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PROMOTING EARLY LITERACY LEARNING

by

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A capstone project submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts in Literacy Education.

Hamline University

Saint Paul, Minnesota

August 2021

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DEDICATION

To my family for providing the rich literacy environment that started me on the path to this project and to my students who inspire me to become a better teacher every day.

“If you want your children to be intelligent, read them fairy tales. If you want them to be more intelligent, read them more fairy tales.”

— Albert Einstein

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Early literacy is a topic that has been interesting to me since my time spent volunteering in elementary schools as a high school student. The way that children move through language development into learning early literacy concepts and from those early concepts into learning to read is fascinating to me, and literacy is something I am passionate about. All of this led to me choosing to focus on early literacy development in my capstone, and specifically what can be done to help children with their literacy development before they begin formal education.

The research question I will be exploring in this capstone is, *How can schools encourage caregivers to engage in early literacy activities with their children (birth to age five)?* In this Capstone, the term, “caregivers” will be used to refer to the adults in the household in which a child lives including, but not limited to, biological, step, and adoptive parents, grandparents, other adult family members, and semipermanent caregivers such as foster parents. It can also be understood more generally in the context of literacy exposure as being any adult that the child spends a large portion of their time with, such as a babysitter or daycare provider (Mendez, 2010). In this chapter, I explore the circumstances and experiences that led me to select this topic for my capstone. I also share examples from my time teaching kindergarten and working with students who have had robust exposure to early literacy concepts, and those who have not and what this led me to believe about the importance of early literacy exposure. The importance of this question to students, caregivers, teachers, and the community at large is addressed. In the

final section of this chapter I will explain how this project can help families who have trouble accessing currently available resources, and why my additional simplified resource will be helpful.

The Impact of Early Exposure

In my seven years as an early elementary educator in public schools, I have worked with students who entered school with various levels of literacy exposure which allows me to see first-hand the effect a caregiver's involvement can have before a child enters a formal education setting. This variation was most noticeable in my kindergarten students who were just entering school for the first time and had not had any exposure to literacy in a formal setting. Some students entered school already able to read chapter books, while others did not know any letter names or sounds and were unable to retell a story that was read to them. Some of this was due to differing ages or developmental levels but many students simply lacked exposure to literacy concepts (McGill-Franzen, 1993).

One student in particular comes to mind when I think of lack of exposure to literacy concepts before entering school. During my school district's initial kindergarten assessment, students are presented with a page of mixed upper and lower case letters and asked to tell the teacher their names. This student went through the whole page giving the letters names like "Mommy", "Grandma", and "Sarah". The names she said had no relation to the letters or their sounds, but when she accidentally repeated a name, she realized her mistake and corrected herself, even remembering which letter she had already given that name to. This showed an attention to detail and impressive memory

skills, but she had no knowledge of even the first letter in her own name. I was curious to see what exposure to literacy instruction would do for her. By the start of the second semester, she had a solid understanding of all her letter names. She demonstrated this by helping a classmate who was struggling with writing his name. The boy was having trouble looking back and forth between his nametag and worksheet to copy all the letters in the correct order. This girl was able to look at the name tag upside down across the table and tell him the names of the letters one at a time so he could copy them down.

Early literacy exposure is also important for students who may struggle with literacy concepts after they enter formal schooling (Shonkoff & Fisher, 2013). I have worked with students who were later diagnosed with a learning disability. The students with these challenges who had been exposed to literacy concepts at home had a much more positive attitude about the difficult work they had to do to learn their letters because they had formed positive associations with literacy and their families before they were ever assessed. They saw the value in literacy and put in the effort necessary to overcome their challenges. This shows that the question, *How can schools encourage caregivers to engage in early literacy activities with their children (birth to age five)?*, is one of importance to students, caregivers, teachers, and the community at large.

Value to Stakeholders

Increased participation in literacy activities will prepare students to participate successfully when they enter school. Research shows that children who have access to books in their home almost double their chance of developing appropriate literacy and numeracy skills (Manu, Ewerling, Barros, & Victora, 2019). In addition, McGill-Franzen

(1993) found that children with early literacy exposure can enter school with thousands of hours of experience with literacy activities. These impacts, combined with positive associations with literacy formed while engaging in literacy activities with caregivers, will create a level of scaffolding that will support students in their early learning and facilitate an overall positive learning experience.

Each year I meet caregivers who are eager to learn what more they can do to help their child be more successful in school. The level at which their child already performs has little to do with how interested they are in working with them to improve. Reading together is always my first suggestion, but caregivers often already know the importance of reading aloud to young children and want a more comprehensive list of strategies to incorporate literacy learning into their home environment. Other caregivers may not be as proactive with seeking out resources and suggestions but would be happy to add literacy experiences to their interactions with their children if they had a clear understanding of how to approach those experiences and evidence of their value. There are many simple, low cost or free things caregivers can do to expose a child to literacy concepts, but they are not intuitive and so the adults need guidance in what to focus on.

Teachers see great value in caregiver participation, but often do not know the best way to encourage that participation or what types of activities will have the greatest impact for families with limited time and resources. For my project, I have created a website to share with caregivers that gives a simplified list of community resources and easy to do activities. The impact of this resource will be of value to teachers because

students will already be familiar with basic literacy concepts when they enter school. It will also provide a quick reference for teachers to access and share with families.

Community stakeholders will also benefit from this project. Existing early literacy programs will receive increased interest from caregivers as a result of the resource list included in the finished project. For the community at large, increased early childhood literacy will increase literacy overall which will be a benefit in the future.

Existing Community Resources

There are already resources in the community to promote literacy in young children. In my community, there is a chapter of Dolly Parton's Imagination Library (Dolly Parton's Imagination Library, n.d.) which mails children who register an age-appropriate book each month from birth through entering kindergarten. Families who participate in the Imagination Library accumulate a library of quality children's literature on a variety of topics. The books also include prompts to help caregivers keep children engaged in the books as they read. A pediatric group in the community participates in the national Reach Out and Read (Reach Out and Read, n.d.) program that distributes books at children's regular checkups. This wealth of resources available is not reflected in the interactions I have with caregivers. These programs do not do as much good as they could because caregivers are unaware that they exist, or unaware of the extent of the services available to them. I hope that the website I create is a highly effective way to reach out to caregivers and make them aware of the help available to them. I also hope to find a way to distribute the information across socioeconomic boundaries. Highly educated caregivers seek out resources for their children, and caregivers who receive the

highest level of social support from the state are provided with resources, but families who are neither highly educated or high needs fall through the cracks and are not given the same opportunities.

Summary

The research question that is the focus of this project is *How can schools encourage caregivers to engage in early literacy activities with their children (birth to age five)?* I have shared examples of my teaching experience that led to my interest in this topic. I have also shared examples of students with varying literacy exposure prior to school, including the effect this exposure had on their early school experiences. The importance of this question to students, caregivers, teachers, and community members was addressed. I have explained how this project will help families provide early literacy experiences to their children and access the resources to promote early literacy that are already available in the community. I have also explained why my resource will be a valuable addition to these resources.

In Chapter 2 literature pertaining to the value of early literacy exposure and caregiver involvement in student achievement is reviewed. The findings of best practices to support caregivers in various situations are also shared. Chapter 3 presents the vision for the finished project, including what it attempts to accomplish, what materials will be produced, and how it will be distributed in the community. Chapter 4 reviews what was learned during the research and creation processes. The distribution process and feedback from stakeholders will be shared. Chapter 4 also presents ideas for how to expand and improve the project for future use.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

The previous chapter introduced the research question, *How can schools encourage caregivers to engage in early literacy activities with their children (birth to age five)?* Examples were given of children who had and did not have caregivers who engaged in these types of activities with them and what the impacts were for their initial school experiences. The importance of the research question to various stakeholders was discussed.

This section will review the literature relating to early literacy exposure and programs that provide literacy exposure to children. The literature will give perspective on the importance of literacy development and the ways in which caregivers can influence that development in the early years of a child's brain development through access to books in the home, shared book reading that incorporates conversational turn taking, and general print exposure. It will also provide insight into what supports have been found to be most effective when working with caregivers to encourage home literacy activities.

The literature will also address the importance of early literacy exposure for later literacy development and reading levels throughout school and the impact caregiver attitudes about literacy can and do have on the literacy levels of children. It will include an examination of the most common aspects of successful literacy programs and the relative challenges presented when working with a variety of families with diverse

resources. This will help to address the question of how schools can best encourage parents to provide early literacy experiences for their children.

The Value of Early Literacy Exposure

The exposure of children to books and literacy concepts before they enter school is a variable that has been examined by many researchers (Hood et al., 2008; Manu et al., 2019; Sénéchal et al., 1998; van Bergen et al., 2017). Most agreed that early literacy affects later literacy development, but there is some disagreement about what types of literacy exposure are most effective and what areas of literacy are most easily changed through early exposure. This section shares literature examining the various types of early literacy exposure and the aspects of literacy they affect.

Multiple studies have found that the literacy level students have when they enter school impacts their learning in the future, however, there is disagreement about exactly what areas of learning are impacted and how long the impact lasts. Boivin and Bierman (2013) stated that “There is cumulating [sic] evidence that cognitive skills assessed in late preschool and at school entry predict later school achievement” (p. 6). Boivin and Bierman (2013) also found that reading ability stays mostly stable throughout school, and predicts graduation rates, future employment, and socioeconomic status.

Students who start school with language skills below the level of their peers may find it challenging to engage in school and interact with teachers and classmates (Bierman et al., 2008). According to Bierman et al. (2008), students entering school behind may never reach the same level as students who did not start with a disadvantage. McGill-Franzen (1993) had similar findings. The research found that children who start

school behind struggle to catch up and often start reading later than their peers. This is because some students enter school with thousands of hours of being read to, playing with alphabet toys, and watching educational programs such as Sesame Street. Children who do not have those experiences are not able to make up these thousands of hours in school while the children who started ahead continue to advance their skills. Similarly, Stoltz et al. (2014) found students who are ready when they enter kindergarten tend to have higher grades throughout school. Being prepared for kindergarten and doing better throughout school may also give students an economic advantage in adulthood (Boivin & Bierman, 2013). There are many different factors that impact early literacy. Development in different aspects of early literacy can be influenced by access to different resources and activities (Moss, 2016).

Early interventions in literacy can make a powerful impact on the lives of young learners. There is increasing evidence that the earlier an intervention happens the more effective it is (Shonkoff & Fisher, 2013). Children have very plastic brains, especially early in development, that are capable of large developmental gains when exposed to the right stimulus. Exposing children to interventions can help to limit the impact of any negative experiences or stressors in their lives that could create challenges in their later learning experiences (Boivin & Bierman, 2013).

Books in the Home

Manu et al. (2019) found that, “irrespective of maternal education, wealth index quintile, children’s age (in months), and area of residence, having at least one children’s book to a child almost doubles their likelihood of being on track for literacy-numeracy”

(p. 7). Similarly, van Bergen et al. (2017) found, “The strongest correlate of child reading appeared to be the number of books in the home. This predicted child reading over and above parental reading fluency” (p. 154). Both studies were careful to add that this does not necessarily show causation, but it matches findings of other similar studies. Van Bergen et al. (2017) believed that a higher number of books in the home may lead to caregivers engaging in reading more often with their child, thus increasing print exposure and the benefits it brings. They also believed providing books for home libraries is something concrete that is relatively inexpensive and so tends to be a popular approach even if it may not be effective (van Bergen et al., 2017).

Shared Reading

There are diverse views on the value of reading aloud to children as a way to improve later reading ability. Some of this variation could be related to the various types of reading meant when someone says they read with or to a child. Studies that look at the simple reading of storybooks to children with minimal or no discussion or other literacy activities did not find a connection between parents reading and children’s later reading ability (Hood et al., 2008). Studies that addressed other aspects of shared reading discovered that books can provide an opportunity for rich conversations between caregivers and children (Wasik & Bond, 2001), and those conversations have a positive impact on later literacy skills.

Interactive reading, in which a book is discussed as it is being read, improves language development and reading achievement (Moss, 2016). One concrete example of this improvement is that, “children’s composite verbal score increased by 1 point for

every additional 11 conversational turns experienced per hour, independently of SES” (Romeo et al., 2018, p. 705). Talking with rather than talking to children while reading and at other times is something that parents should be encouraged to do (Romeo et al., 2018). The effect of parent education on language development was mediated by conversational turns (Romeo et al., 2018). This supports McGill-Franzen’s (1993) view that literacy happens when children participate in literacy activities and conversation.

Other studies found that books can provide exposure to low-frequency words that a child may not encounter in everyday life, along with the context and repetition children need to truly absorb new vocabulary (Boivin & Bierman, 2013; Mol & Bus, 2011). Several studies have found that shared book reading has a positive effect on oral language and print awareness, independent of other variables, while more formal literacy instruction impacts reading skills (Mol & Bus, 2011; Moss, 2016; Puglisi et al., 2017; Sénéchal et al., 1998). At the very least, exposure to books through shared reading can cultivate in children a sense that reading is an enjoyable activity that one should engage in frequently. Exposure to books will also help children to learn how books work so that they will have a knowledge base of print concepts when they begin formal reading instruction (Mol & Bus, 2011; Peckham, 2017).

Effects of Print Exposure

Exposure to print can help a child develop the print awareness they need to learn to read (Boivin & Bierman, 2013). Print exposure and oral language seem to be closely linked and oral language can impact reading ability (Boivin & Bierman, 2013; Mol & Bus, 2011; Sénéchal et al., 1998). This led Mol and Bus (2011) to suggest that parents

read to their children although there was not a direct connection found between print exposure and reading ability because there appears to be an indirect benefit to print exposure. The most popular explanation for the connection between oral language and reading ability is that the more words a child learns, the better they understand how sounds and words in their language work. This gives them a knowledge base for their reading learning because they know the common sounds in words and the syntactic and grammatical rules words have to follow (Boivin & Bierman, 2013).

The number and variety of words children hear early in their development impacts their later literacy skills (Romeo et al., 2018). This is because vocabulary helps with reading comprehension. Even if a child has strong decoding skills, if they attempt to read a word they do not know the meaning of, they will struggle to understand (Boivin & Bierman, 2013). If a child has a rich vocabulary, they will be able to focus on the process of reading without having the added task of using context clues to decipher the meaning of unknown words (Boivin & Bierman, 2013). Interactive reading exposes children to low-frequency words and introduces them to book specific language that they are unlikely to encounter in other situations (Wasik & Bond, 2001). The effect of a larger vocabulary on reading comprehension can help to create the positive feedback loop called “The Matthew Effect” by Stanovich (1986) in reference to a verse in the Gospel of Matthew saying more will be given to those who already have. For Stanovich (1986), the Matthew Effect describes a situation in which a child is good at reading, so it is enjoyable for them. This leads to them reading more often and getting even better through repeated practice. In contrast, a child who is not good at reading will struggle with it and find it

unenjoyable. The child is then likely to avoid reading and not get the practice they need to improve. Other researchers supported this idea as well. If children have exposure they have the opportunity to practice and improve, if they do not have exposure they lack that opportunity (Moss, 2016). These findings make it imperative for schools and other community organizations to help families provide children with the opportunity and resources to have a positive experience with early literacy and the exposure needed to improve their skills.

This section has shared research pertaining to the effect of various types of early literacy exposure on children's later literacy levels. The impact of books in the home and the interactions and reading they encourage was shared along with the information that book reading alone has not been directly tied to future reading ability, but connects indirectly through an increase in overall language skills. There was an examination of shared reading as a way for caregivers to encourage children to interact with books and language. Finally, the effects of general print exposure on early literacy development were discussed. Research in each of these areas will inform my project by providing a basis for the value of the activities I recommend. The next section will provide information on caregiver involvement in children's literacy development, with a focus on what caregivers can do to encourage language development and engagement in literacy activities.

Caregiver Involvement in Early Literacy Development

As discussed in the previous section, reading to children has not been found to increase their knowledge of formal reading, but it does increase their oral language skills.

In turn, oral language skills are a predictor of later reading ability. Oral language levels of two-year-olds, “predict up to 9% of individual differences in early reading. By age 3, expressive and receptive language predicts up to 21% of the variance in early reading” (Boivin & Bierman, 2013, p. 109). Jordan et al. (2000) stated that homes with a rich linguistic environment have a greater impact on child literacy than school environments.

Language development in preschoolers can indicate reading readiness. Children who are read to more frequently have increased language skills (Hood et al., 2008). However, the amount a child is read to does not correlate with a greater knowledge of letter names or sounds (Hood et al., 2008). The amount a parent reads to their child was found by Hood et al. (2008) to be more closely related to third-grade reading levels than first-grade reading levels, which may indicate that being read to is an indirect cause of reading achievement rather than a direct cause.

The attitude a caregiver presents about reading can also have a large impact on a child’s literacy learning experience. Parent involvement in literacy, especially before a child is three years old, is connected to later literacy achievement (Moss, 2016). Parental involvement and pre-literacy scores are connected independent of socio-economic status with families with similar socioeconomic statuses providing a wide variety of language exposure (Moss, 2016; Romeo et al., 2018). In addition, direct literacy instruction is not influenced by parental education (Puglisi et al., 2017).

The adults involved early in a child’s life are important in shaping the child’s world view, and the attitude towards reading is a part of that. If a child sees that reading is important to the adults in their life, they are more likely to value it as well (Peckham,

2017). Because of the differing effects of shared book reading versus explicit literacy instruction, the literacy activities parents choose to engage in with their child affects in which areas of literacy their child develops (Moss, 2016). Hood et al. (2008) found the amount a child is read to impacts their language skills, while Sénéchal et al. (1998) found that how much parents explicitly taught reading affected children's writing skills. These findings show the importance of programs that provide information to caregivers about which activities affect which areas of learning. Sharing with caregivers how the various ways they approach literacy exposure impact literacy development will encourage them to provide a rich early literacy experience that provides their child with building blocks for all aspects of literacy learning once they enter school.

Van Bergen et al. (2017) presented an opposing view of parental effect on literacy development. They found that differences in reading levels may be based on genetics and not on reading interventions used by parents. Puglisi et al. (2017) presented a similar view. Their idea was based on the argument that parents who are good readers have the genes to be good readers. They then pass those genes on to their children. Parents who are good readers also tend to have a higher socioeconomic status which provides them more free time in which to read. When children see their caregivers reading, they are more likely to value reading and choose to engage in it as well. This gives the children more practice which leads them to be better readers who then pass that trait on to their children. Thus, the effect seen from parents reading to their child could simply be the effect of the parents' strong reading genes, that were passed on to the child who is then a better reader, not because of anything the parent did but because of genetics. It is difficult

to truly isolate genetics from parental involvement because the two are so closely tied together (Puglisi et al., 2017).

This section shared the various ways in which caregivers can impact a child's literacy development through activities that encourage positive interactions with various aspects of literacy. Higher levels of oral language skills appear to lead to higher levels of literacy later in development (Boivin & Bierman, 2013) and the interactions caregivers have with children on a daily basis can increase those oral language skills (Jordan et al., 2000). There was also research shared which presented the idea that genetics has a stronger influence on literacy levels than any interventions caregivers provide. However, it is difficult to separate genetic variation from the literacy engagement provided by parents. The next section will provide information on how literacy activities caregivers engage in with young children can increase literacy awareness and development.

Literacy Activities

The previous section discussed the impact caregivers can have on children's early literacy development. It also examined the ways in which different types of literacy activities affect oral language and reading development. This section will discuss what types of literacy activities have been found to have the most value in early literacy development, and what caregivers should consider when they provide early literacy activities.

Literacy activities can be implemented in the home or in a daycare or preschool setting. Planned literacy activities in preschool such as alphabet instruction and interactive read alouds can impact literacy achievement through elementary school

because early exposure increases phonological awareness (Bierman et al., 2008). If a preschool or daycare is going to implement literacy activities for the purpose of formal literacy instruction, it is important that they be trained in how to provide rich literacy experiences (Peckham, 2017). It is also important to encourage innovation in these interventions (Shonkoff & Fisher, 2013). If teachers are not trained and given examples of rich literacy activities, teachers tend to fall back on memorization which can make children reluctant to participate in literacy activities. When an early literacy plan is in place, there also needs to be a system of evaluation in which evaluators continue to assess all teachers, even if they have done well in the past. This is an important aspect of a successful program because all teachers should be working to improve their level of instruction at all times regardless of past achievement (Peckham, 2017). Teachers must also tailor lessons and activities to the skill levels and interests of the students they have in their class at any given time (Peckham, 2017).

A program with this depth of involvement can present a challenge to a daycare or preschool. The amount of time that highly trained staff must invest in order to make the program successful can be prohibitively expensive and unrealistic (Shonkoff & Fisher, 2013). The level of instruction provided in studies to test the effectiveness of programs is what Shonkoff and Fisher (2013) referred to as the “best-case scenario” (p. 1638). When a program is being implemented for study, there is a great effort to use the program with fidelity, which may or may not reflect the use in the real world. Even with a commitment to implementing the program exactly as designed, results from these types of programs are quite uneven given how carefully they have been developed (Shonkoff & Fisher,

2013). This may be seen as a reason to avoid complex early literacy programs altogether.

Peckham (2017) presented the view that teachers have to communicate to caregivers that it is not as important for children to read and write as it is for them to like to read. Being able to read as an adult is different from choosing to read as an adult.

Peckham (2017) thought developing a desire to read was important to cultivating lifelong scholarship and therefore something that should be encouraged in children's development.

This section reviewed the importance of rich literacy experiences in early development. The aspects of successful literacy interventions were shared, and the challenges presented by constantly creating a richer and more impactful environment were examined. The flaws in studies looking at the impact of these types of literacy programs were also addressed. The next section will present literature regarding successful home literacy programs. It will also address the challenges faced by programs when working to be as effective as possible.

Successful Home Literacy Programs

As the previous sections showed, early literacy exposure is a key part of student success in school. Caregiver involvement is a necessary part of early literacy. There are a wide variety of programs that have been developed to promote childhood literacy and caregiver participation in literacy development. This section shares some of the research on home literacy programs that have been implemented by various early learning organizations and the difficulties that those programs face.

There are some major commonalities among successful home literacy

intervention programs. Most included some type of training session for caregivers to inform them of the purpose and procedures of the program (Jordan et al., 2000; Padak & Rasinski, 2006; Whitehurst et al., 1994). Childcare providers who received professional development before implementing a literacy engagement program were motivated and eager to improve their literacy instruction (Stoltz et al., 2014). Refresher training based on common caregiver questions and periodic newsletters provided caregivers with support during the implementation of the program and continuing education in early literacy activities they could try with the children in their care. Many of the programs also provide caregivers with books to read with their child and add to their home library (Brand et al., 2014; Jordan et al., 2000; Padak & Rasinski, 2006; Whitehurst et al., 1994). Manu et al. (2019) found that book sharing, which is reading aloud to children while discussing the book, helped development, but caregivers must have books available to them before they can share them with their children, thus a program to provide books is a logical first step. The increase in communication between caregiver and child created by the interactive activities provided by these programs improved children's speech and language skills (Whitehurst et al., 1994).

Successful programs also provided resources to caregivers. Books by themselves may not provide the types of benefits seen from these programs. Caregivers in the home-school literacy bag program examined by Brand et al. (2014) were given interactive activities, stuffed animals, and games that matched the theme of the book provided in the bag. This encouraged student engagement and created the rich interaction and "shared fun" seen by Stoltz et al. (2014, p. 26) as the best way to provide home

literacy exposure. When resources are provided with the child's interests and developmental level in mind, there is even greater benefit (Brand et al., 2014).

Padak and Rasinski (2006) emphasized that caregivers should be given clear instructions for activities that are based on research in early childhood literacy. Caregivers want to help their child succeed but may not know how best to do that (Brand et al., 2014). Providing resources and guidance is one approach schools can use to help them increase a child's exposure to literacy. Caregiver involvement is important to a successful program because children who received interventions at home and at school improved much more than those who only received school interventions (Whitehurst et al., 1994). When an activity is given with an explanation of exactly what literacy skills it addresses and how it will help a child develop those skills, caregivers may be more willing to take time out of their schedule to engage in the literacy activities (Jordan et al., 2000). Caregivers can also benefit from training sessions that provide them with techniques to positively engage with literacy. They may be unsure of the best way to approach the informal instruction involved in early literacy exposure and training can help them avoid situations that create a negative experience for their child (Moss, 2016).

Active learning was an important component in all of the literature examined. In a childcare setting, teachers were already reading to students daily but felt the increased student engagement in reading provided by activities and discussion questions improved the quality of literacy instruction they were able to provide (Stoltz et al., 2014). According to Stoltz et al. (2014), the active learning component is what provides most of the benefit from the program. Having conversations with children about books,

encouraging predictions, asking questions, and retelling the story are all valuable pieces in literacy development and are something provided by successful early literacy programs. These programs helped caregivers discover literacy developing activities and new ways to share reading with their child (Brand et al., 2014). Fun ways to engage in learning also provided bonding time for caregivers and children (Padak & Rasinski, 2006).

Both children and caregivers shared that they enjoyed the family time that occurred while they engaged in literacy activities in the home (Brand et al., 2014; Jordan et al., 2000; Padak & Rasinski, 2006). Providing games and discussion points related to books facilitated adults spending time with and interacting with their child in a way they might not take time to otherwise. Caregivers were glad to be involved in their child's literacy development and appreciated that these programs promoted family time with fun activities (Brand et al., 2014; Jordan et al., 2000; Padak & Rasinski, 2006). Jordan et al. (2000) used the caregiver participation rate as an indicator of program enjoyment. As Padak and Rasinski (2006) noted, children enjoyed spending time with their caregivers while engaged in these literacy-building activities. They also received the benefit of developing their literacy skills. When children see that their caregivers and the adults at school both place importance on reading and literacy skills, they are more likely to see those same things as important themselves (Brand et al., 2014).

When home literacy programs are being designed, the time and resources available to caregivers must be taken into account (Padak & Rasinski, 2006). Teachers who engage with families and provide parents with concrete activities to help their child

at home have a strong positive influence on the level of family involvement (Henderson & Mapp, 2002). Teachers can survey caregivers on the books or other literacy resources they have available to them in their homes in order to determine what additional resources a literacy program would need to provide. A program that asks caregivers to use things they do not have will not be as successful as one that tailors activities to the individual situation and provides any resources needed to fill in the gaps (Brand et al., 2014). Caregivers want to help their children but may have limited time to interact with their child because of work schedules or other responsibilities. When a literacy program takes this time constraint into account and provides resources to create rich literacy experiences in just a few minutes a day, it makes the program much more approachable for caregivers and increases the likelihood that the activities will be utilized. Creating activities that are fun for both the child and the caregiver will also allow literacy to fit into the daily interactions of families and not give caregivers the feeling that they are adding another responsibility to their already busy lives.

Shonkoff and Fisher (2013) suggested that it may be more effective to help parents reduce stress in their own lives before adding literacy learning as a focus. Parent characteristics influence children's development so focusing on parents might give better end results than providing more resources for the children (Shonkoff & Fisher, 2013). The exposure to stressful situations at a young age affects brain development and may make literacy learning and other aspects of school more difficult for children. Reducing parental stress can reduce children's stress and thus mitigate the effect that stress has on learning (Shonkoff & Fisher, 2013).

The aspects that make home literacy programs successful also present challenges for schools and families. There must be a monetary investment or request for donations if a program chooses to provide families with books or other resources for literacy activities. Attaining funding from policymakers can also present a challenge. Shonkoff and Fisher (2013) found that presenting research with complex or conflicting ideas about early literacy can make it difficult to make a case for public funding. In contrast, anecdotal evidence that does not hold much sway with researchers can have a powerful influence on public opinion and policy (Shonkoff & Fisher, 2013). Caregiver trainings engage families and provide them with the information they need to successfully implement suggested activities, however, it can be challenging for working caregivers to find time to attend a scheduled information session. Providing an information session also requires that a school or organization plan a presentation that will be valuable to caregivers and schedule the session at a time when as many families as possible will be able to participate. In order for a program to be truly successful, there must be a time investment by caregivers, which may present challenges for some families. Taking all of these challenges into account is important when developing a home literacy program. If a school or program believes there is value in home literacy engagement for students, they will need to find a way to work through the challenges that are specific to their community or organization.

This section has reviewed literature on home literacy programs and their impact on early childhood literacy development. Examples of successful programs were shared and the commonalities among those programs were examined. Potential challenges to the

successful implementation of home literacy programs were addressed. I will consider these challenges when creating my project and find ways to avoid them. Information was provided that showed caregivers should be encouraged to participate in early literacy activities and provided with resources for those activities for schools to facilitate an increase in the literacy level of students entering kindergarten. This justifies the importance of my project as a way to provide those types of resources and activities and encourage parent participation in literacy learning. These are all important factors for a school or other program to consider when developing a program to encourage caregivers to participate in early literacy activities with their children. The next section will address how the findings in this chapter relate to the research question that is the focus of this capstone.

Relation to the Research Question

The question addressed in this capstone is *How can schools encourage caregivers to engage in early literacy activities with their children (birth to age five)?* The information in this chapter helps to address this question by first establishing the importance of early literacy in later literacy development and reading ability. Research on the effect early literacy activities have on children's reading levels shows that caregivers engaging in various activities has value for children's future educational experiences. Caregiver involvement can be a powerful predictor of a child's later literacy achievement (Moss, 2016) and is therefore a vital part of successful early literacy programs. All of this information supports the idea of schools encouraging caregivers to engage in literacy

activities before their child enters school in order to help literacy development and provide a more successful entry into formal literacy learning for the child.

The research on commonalities among successful early literacy programs that have been implemented by various entities over the years provides a basis for schools to develop similarly successful programs. The successes and challenges of previous programs can be used to inform future approaches and ensure that the most successful aspects of past research are included while avoiding or mitigating the challenges experienced by previous attempts at providing early literacy interventions. The research on caregiver involvement and the challenges presented by the time commitment required by caregivers for each type of program to be successful is particularly pertinent when a school is developing a program for community outreach.

Summary

This chapter shared research on the importance of early literacy exposure and its impact on later literacy development. Early literacy exposure has been closely linked to reading ability, although there are various perspectives regarding what specific aspects of early literacy are most influential in future development (Bierman et al., 2008; Moss, 2016; Puglisi et al., 2017; Sénéchal et al., 1998). The various ways in which this exposure can be achieved were also examined. One way to promote early literacy is having books available in the home for children to read and interact with. The number of books in a home can also provide children with an example of literacy as important to the adults in their lives, which may in turn lead to the children valuing literacy more highly (Brand et al., 2014). A greater number of books in the home tends to lead to caregivers spending

more time reading with and having conversations with children, which can increase their oral language skills (Romeo et al., 2018; van Bergen et al., 2017). Shared reading is another valuable tool for increasing early literacy skills. The rich conversations prompted by books increase oral language skills and provide exposure to low-frequency words and book-specific vocabulary children will encounter when they begin to read on their own (Boivin & Bierman, 2013; Mol & Bus, 2011; Wasik & Bond, 2001). General print exposure can also be a powerful tool for literacy development as it increases oral vocabulary which in turn impacts reading ability (Boivin & Bierman, 2013; Mol & Bus, 2011; Sénéchal et al., 1998).

The impact of caregiver involvement on early literacy development was shared. This can be particularly important for children who do not attend preschool or daycare as their home caregivers may be the only people who interact with them on a daily basis and so are their only source of literacy exposure. One area in which caregiver involvement can have a particularly strong impact is language development. Caregivers who read with their children tend to have children with a more robust oral vocabulary, which in turn impacts early reading development (Sénéchal et al., 1998). In addition, children who experience literacy interventions in the home in addition to at school or in a preschool setting improve more quickly than children who receive literacy instruction only outside of the home (Whitehurst et al., 1994). Caregiver attitude towards literacy can also have a strong effect on children's literacy skills (Peckham, 2017). An adult who presents reading as a fun experience is likely to influence the children in their lives to see reading as an enjoyable activity as well. If reading is fun and exciting, children are more likely to

participate and practice, which makes reading easier and thus even more enjoyable (Stanovich, 1986). The possible influence of genetics on children's reading ability was also discussed (Puglisi et al., 2017). Because of the challenge of separating genetics from the behaviors of parents, this has less impact on the development of early intervention strategies.

Differing approaches to literacy activities were briefly addressed, with attention to how programs can ensure they are providing the most effective interventions possible. The importance of intentionality in interventions was discussed, along with the idea that any program should be constantly reassessed to ensure the approach is tailored to the children and families currently involved in the program and provides the highest level of excellence possible. It is also important for programs to ensure they give children the chance to experience rich literacy activities rather than falling back to the easier and possibly more familiar approach of rote memorization (Peckham, 2017).

Finally, the aspects of successful early literacy programs were discussed. Some of these characteristics included providing training, children's books, and other activity resources for caregivers in addition to clear instructions on how the activities could be added to daily activities already taking place in the home (Brand et al., 2014; Jordan et al., 2000; Padak & Rasinski, 2006; Whitehurst et al., 1994). Successful programs also focused on active learning activities that promoted caregivers spending time with their child while engaged in a fun activity that advanced literacy skills (Brand et al., 2014; Stoltz et al., 2014). Programs with a high level of caregiver participation received positive feedback about the family time that resulted from the provided activities (Brand

et al., 2014; Jordan et al., 2000; Padak & Rasinski, 2006). Successful programs also keep family situations in mind when planning activities to ensure they can be reasonably implemented by the intended audience (Brand et al., 2014; Padak & Rasinski, 2006).

Chapter 3 describes a resource for caregivers to encourage engagement in early literacy activities. It will use the information shared in this literature review to inform the development of the different aspects of the resource. The importance of early literacy exposure will be used to justify the need for such a resource. The research of the elements of successful home literacy interventions will be particularly useful in providing a website that is tailored to the needs of caregivers and their children's early literacy development.

CHAPTER THREE

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

Introduction

The research question addressed in this capstone is, *How can schools encourage caregivers to engage in early literacy activities with their children (birth to age five)?*

The project described in this chapter is a website intended to be a resource providing literacy activities and links to community literacy programs. It will be tailored to the needs of caregivers with children under the age of five who have not yet entered a formal schooling environment, and to agencies and programs who work to provide literacy resources to the community in order to promote early learning opportunities.

This chapter reviews the research behind using a website to communicate with caregivers and presents some of the advantages of reaching a large audience with the website. The community in which the resource will be used is described and the intended audience for the website is identified. The project is described in depth, with attention to what types of literacy learning the various areas of the website will promote. The timeline for completion of the project is also presented. The chapter ends with a summary and transition into chapter 4 which shares what I have learned in the process of creating the project and what could be done to develop the project further.

Overview of the Project

For my project, I have created a website that will act as a resource for caregivers and for schools who want to provide easy to understand information on early literacy and early literacy activities. The site provides research-based literacy activities that caregivers

can implement in their homes with minimal supplies or additional time commitment. There are also links to community-specific programs that provide resources for early literacy learning.

Method

My goal with this project is to share information promoting literacy learning with as many caregivers as possible to support them in helping their children. Padak (2006) found that parents who were given support and resources to create a rich home literacy environment were happy to do so and enjoyed the time spent engaged in literacy learning activities with their children. Padak (2006) stated that clear research-based instructions were important in order for activities to be useful to parents. My project provides those instructions for activities that address various areas of literacy learning, with the hope that they will be enjoyable for both caregivers and children.

I chose to use a website for the distribution of the information and materials because it provides a simple way to share the information through distributing the URL or linking to the site from other literacy resources or school websites (Gu, 2017). It is also a lower cost and waste alternative to creating and distributing physical handouts or posters. A website can be accessed from a variety of locations at a time convenient for the user. Almost anyone can have internet access in some form through a home internet connection, a phone with a data plan, or use of public computers at the local library. Gu (2017) researched the use of school websites to communicate with caregivers and stated, “a website should optimally be informative, usable, accurate, and effective for public

use” (p. 135). This quote has been used to inform the design of the website for this project.

Project Description

I have created a website for families with pages providing a brief overview of the importance of early literacy learning, activities families can do with their children, literacy goals for entry into kindergarten, and links to early literacy resources available in the community. There is also a page on the website for schools and educators that gives suggestions on how to use the site and shares information on what types of school provided interventions have been shown to have the most impact.

The information on the specific research regarding the impact of early literacy activities on further literacy development is presented as succinctly as possible to give justification for the activities on the site without creating a resource that is overwhelming to caregivers. The information is divided into different pages that are each dedicated to one area. The home page provides an overview of the purpose of the site and the resources available. There is a separate page with links to activities for each area of literacy learning. This is where a brief explanation of research on the impact early literacy activities have on later literacy levels is shared.

There is a page that provides a more in-depth summary of the research with a bibliography provided for any caregiver or teacher who would like to learn more about early literacy. There is also a page with links to community-specific literacy resources, including the local chapter of Dolly Parton’s Imagination Library (Dolly Parton’s Imagination Library, n.d.), early literacy programming available at local libraries, and

information on home visits and parent trainings provided by the local Alaska Native Association (Fairbanks Native Association, n.d.).

There are pages that provide activities caregivers can do with their children to promote each area of literacy learning. The page for encouraging oral language development will discuss the benefits of reading aloud to children to increase exposure to low-frequency words and other vocabulary present in books. It also shares tips for interactive reading to increase conversation around books. The impact of conversational turn-taking on literacy development is discussed along with question stems to help promote conversations between caregivers and children.

The page on phonemic awareness and phonics provides activities for caregivers to increase their child's phonemic awareness. Different games and activities for children to work with letter names and sounds are shared, with an emphasis on activities that use common household items. There are also tips for using naturally occurring environmental print to prompt discussions of letter names and sounds.

The page with information on developing print awareness provides activities that families can use to increase their child's print awareness. This includes guides for discussing the parts of a book, along with explanations of different levels of print awareness and writing development in children. Janaszak (2013) found that sharing the levels of writing development with caregivers helped them to interact positively with their child and encourage further writing development. The page also provides suggestions for scaffolding children in their print awareness and writing development.

Another page shares the literacy goals for students entering kindergarten in the local school district. This gives caregivers a concrete idea of what types of literacy learning will be most helpful to their child upon their entry to school. These school entry goals are presented in conjunction with the literacy goals for the end of kindergarten that they support. Pitt (2013) received positive feedback when presenting parents with information on learning goals because caregivers found it helpful to know what their child was expected to know before entering school. End of kindergarten goals are shared to provide context for caregivers to understand what students will work to learn in their first year after entering school.

The final page is more directed towards teachers and daycare providers. It shares descriptions of the ways in which professionals can both provide early literacy exposure to children and encourage caregivers to foster a rich literacy environment in the home. Commonalities among successful programs are shared along with research supporting those findings. There is also a list of possible challenges to implementing an early literacy program and the ways that have been found to work around and through those challenges.

In addition, there is a page with a link to a Google form for users to share feedback on their use of the site. There are questions about whether the user is a caregiver, teacher, or other adult, what areas of the site were most useful, which activities were most enjoyable and which areas were least helpful. There is also a space for users to write any comments they may have. The information gathered from these forms will be

used to improve the resource as it is used by more people and better shape it to the interests and needs of the community.

Setting and Audience

This project is not specific to one school, rather it is for the community at large in order to reach families whose children are birth to age five and have not yet started school. The community served by this project is a geographically large borough with a diverse population and a large military presence. The demographics of the borough are approximately: 75% White, 5% Black, 8% American Indian or Alaska Native, 3% Asian, .6% Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, and 7% Two or more races, with approximately 20% of the population listed as Military Connected (United States Census Bureau, n.d.). The borough encompasses two small cities and two military installations and has a public land-grant research university.

Caregivers of children birth to age five are the main audience because all children have access to caregivers. Preschool and early elementary teachers are a secondary audience because families may interact with them before all their children enter formal schooling. All the adults in a child's life are important in helping with their development and therefore can have an influence on their literacy development.

Timeline for Completion

The website content was further researched and the website drafted beginning in May of 2021. The continued research focused on what specific literacy activities have been found to have the most impact on children's later reading abilities. Research on caregiver participation in early literacy programs also informed the types of activities and

resources on the website and how they are presented. Research on website design informed the formatting of the site in order to make it as user friendly as possible. The website design was finalized during the summer of 2021 with a completion date of July 2021. The finalized website was made publicly available in August of 2021.

Summary

Chapter 3 shared a description of the website I designed and the research supporting the use of a website to promote strong home-school partnerships to encourage early literacy learning. The various pages that will make up the website were described. These include a homepage with quick links to activities and further early literacy resources available in the community, and pages focusing on each major area of early literacy development with activities to promote caregiver involvement. There is a page providing some main ideas of the research around early literacy development with a bibliography for anyone who would like to research the topic further, and a page for groups such as schools and daycares that gives guidance on encouraging caregiver participation. Chapter 4 will discuss what I have learned over the course of the project and what possible future steps can be taken to extend the project.

CHAPTER FOUR

CONCLUSION

Introduction

The question I have explored in this capstone is, *How can schools encourage caregivers to engage in early literacy activities with their children (birth to age five)?* In this chapter I will share what I have learned over the course of this capstone through both my research and the creation of my website final project. I will share the pieces of the literature review that had the most influence on the resource I created as well as the implications and limitations of that resource. I will also discuss what future research interests me based on what I have learned during this project. The chapter concludes with how the resource created during this project will be distributed, and what its benefit to the profession will be.

Major Learnings

Over the course of this capstone project, I have learned about the impact of early literacy exposure on student achievement in elementary school and the positive correlation between these two stages of literacy learning. I also found research showing that caregivers who are informed about the importance of early literacy exposure, and given techniques and resources to increase their child's literacy learning, are more likely to provide those experiences for their child. I learned about the role the socioeconomic status of families studied plays in their use of these types of resources and used this to shape the creation of my resource. I am hopeful that using multiple forms of

communication such as a website, fliers, and posters will connect with more caregivers and provide expanded opportunities to the greatest number of children.

Going through the capstone paper and project creation process has developed my abilities as both a researcher and a writer through practice and the peer review process. I did not discover any unexpected learnings, as the research mostly aligned with my understanding of what supports early literacy development, but I was glad to confirm that what I had been recommending to caregivers was an appropriate way to increase the basic knowledge needed for reading development. These discoveries will be further addressed in the next section where I share the information from my literature review that I found to be most helpful for the creation of my project.

Literature Review

All of the literature I used in my review had some influence on the creation of my capstone project, but the areas that proved the most valuable were those of early literacy exposure, caregiver involvement, and successful home literacy programs. These areas directly affected both the content and design of my website resource for parents.

My research on early literacy exposure helped me decide that I should create a resource to encourage caregivers to engage in literacy activities with children as early in life as possible. The research by Boivin and Bierman (2013) on a child's cognitive skills at school entry and their effect on later school achievement and employment justifies making a concerted effort to provide enriching experiences for children before they enter school. Shonkoff and Fisher (2013) found that earlier interventions are more effective,

which also supports providing caregivers with the information to start literacy learning as soon as possible.

Caregiver involvement and the elements of successful home literacy programs are also focal points of my project. Parents who read with their child increase the child's language skills and the amount to which a child is read appears to influence their reading achievement in later grades (Hood et al., 2008). My project provides instructions for activities to help parents target different aspects of literacy development (Padak & Rasinski, 2006; Brand et al., 2014). Explicitly stating which area of literacy development an activity focuses on can motivate caregivers to invest more time in that activity (Jordan et al., 2000). Sharing activities that require minimal supplies and are fun also makes the resource more likely to be used by caregivers on a regular basis (Brand et al., 2014; Jordan et al., 2000; Padak & Rasinski, 2006). I used this information to shape both the design and content of my website.

As I worked to incorporate the information from my literature review into my final project, I discovered how much overlap there is between the different areas of early literacy development and the ways that caregivers can be empowered to help their children. Each area of literacy works in combination with the others to create a comprehensive understanding of how language works. The areas of early literacy development and the activities that promote their growth are connected in the same way. The implications that are made by the research included in my literature review are shared in the next section.

Implications

The importance of early literacy experiences for children's later literacy development has strong implications for schools and community resources. Caregivers who are informed about literacy development can be an active part of helping their child succeed. This means that there is a need to spread this information as widely as possible so that the largest possible number of children can benefit from informed, empowered, caregivers. Professional caregivers should work to both include literacy activities in their students' daily routines, and encourage parents and other caregivers to engage in literacy activities at home. Policy makers should ensure that programs at local libraries and those provided by other resources such as Reach Out and Read (Reach Out and Read, n.d.), and Dolly Parton's Imagination Library (Dolly Parton's Imagination Library, n.d.) are funded in their community so that more children have access to books with which to have literacy experiences. These programs each have their own limitations unique to their approach to the issue. The limitations of my project are shared in the next section.

Limitations

There are several limitations to this project because of its scope. I chose a website as the format for my finished product because of the ease of distribution to a large audience, but there are some potential issues with accessibility. While many caregivers have some form of internet access easily available to them, either through a home computer or a smart phone with a data plan, others may have to access the internet by using a public computer at the library which creates a significant barrier to access. This project is also limited by the number of participants who engage in the activities. After accessing the project's website, caregivers have to follow through by investing their time

in trying the activities suggested. Another limitation to the project is the balance between sharing rich information and being concise enough to be practically useful. It is nearly impossible to include all the ways in which a caregiver could help their child with literacy development, and a list that is more comprehensive but overwhelming could be less helpful than one that is limited in order to be more manageable. There is the possibility for creation of a companion resource for parents of older children, to avoid making the original site too complex. An idea for that companion resource is outlined in the next section.

Future Research

I would like to continue with this type of research and create a resource for caregivers of older children. My project focused on children from birth to age five because they are not typically served by formal educational settings, so caregivers may have more difficulty finding resources and activities to promote literacy learning. Caregivers of older children have schools as a resource, but sometimes the activities provided by teachers are overwhelming or more time consuming than is practical. I would like to create a list of activities that progress through the stages of literacy development and ability, to allow caregivers to continue to support their child as they learn and grow. I would recommend that any resource created for caregivers of older children focus on activities that promote quality time and interactions between caregivers and children, as this has been shown to be an effective and enjoyable for both adults and children (Brand et al., 2014; Jordan et al., 2000; Padak & Rasinski, 2006). I would also recommend that the resource clearly state what area of literacy development each activity

supports, as that can motivate caregivers to engage in the activities (Jordan et al., 2000). In the next section, I will share how I structured my resource to communicate the information I found in my research.

Communicating Results

I will share the caregiver resources I have created in my community in various ways. I have both the URL for the Google Site and a QR code that can be included on flyers or posters to be distributed to places in the community frequented by caregivers of children in the target age range such as doctor's offices, daycare providers, and community gathering spaces. These paper resources will also provide a sample of the activities provided on the site. I will also ask that the local school district and homeschooling programs provide a link to the web based resource to families that have younger children in addition to those in the school system. I look forward to getting more traffic on my site in order to get feedback from users on what is working or not working so I can continue to improve the resource and make it as useful as possible. I am hopeful that my project can also be beneficial to teachers as described in the next section.

Benefit to the Profession

This project is a benefit to the profession because children who have better early literacy exposure enter school with a larger vocabulary and more pre-literacy skills which makes them more likely to achieve highly in literacy (Boivin & Bierman, 2013; Hood et al., 2008; Jordan et al., 2000). This increased success helps students and teachers throughout school because in higher grades literacy is a skill used in all subject areas. In addition to helping students with literacy, this project also helps encourage caregivers to

be informed and involved in their child's development and eventual academic achievement. Caregivers who are engaged in the learning process set an example for their children that reading is important and something that is worthy of their time and effort (Brand et al., 2014). This project can also be a resource for teachers who are unsure of what at home activities are most valuable to early literacy students. Teachers of primary students can share the activity lists and resources provided on the site with caregivers who are looking for more ways to promote their child's literacy development. Teachers can also use the section of the site aimed at professional caregivers as a quick reference for classroom activities that promote different areas of literacy development.

Summary

This chapter reviewed what I learned during the research and writing process of my capstone and the completion of my project. I shared the pieces of information from the literature review that were the most relevant in the creation of my project. The implications and limitations of the project were addressed. I outlined what my possible next steps would be to further my understanding in this area of research and extend the usefulness of my project. The distribution process for the resource and its benefit to the profession were explained.

Throughout this capstone I have examined the question, *How can schools encourage caregivers to engage in early literacy activities with their children (birth to age five)?* This is a complex topic, and the project I developed addressed one small aspect of it. I look forward to continuing research in this area to deepen my understanding and possibly create additional resources tailored to caregivers of older children.

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