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Family Members as Partners in an After-School and Summer Literacy Program

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If educators expect more children to be successful in literacy experiences at school, then they must strive to form lasting partnerships with parents (Fried, 2001). The educators working with the after-school and summer literacy program actively sought to form partnerships with family members at a small rural elementary school in a southern state. By collaborating with mothers and relatives of children at this low-income, African-American school we learned about the commitment and caring of families. Family members participating in the program explained they began to spend more time on literacy activities at home and were excited about reading with their children. These family members became better at (a) asking open-ended response questions, (b) encouraging children to tell what they think, and (c) reading with expression.

TEACHERS, ADMINISTRATORS, policy makers, and the public tend to blame families for children's low achievement, believing that parents do not care about or are unable to support children's learning. It is not unfamiliar to hear that children have trouble in school because their parents do not read to them or just do not care. The following quote from Wyatt Emmerich (2003), a newspaper editor and owner, reflects what many believe:

We ought to give education priority. But let's face it, the problem of illiteracy is not children lacking schoolbooks. The problem is children lacking committed parents. . . . Any properly motivated parent and child in Mississippi today will meet with great success with just diligence and hard work. It's the motivation and attitude that is [sic] lacking. (p. 4)

The tendency to blame parents and caregivers of children with low achievement is not uncommon. Unfortunately, when teachers and schools blame families for students' low performance, families' strengths and characteristics become increasingly invisible (Payne, 2002). In a spiraling cycle, the invisibility of these families of children with low achievement often contributes to the failure of their children in school systems.

From federal reform efforts such as the *No Child Left Behind Act* and the *Even Start* program to local family literacy centers, it is easy to find programs that aim to improve literacy by "fixing" parents, teaching them typically middle class and school based literacy practices. The structure and design of most family literacy programs are founded on the belief that the way to improve children's achievement is to improve the literacy and parenting skills of the parents (Nueman, Caperelli, & Kee, 1998).

In a challenge to this model, researchers such as Edwards & Pleasants (1999), Lopez, Scribner, and Mahitivanichcha (2001), and Paratore, Melzi, and Krol-Sinclair (1999) have demonstrated that successful family literacy programs can be constructed when school personnel work to know, understand, and value the cultures, strengths,

and characteristics of families. Researchers such as these have begun to address what Auerbach (1995) described as a pervasive gap in our knowledge base about family literacy.

There are widely diverging perspectives on parental roles, effective practice, measures of assessment, and program models. Most importantly, the voices of the participants themselves have largely been absent in any discussions about program development, quality, or evaluation. The voices of the participants should be a critical component if programs are to be designed to accommodate family needs and life goals. Data from working with family members in an after school and summer literacy program may assist educators in understanding the potential of collaborating with family members by sharing family members' comments, literacy practices, and perspectives.

Program and Participants

For two and a half years, beginning in the spring of 2001, the authors collaborated with families to provide an after school and summer literacy program. Davis Elementary is a small, low-income school long plagued by poor performance, high teacher turnover, little parental involvement, and dilapidated facilities. Students at Davis Elementary live in several small, rural communities located from within walking distance to 20 miles from the school building. All of Davis Elementary School's 240 students (K-6) are African-American, and over 97 percent receive free lunch. Surveys indicate that 25 percent of families are unemployed, and nearly 50 percent are single parent households.

The after school and summer literacy program, a tutorial assistance program funded by the Reading Excellence Act (REA), provided tutoring and reading assistance to struggling pre-K-3 readers and writers at the school site using a literature based approach. The program provided tutoring and instruction during the school year and summer, serving 80-90 pre-kindergarten through third graders at a time. During the school year, the program operated three days a week for 75 minutes after the end of the school day. Each summer the program operated for 5 hours, five days a week, for 4 weeks.

The staff, which consisted of professors from the local university and classroom teachers, worked to increase student achievement by supporting family involvement in the school and actively recruiting family members throughout the course of the program. Family members were invited to come to school to assist in planning and operating the program, and to read, write, play, talk, and interact with children. Family members were paid a small stipend to assist with transportation costs and childcare.

The 16 family members working with the program in the third year of fall 2003, included one grandmother, one aunt, and fourteen mothers. Of those 16 family members, nine had earned high school diplomas, one had earned a GED, and six had attended or were currently attending community college. None of the family members had taken courses at a four-year college. Nine of the family members worked at service jobs, such as nursing home attendant, fast food worker, and hotel housekeeper. The other family members were unemployed.

When the after school and summer tutorial program began at Davis Elementary, the school experienced low family involvement at PTA meetings, parent-teacher conference days, and family information nights. Teachers generally blamed parents for students' poor performance. Several teachers told us stories about parents who did not come to school, did not answer phone calls, and refused to make children do homework. The teachers and administrators did not trust the family members. The principal even stated that family members should not be invited to help supervise the unloading and loading of buses at the beginning of the school year, because conflicts were likely to arise and he did not trust family members to deal fairly with students.

Family members, professors, and teachers working in the after-school and summer program met weekly to plan and reflect on the success of the teaching and learning experiences and to plan for the upcoming week. In addition, the staff met bi-weekly for professional development sessions. At these professional development sessions, professors or teachers would share teaching strategies such as techniques for reading aloud, using invented spelling, or asking open-ended

questions. Family members and teachers were also asked to critique the curriculum.

In the program, teachers and family members worked and planned together to implement small groups and centers that allowed children to engage in a variety of literacy experiences. A typical day in the after-school program began with a read-aloud. The children would then move to small groups and centers that were led by family members and teachers where they wrote in response journals, reread a selection, worked on comprehension skills, created art projects, or worked on phonemic awareness and phonics.

Data Collection

The findings from this qualitative study focus on "meanings in context" (Noblitt & Hare, 1988). The family members in this study are typical examples of the phenomenon of interest (Merriam, 2002). The variety of data collected allowed for triangulation, and led to thick descriptions of family members' participation (Babbie, 1995).

We, the researchers in this study, were participant-observers. Data collected included:

- semi-structured interviews with family members and school personnel;
- field notes and observations describing the program;
- family members' journals describing their activities and their perceptions of the program; and
- audiotapes and videotapes of selected class sessions and interviews.

In order to ascertain if the data gathered reflected the family members' perceptions and beliefs, participating family members checked the data. The descriptions of family members' interactions at school were generated, along with tentative explanations, and then shared with family members, who made suggestions for revising and reinterpreting the data. The data collected give credence to the voices of family member participants.

Findings

Recruiting parents. Initially, family members were recruited by sending letters home with children participating in the program. During the first year of our program, 80 children came to our after school and summer programs, but only four family members applied and worked with us. Like many school programs, the after school program was fairly invisible to the family members sending students to school. Family members did not understand that they were being truly invited to participate at the school, and did not sense they had a legitimate role to play in the program.

Over time, word of mouth from participating family members about the quality of the program helped recruit the rest of the staff. By the start of the third year, 16 family members related to over half of the students, applied and were hired. As Sherice, the mother, sister, and aunt of children in the program said,

My cousin, Janet, she was working in the program and she was telling me about all the things they were trying to do to help the kids learn reading, a lot of different activities, and so I said I want to try it out.

Other family members joined us when they saw how much their children were learning. As Florence said, “[My child] was in the program during the summer, and I used to come out there and just pay attention to the things that they was doing, and it was really interesting, some of the things that they was learning.” She found the program so interesting, she decided to apply to work. By the end of its first year, the program had earned a reputation as a positive way to become involved at the school.

Family members’ descriptions of their reasons for working with the program belie the traditional assumptions that family members of poor, rural, and minority children simply do not care. Family members worked in the program because they believed they could help their own children, and because they wanted to help other children at the school. Janet explained why she decided to work with the program, by saying,

I became interested when I found out that my son, he was having problems with reading, and I heard about the program through the school, so I decided to come out here, just cause by me being here, showing him that I'm interested in the work he doing, might help him improve his work.

Her primary reason for working with the program was a belief that her presence would support and enhance her son's learning.

Since the community was plagued with a high unemployment rate, the after school program provided meaningful work for women in the community unable to locate other positions. Laura told us,

It has helped me, at first I was just sitting around at home and wasn't doing anything, and I like doing things, and, I, like I say, I love working with children, and I just say this is a good opportunity for me to get out and do something, something that I would really enjoy.

The stipend that family members received was important. The approximately \$50.00 a week family members earned as teachers/tutors made a real difference in some of their lives. Family members talked about using their paychecks to help with phone bills, to buy groceries, to replace worn out backpacks, to go shopping. But the stipend was not the main reason they came to school. For most family members, the stipend barely offset the cost of transportation across the county, with drives from 20-45 minutes long, one way, childcare for younger siblings, or the treats and prizes family members brought the children. As Angie told us,

To me this is not about the money, this is about the kids getting an education, that's the way I feel about it.

What the stipend did was communicate the value placed on parental involvement. Because they were paid workers, family members understood they played a clear, important role in the program. They felt ownership. The fact that over half of the students had family members who became tutors/teachers at some point in our program spoke loudly

about family members' commitment to, and interest in, their children's education.

Becoming better at working with children. From the beginning, family members worked directly with children. Family members helped with art projects, listened to children read aloud, read to children, supported children as they wrote stories and responses to books, and played games, among dozens of other things. Over time, many family members became more confident and more able to help children with the literacy tasks assigned during the program. Christie, one family member, recognized her own growing ability. Christie told us,

At first when I first started for the summer, I'm like, I don't know nothing about teaching, but once I got in and got to doing what I was told to do and I did it, and now it's just, like I already, you know, like it's just come natural since I've been in it before.

After working in the program for nearly two years, Sherice told us that she was becoming a better teacher, someone who could adjust her teaching to the needs of her students. She said:

One of the things I've learned from this program is to be patient, with the kids, because at first I wasn't, I was like, I know you know this and I know you can do it, and I learned that there are some kids that are, you know, that are a little slower than the others that won't get it the first time around, and it takes time, you can't pressure them into learning things.

Family members felt responsible for helping students learn, and therefore responsible for understanding "what they were supposed to do." Tomeka described her role in this way: "I'm working with the program, and what we are doing is helping children that need, that's lacking reading, we're helping them with their reading and different activities, and writing." This sense of responsibility translated into a sense of skill at working with children. Tomeka told us,

We sit down and discuss what we have to do for the whole week and pick out children that we think, that want to be in our group and try to help them Miss Ann [the teacher] loves me to read with the kids, cause I read with excitement and they be so tickled, and I be reading, I say that's how you supposed to be reading, with excitement.

Over time, family members were given increased responsibility for selecting appropriate literature, and even coming up with activities for their small groups. For example, when Miss Ann's second grade classroom finished reading the first book in the *Horrible Harry* series by Suzy Kline, Donna decided that her group of second graders would enjoy reading the second book. She took the book home, read it, and prepared a variety of questions, writing prompts, and art activities for her students to complete.

Learning translates to home. Most family members could be very specific about strategies, skills, and content they were learning and immediately applying in the classroom and at home. Tomeka, for example, described learning phonic rules and punctuation, telling us,

I'm learning a lot, like, well, I say like just the vowels, and sounding out the words cause /k/could be used as /c/ or /k/, and I learned that, you know, different little vowels and consonants, and what's the name, of all, like the period and exclamation point and what they are named, cause I get them mixed up. Punctuation.

Tomeka applied what she was learning at home. She described reading with her three children, and emphasizing punctuation, saying: "When they bring a book home they have to read, I tell them they have like different punctuation, they have to make it sound exciting, or if it have a question mark it's asking a question that you have to answer."

Family members also explained that as they participated in the program, they began to spend more time at home on literacy activities. Florence, for example, stated,

Reading, we spend more time reading, and, I used to have to ask him [her son], now he come home and he say momma let's read this, or that, and he enjoys it more."

Marcy, who has been working since the program started stated,

I am still learning that the more they read and the more they write the better they get and the better they get, and I have a daughter and she's in the program and she's an excellent reader.

As she worked with the program, Marcy made a conscious effort to do more reading and writing with her own daughter.

Working in the program also helped some family members with their own learning. During the summer program, Donna was thrilled to be learning about other countries during the third graders' explorations of France and Egypt. She kept a notebook of all the resources and gave presentations to students about different countries. She also worked on her own language skills. Christie told us,

I'm learning how to be, how do you say it, I'm learning how to, um, some of the kids are not using correct English, (laughs) and, I'm learning that, you know. I'm learning a lot about using correct English.

Family members were concerned about teaching skills or concepts they did not think that they fully understood. One family member who came to work with us had not finished high school, and described herself "weak" in reading and writing. Sam asked to work mostly at the art table, so that children would not know that she could barely write. She cared about children's perceptions of her own literacy skills.

Tomeka talked about her increasing willingness and ability to read with her children at home. Not only had she become a better listener and reader, she realized that she enjoyed the books her children were being asked to read. She explained:

Like, at first, when they used to bring a book home from school, I'd be like "Oh, go and read it." I'd look at the book, I'd say to myself, "That book ain't exciting." But since I been working with the children and I've been reading to them and I take books home and read to my kids, and they enjoy that, or sometimes they'll say, "Oh we read that a book already, we know what's going to happen," and I'll say, "Well, listen again, cause I like the book myself!"

Borrowing literacy materials. During the time period that the program operated at Davis Elementary, the school had two small parent centers, one funded by the REA grant, which was being developed, and the second one, operated by the school district with few supplies. Both parent centers were rarely visited, and few family members came to check out materials. On the other hand, all of the family members borrowed (or asked to keep) materials from the program. Some family members took books home to read for themselves; while others borrowed big books to read to their children, marker boards, and flash cards to use to practice writing skills and phonics. Family members took home paper and pencils to write with their children and markers to create illustrations.

Donna borrowed books to prepare for her role as a teacher/tutor. She took them home and read them with her third grade son. Based on his responses and reactions and questions, she came up with things to ask the second graders she would work with the next week. Christie said that she would make copies of the activities she did as a teacher/tutor with first graders, borrow the books, and do the same activities at home with her kindergarten son. Shekela talked repeatedly about how she used what she learned working with the second graders in the program with her third grade son and grandsons. Each week, she borrowed a second grade book and took it home to read while she took care of the boys over the weekend. Shekela said:

I read it, instead of us sitting there watching the Power Rangers, little cartoons or anything . . . I bring books home over the weekend, I read to my grandchildren, my

son, we act out, we switch roles. I have fun with my grand kids. The older I have gotten the more fun I've had with them. We don't argue as much as we used to, since I've been here with this program. It's a lot of fun; it's a lot of fun.

Family members borrowed, kept, and used materials from the program because they had experiences using these materials as teachers/tutors. They were familiar with the books, papers, games, and manipulatives. In contrast, the materials at formal parent centers remained unfamiliar and relatively unused.

Learning from one another. Family members learned as they participated in day-to-day activities and collaborated with teachers and professors to plan and implement lessons. They also learned from the modeling provided by the teachers and professors. But perhaps most crucially, family members learned from each other. Family members talked with each other formally at weekly professional development sessions and informally as they collaborated to teach the children. These opportunities for family members to talk with each other about children, the program, and the curriculum were invaluable learning experiences for them as well as the other staff members.

For example, when the staff met to discuss the program, Tomeka was really struggling with Terence, a second grader being treated for ADHD. Tomeka was resistant to try any of the open-ended literacy activities. Tomeka had a hard time getting Terence to "pay attention," and wished aloud at the staff meeting that she could "whip him." Tomeka's struggles with Terence led the group to talk about ways to discipline children at school and at home.

Some family members agreed that corporal punishment might be the best choice. When Brenna started working with the program, she explained that her daughter acted up a lot, but that a good whipping would make her behave. Brenna believed that teachers should expect children to behave and provide firm consequences if they did not. Wilma, the mother of a first grader, disagreed. Wilma, a shy woman, who rarely spoke during large group meetings, spoke up about her son

and the period when his behavior was out of control. Wilma and her son had been going to family counseling, and learning new ways of interacting. She told the group that she had learned that children give back what they are taught. "Why should a child respect you, if you don't respect them?" she asked the group. Wilma talked about ways she had learned to manage her son's behavior without yelling and hitting. She was learning to give clear, specific directions and to talk respectfully to her son, and to match the consequences to the behavior. She said her house was more peaceful than it had ever been, and that her child's behavior at school was improving.

Wilma's challenge of the cultural practice of spanking and yelling at misbehaving children caused family members to think in new ways about their own parenting practices. Later Florence, another family member, said that the one thing she had learned most [while working with the program] was how to deal with her children. Four months later, Florence confirmed the impact of conversations like these, saying that she was, learning "just different things, like how to talk to him to get him to do things without hollering at him."

The impact of family members' interactions with one another was long reaching. A year later, Brenna, who had outspokenly supported corporal punishment previously explained, "I told her [my daughter] that her teacher better not paddle her." She then told school officials not to paddle her child.

The conversations about teaching, learning, and discipline, which continued over time, empowered the family members. They began to value each other's opinions and to voice their own opinions more readily. They became active participants and problem solvers in the program and the school community.

Learning that the school is not doing very well. Family members who worked with the program were surprised to learn about students' poor achievement. Generally, they knew that their own children were struggling with reading or writing, but did not realize reading difficulties were a pervasive problem at Davis Elementary.

As family members learned about the school's performance, they also realized they knew how to help make a difference. Laura told us, "Some of the children, I really feel like they should be better readers . . . it's good that we do a lot of reading with them, because a lot of words they may come across that they don't know, we can help them with those words. . . . So I really think this is a good program for some of the children, as well as the parents."

Florence spoke about this issue. She stated,

A lot of children who really needs the program, cause it's a lot of children who don't take the time to read and put their words together, I have really learned a lot with working with the program, and just paying attention to the different students and things that some of them know.

Florence's concern for struggling readers carried over to a commitment to keep working at the school even after the program ended.

Increasing family involvement at school. Janet explained that before she began working with the program, she never came to school. "I didn't even come out here to check on my child until I started working in this program." She could not really explain why she had not come to school. "I just hadn't taken an interest, I guess." She commented about assuming things were okay at school, trusting teachers to communicate with her, and allowing herself to be invisible to the school faculty. She explained she did not even realize her son was struggling with reading until his first grade teacher sent home a note recommending him for the program.

Once she realized that her son was having trouble and she could participate in a program designed to help him, she began coming to school. She explained,

Even the days that I don't come work here, I come and check on his work and check on see how he's progressing in class.

The classroom teacher stated that Janet had become a regular presence at the school. She was clearly becoming visible to the school faculty.

Janet was not alone. In fact, most of the family members who worked with the program had never or rarely been to the school. Once they became a member of the school community their involvement continued. Working with the program assisted family members in understanding schooling practices. Family members reported feeling more welcome at and familiar with the school, and this familiarity supported parental involvement. Family members who worked with the program started coming to the school before the program started to check on their children. They stopped by the classrooms to offer assistance and support.

Classroom teachers noticed this increased involvement. A third grade teacher told us, "I have noticed that the parents who are involved with the program are a lot more involved in my classroom. I'm very pleased with the carry over from the program and the additional parental involvement."

Family members often discussed what they would do at the school once the after school and summer program ended. Many of the family members expressed a commitment to continue their involvement with Davis Elementary. Laura, a mother and a grandmother, explained that she would "really enjoy coming, just sitting in and working with the school program." Tomeka expressed a willingness to keep coming to the school and working with children, "if they let me." She would like to come for reading time, or story time, but she was not sure if the classroom teacher would allow her to continue this kind of involvement.

Janet felt working with the program and other family members helped prepare her to be a classroom volunteer. She said at first she had only been around her own son, and not other children but that,

After I started working with the Promising Readers, I know that I really like kids and I like being around them, and I know that, you know, that I can help them. Because it's a lot of children who need one-on one help

and teachers don't really have a chance to help them one-on-one cause they have a lot of children to deal with, so I would, if there's a child that needs help and their parents may not have time to teach them, I would really like that cause a lot of children just need someone to be there.

Marcy explained that participating in the program led to greater involvement, saying, "It make me come out to more meetings, PTA meetings and little activities and stuff, because, I mean, I have a child out here and I am concerned, in order for it to get better we have to be a part of it."

Becoming members of the school community. The inclusion of family members into the school community did take time. However, over time teachers and administrators at Davis Elementary did see the family members as active members and participants of the school community. As the family members continued to come to Davis Elementary, the school community began to accept them. One family member was even hired as a paraprofessional at Davis Elementary. As family members talked to students and joked and teased them, the students came to see them as members of their learning community.

Conclusion and Discussion

Typically, when family members volunteer at school, they do work separate from the teaching and learning that takes place in the classroom. Family members might be asked to sit in the hall and listen to children read, hang bulletin boards, run copies, grade papers, or drill children on flash cards. While family members can assist in raising funds for the PTA or running copies for teachers, these types of activities do little to help the family members become viable members of the school community (Moll & Greenberg, 1990).

The staff of the after school and summer literacy program did not try to "fix" family members by asking them to come in and learn typically middle class and school based literary practices. Instead, the staff worked hard to listen and understand the culture, strengths, and

characteristics of family members. From the beginning, the aim of the program was to create a space where family members could be valued as teachers and colleagues, not just helpers, to facilitate the construction of knowledge about literacy teaching and learning. As teacher/tutors, family members had a concrete reason to understand the curriculum because they were the ones in charge of the teaching and learning of students in small groups.

The findings do not indicate nor do the researchers try to say that all 16 of the family members became adept literacy teachers. Indeed, most possessed limited facility with written language themselves. Tasks and assignments were divided to take advantage of the strengths of all the adults working in the program. While the classroom teacher or professor in each room taught comprehension lessons or guided writing activities, family members generally listened to children read aloud, read to children, supervised journal writing, or led children in art activities. These tasks took advantage of family members' abilities, and paralleled literacy activities family members are often expected to engage in at home—listening to children read aloud, supervising homework, reading to their children.

Family members who stayed in the program for at least a year tended to improve their skills in working with children. Family members became better at (a) asking open-ended response questions, (b) encouraging students to tell what they think, and (c) reading with expression. When they began working with the program, most family members generally supplied words whenever readers got stuck. Over time, as they observed the teachers and other family members and talked about reading strategies during professional developments, many parents developed a repertoire of prompts to use. Family members began to remind students to use context clues, think about the meaning of the sentence, look for familiar word chunks such as prefixes, suffixes, and root words, and to use illustrations, as well as "sound it out" during a read-aloud. Family members talked about how they were learning and growing throughout the program.

Another significant area of growth was in interactions between students and family members. The design of the program established:

- family members as peers and colleagues;
- working together to grapple with difficult issues of management;
- teaching; and
- learning.

Conversations allowed family members to talk with one another about teaching children, which often led to conversations about raising children. Family members were able to support one another, reinforce decisions that worked to support children, and provide new perspectives on all kinds of issues related to children's growth, development, and learning.

Family members learned that Davis Elementary was not doing very well. This knowledge led to concern for the struggling readers at Davis Elementary. The family members felt a commitment to the students with whom they had been working, and family involvement at Davis Elementary increased. Even classroom teachers commented on the increased family involvement.

As family members assumed more and more roles in the program, it quickly became apparent that they felt welcome and appreciated the opportunities to share and learn with students, teachers, and administrators. There were conflicts at times. However, the learning, understanding, and teaching for family members and for us as researchers were tremendous and powerful. Family members engaged us in critical inquiry about literacy issues and about their empowerment in the school community as they became members of the school community.

Key features of the program facilitated our success of developing partnerships with families. Family members took on specific meaningful roles; they felt a sense of responsibility for students' achievement. Regular reflection, discussion, and professional development, along with the stipend, communicated the importance of family members' roles in the program.

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