to better my own practice. The research has reaffirmed the idea that community and social learning are an important part of learning. Students need to feel supported and respected to be able to grow. In turn I will be putting more focus on community building in my own classroom next year.

I will also use the research that discussed best practice for fostering and strengthening home-school relationships with the families I work with. This is something I and others in my school have struggled with in the past. I was surprised to learn that there are many barriers on both sides of the table when it comes to creating strong home-school partnerships beyond interest. Thinking of my own experiences, I used to think that many parents had no interest in school related partnerships or what was going on in their child's school life. I know now, that I am a big part of this perceived problem. I have to look at my own bias and ideas to make the possibilities of these partnerships a reality in the first place. I need to create pathways that break down barriers and invite open communication so that all students are supported. I need to work with families to support them in ways they feel there is a need, and not just focus on my own perceived needs of the situation. As partners, we need to remember we are not in this alone. In order for us to really focus on the literacy growth of our students, we need to recognize that we are just one small part of our student's literacy community. We need to honor, value, and embrace the other parts of these communities, while also "[shifting] our exclusive focus from the

school to the children and the many context in which they are active participants” (Gregory, Long, and Volk, 2004)” Finally, educators need to remember that parents and families do care, they want their children to succeed, they just need to be invited into the conversation on how to best support their student. Each student's personal learning community is different, but behind each child is that group of people that want the very best for them.

Partnership with Title I. After researching how family literacy programs can be used to promote community and achievement, I think my project can be a catalyst for building positive home-school relationships at my school. I have heard from both administration and families alike, that they would like more opportunities to work together to support students. I have also heard from our Title I program staff, who already have to offer family programs throughout the year to support relationship building and student support. The Minnesota department of Education defines these partnerships as, “The Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), Title I, Part A program regulations insist on robust family involvement activities that build partnerships, between parents and educators, at every district and school where these federal funds support effective teaching and engaged learning” (p. 4). I think combining our forces together, we could make a wonderful program that attracted families and supported literacy achievement in our students.

Limitations of the Project

Project design. One of the greatest limitations of my project design, was the use of Understanding by Design (UbD) to plan my unit. I am new to the idea of backwards design, as my school doesn't have any particular way it prefers lesson plans to be done. While I really liked

working from the intended outcomes, backwards, I found the actual planning part different from my preferred style. I prefer to make lessons very step by step, so that if something happens, someone else could probably figure out what I am trying to do and teach. That is not to say I follow the script exactly, I use the planning process to help fit my own learning and memory style. However, part of the whole idea of UbD is that plans should not be so scripted as to allow learning to flow in whichever way it needs to, to achieve the intended outcomes. As this was my own project I modified and adapted how I planned this unit to fit my own style, which helped me stay motivated and really work through the process of the unit.

Limitations on implementation. After I finished designing my project, I started to wonder about certain issues that might come up when it came to actually implementing the project at my school. The largest two issues facing the effective implementation of this program seem to be time and money. I started to think of how I could gain volunteers from the school and greater community to help run and organize the program. I also wondered how I would be able to find the money to implement the project? While most parts of the project can be done at no cost, certain important parts of the program needed to be funded, these two areas are food (to serve community meals) and costs of building the “Little Free Libraries.” It is clear that before I will be able to implement this program at my school a few more details need to be figured out and organized.

Time. An important limitation to anyone is time. This could be time for the teacher and or administrators trying to run this program in addition to their other duties or time a family has to spend away from their normal routines. As this was mentioned as a barrier for both parents and teachers it is important to consider this as a possible roadblock for an effective program. It

will be important to find a time, date, and location that makes it easiest for the greatest number of people to join the program. It will be important to make sure that the learning outcomes are valuable to all participants and that each person feels they gained new tools or knowledge from each session. Understanding that time can be a major limitation, helps us as educators develop curriculum that meets the needs of the most people, which in turn creates a more effective program.

Costs. Serving meals and snacks at each session is an important part of the program. Meals bring people together, they allow people to share ideas, conversation, and culture in an informal way that promotes community (Block, 2008). To create this sense of community the program would need to figure out how to attain enough healthy food to support attendance of all participants. Fundraising and soliciting donations might be the best way to combat the financial costs of serving meals. Having potluck meals where families can share meals is another way to build community by sharing culture and promoting community. Another source of funding would be tapping into Title I funds by working with Title I staff to promote the program and it's goals (which align with Title I goals.)

The final session of my project is building a few "Little Free Libraries" for the communities in which my students live to help ease book access. "Little Free Libraries" are small structures that house donated books in which people can take and leave at any time. Community members will work together to build these for areas in their communities that do not already have access to a LFL. Each library could cost up to \$200, with licensing fees and materials (Little Free Library, 2017). We would have the option of buying premade kit to assemble the libraries or to design and build our own from scratch. Starting the fundraising early

and getting members of the community involved would definitely help make this goal a reality. Along with fundraising for money, we will need to sponsor a book drive for new and like new books to fill each of our libraries. These books will have to be organized and divided among each of the libraries. We will also need volunteers to help build and create these projects, many of which will hopefully have tools that we can use to create the libraries. This particular session will have to be well organized ahead of time to make sure all the resources are in place by the time the final session takes place.

Author's Reflection

When I first decided to go back to school, to start the Masters of Literacy program, I wanted to learn how to become a better teacher. I wanted to improve my craft to learn new strategies and ideas that would keep me current with best practice. I was unsure of how this process would affect me, how it would change me, and how much I needed it. Looking back over the past few years, I am surprised at how much I have learned, and how this process has already affected my practice. I was reminded time and time again that, I am a learner and that I thrive on learning new information. I live for those “aha” moments in my students, and I am starting to understand that I live for them in myself as well. Every time a new idea or topic resonated with me, I would try to figure out how I could implement it in my lessons the very next day. I would often get sidetracked in my research by wormholes, I would get so excited about something, I needed to learn more right away. I would track down more information on it. It became a bit of a challenge as I really needed to keep focused, but as an educator more and more ideas caught my attention and I was excited about what I was finding. Sometimes as educators we get complacent in our routines, we have so many standards to teach to and tests to ready our students for. I think

this experience has reminded me that we as educators need to continue to learn and push ourselves to be our best. We need to practice what we teach, we need to continue to grow to be better in practice and in turn this knowledge helps our students. Luckily for us, education and educational practice is always evolving. It is up to us to seek out new and current trends to keep on the upside on education.

I have learned that school-home partnerships are an important aspect of academic achievement. If we want our students to be successful, we need to help build bridges of support, we need to create and foster their personal communities. We as teachers need to understand that we are not in this fight alone, there are so many people that care and support these students every day. These relationships are not built overnight, but by putting in the time and effort to create these partnerships. We need to break barriers and invite all members as they are and celebrate what they bring to the partnership. Together we can be successful, together we can help students reach their potential. As the African proverb says, “It takes a village to raise a child.”

As a teacher I am always trying to better myself, I want to be effective and I want to help my students be the best they can be. This project, although the end of my degree program is not the end of my learning. I will continue to keep up with best practice, the newest research and new ideas within the education community. I will remember that teaching is not an island, I will work with my peers to share my own learning, but also take the time to learn from them. I will also learn from my students, they have so much to offer and teach me something new every day. This is not the end, just another step in the journey.

Summary

In this chapter I have deliberated on the capstone project experience in an effort to answer my research question, *How can an effective parent outreach program impact literacy achievement and foster a community network at an urban charter school?* I have reflect on what I have learned about myself as a researcher, writer, and learner during this capstone process. I discussed the implications and possible limitations of my research and curriculum. Finally, I have reflected on the overall capstone experience it's implications on my future teaching practice. Together this reflective practice has given me the time and opportunity to view this capstone experiences for what it is; a wonderful learning opportunity, that I will appreciate for a long time to come.

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