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Project CAPER (Children And Parents Enjoy Reading): A Case Study

**Shelley B. Wepner
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Parents are our best allies in supporting the overall goals of the elementary reading program. Research clearly indicates that parents' involvement with children's reading development is a prominent factor in promoting children's academic success (Allen and Freitag, 1988; Melton, 1985; Rich, 1985; Smith, 1988). In serving as models for their children, parents' reading behaviors impact on children's attitudes toward reading. When parents frequently read "just for the fun of it," children view reading as a valued, recreational home activity (Demos, 1987). When parents transmit the view that reading is vital to one's development, children carry these values into school.

Cousert (1978) found that the amount of time that children saw their parents reading was a powerful influence on children's success in elementary school. Whether they read books, magazines, newsletters, or any other type of reading material was not as important as the amount of time spent reading. In a similar vein, Smith (1988) reported that parents' interest in what children were reading and how they were responding was crucial for children's reading success. In other words, modeling was more important than coaxing.

Even with the nation's attention to children's recreational reading development, schools need to provide direction and encouragement so that parents know what to do (Au and Mason, 1989; Fredericks, 1989). Schools need to stress ways in which to create a home atmosphere where the importance of reading is taught through role modeling (Cohen, 1987; Murrin, 1989). It is not enough for parents to read *to* children; parents must read *with* children, so that an image is formed that parents enjoy reading.

One school-home partnership for encouraging parents to read along with their children is Project CAPER (Children And Parents Enjoy Readng), an at-home recreational reading program implemented in the East Brunswick School District, East Brunswick New Jersey, an affluent suburban school district characterized by families with adequate literacy skills. Created as a district-wide program for any student in grades one through five, this seven-month project was offered to parent-student volunteer teams to promote reading as a part of children's everyday habits. The project's purpose was to see whether children's attitudes toward reading would improve.

Project CAPER action plan

During the summer preceding the project, six of the district's eight elementary principals agreed that their schools would participate. In September, reading specialists from these six volunteer schools participated in a staff development session to organize and plan for the project. Subsequently, volunteer teachers engaged in a workshop to prepare them to present Project CAPER to parents during Back-to-School night. In addition to presenting the project's purpose, teachers asked the children of volunteer teams to complete surveys indicating their interest in reading.

In late October, the project began officially. Volunteer parent-child teams were asked to read together daily. Directions to parents explained that CAPER was designed to spark interest in reading for pleasure. Time was to be set aside each day for pleasure reading, with parents and children reading any type of acceptable reading material (e.g., books, magazines, newspapers, poetry, manuals). They, together with their children, were to read anything enjoyable and/or informational. Also included in the directions were suggested (but not required) incremental time frames: 10 minutes every day for the first two months (November-December), 15 minutes every day for the second two months (January-February); and 20 minutes every day for the last three months (March-May).

Teachers distributed a color-coded, double-sided monthly Reading Record that students and parents completed. On one side students recorded daily the amount of time spent reading and the title or type of material read; they also recorded the total time spent reading each week and the hours and minutes spent reading per month. Parents did the same on the reverse side of the same form (see Figure 1). When students turned in their Reading Record each month, they received the same form in a different color and a small token (e.g., paper bookmark) for their efforts. Teachers gave all forms to the reading specialists to organize; reading specialists, in turn, sent forms to the reading supervisor. At the end of the project in May, the 200 participating students received a certificate of recognition for demonstrating enthusiasm for reading. The same Likert-type attitudinal survey, used in September, was completed by students to measure attitudinal differences toward reading.

Figure 1.
CAPER Monthly Progress Report
 Please fill in daily the amount of time spent reading
 and the title or type of material read.

PARENT READING RECORD

Sun. *Mon.* *Tues.* *Wed.* *Thurs.* *Fri.* *Sat.*

<i>Sun.</i>	<i>Mon.</i>	<i>Tues.</i>	<i>Wed.</i>	<i>Thurs.</i>	<i>Fri.</i>	<i>Sat.</i>

Total time spent reading Week 1: _____

Total time spent reading Week 2: _____

Total time spent reading Week 3: _____

Total time spent reading Week 4: _____

Total time spent reading Week 5: _____

I read for a total of _____ hours and _____ minutes this month.

_____ *Signature*

_____ *Name (please print)*

Note: on the reverse side is the same form, entitled Student Reading Record

What happened?

Four student survey questions (“I like to read every day,” “I like to read,” “I like to read when my parents read,” and “I am a good reader”), with 3 = “all of the time,” 2 = “sometimes,” 1 = “never,” weights were subjected to a correlated *t*-test. Students could receive anywhere from a maximum score of 12 to a minimum score of 4. The mean for the pretest score was 9.095, with a standard deviation of 1.61; the mean for the posttest score was 9.505, with a standard deviation of 1.65. Results were statistically significant ($p < .05$), indicating an improvement in students’ attitude toward themselves as readers.

Table 1
Summary of Results for Attitudinal Survey

	Pretest	Posttest
Mean	9.095	9.505
s.d.	1.61	1.65
<hr/>		
$t = 2.016; p < .05$		

We believe that this difference can be attributed to the children’s opportunity to experience reading with their parents rather than only in school. In fact, many students commented to their teachers that they enjoyed the time alone with their parents. Some students stated that it was the only opportunity they had to receive attention from their parents on a one-to-one basis.

Another serendipitous finding by one of the reading specialists was that all the second grade Chapter 1 students in one of the participating schools no longer qualified for the Chapter 1 program since they had scored above the minimum level of proficiency on a standardized test.

Analysis of this same school's 38 student and parent records indicated that 23 or approximately 60% of the 38 teams were male students, yet all of the parent participants were female. Because this school's kindergarten teachers volunteered for the project, seven kindergarten parent-child teams participated. Each team read between five and six days a week for about 15-20 minutes a day. Slightly more than half (53%) of the teams followed the suggested 10-15-20 minute time frame while the other teams read for varying amounts of time, ranging from 5 minutes to 60 minutes.

Students who recorded what they read indicated that they chose to read mostly books (e.g., *Curious George*, *Little Red Riding Hood*, and *The Berenstain Bears* at the primary level; Cam Jansen, Beverly Cleary, Judy Blume, and *Encyclopedia Brown* at the intermediate level). A few intermediate students spent some of their time reading magazines and newspapers. Similarly, many of the parents recorded that they read mostly books; however, some parents also read newspapers, magazines, and technical manuals. Two parents spent every session reading the newspaper. One parent wrote on the record-keeping form "I think this program is fantastic. Thank you."

Midge Murrin, a reading specialist in Haskell Elementary School, Haskell New Jersey, implemented the same project on a smaller scale in her K-8 school for four months. Twenty-six (or 74%) of the thirty-five children in the special reading program completed the project. All students were in grades one through seven except for one kindergarten student who already was reading (Murrin, 1989). Although Murrin's pre-post survey differences were not significant, she found from informal interviews with parent-child teams that they enjoyed the program and, in fact, asked for additional calendars so that they could

continue to read at home and keep track of their time. Parents commented that it was a "great way to spend time together" and that "it created a scheduled, quality time for reading." Parents also stated that the project got them interested in reading again, and that it allowed their children to see them reading. One mother said, "My son who was reluctant to read before would announce, 'It's time to read.' He set aside reading materials for himself for our sessions." Even though some parents expressed concern about the difficulty of finding time for reading, most felt that a program of this nature should be part of every child's education.

Administrative realizations

Three unanticipated administrative problems arose during the course of the school year. First, we found that some parents were unwilling or unable to make the required commitment to reading with their children on a daily basis; in fact, questions about the feasibility of using a parent substitute were raised. Moreover, a number felt that reading should be its own reward and that providing a small tangible item such as a bookmark would impact negatively upon students' future involvement with recreational reading. A number of parents complained about the project to the superintendent who, because of his peripheral involvement, didn't know whether their complaints were valid or not. It took a few weeks before the community accepted that it was a voluntary program for interested parent-child teams.

Second, we discovered that the staff did not feel "ownership" of the program. Although teachers volunteered to participate, they commented that they did not have sufficient information on the "whys" and "hows" of the program. Teachers also felt that they did not have enough time to work with the project during the school day. They had not anticipated the struggle to keep abreast of CAPER paper

work. For example, because of some attrition, teachers had difficulty determining whether parent-child teams were remiss in returning forms or were dropping out of the program. The amount of time and energy spent on gentle reminders to return the forms became frustrating.

Third, we realized that our record-keeping system was too cumbersome. Since it was a district program, the forms came back to the district office at varying times. There was a continual stream of forms that had to be organized and filed without a proper system in place to account for drop-out teams. It took months to get organized.

Implementation guidelines

Inasmuch as the project turned out to be successful for encouraging at-home recreational reading and for helping students to feel better about themselves as readers, the district intends to include this project as part of its annual recreational reading goal. However, modifications currently are being made which are reflected in the following twelve recommendations and guidelines.

Community awareness 1) Parents need approximately nine months to digest the idea, either through the Parent Teacher Association (PTA) or through a district newsletter. Use the district newsletter to intrigue parents about your program. Also use the newsletter to provide as much background information as possible. Print the record keeping form in one issue, with an illustration of how to complete the form. 2) Meet with the PTA to share information about your project. PTA presidents can, in turn, communicate this information within their respective schools, possibly printing highlights of the program in their school-based newsletters. 3) Create manageable guidelines so that parents don't feel threatened by the project. (We are

changing our guidelines from reading every day to reading five out of seven days each week.) 4) Use the community's public library to sponsor CAPER times so that parent-child teams can join other parent-child teams for reading time. 5) Do extensive preplanning with your superintendent so that s/he can take a detailed plan back to the Board of Education. The superintendent's public endorsement of the program before its implementation should help to offset community concerns. 6) Encourage parent substitutes to participate if parents cannot find the time, and encourage fathers to participate more.

Staff development 7) Use reading specialists as resources for getting staff input before the program begins. Create a survey with reading specialists that invites volunteer teachers to share their ideas and concerns about the project. Include proposed goals, procedures, and classroom-based responsibilities in the survey. 8) Create a staff development schedule during the year preceding the project. In addition to presenting information about the mechanics of the program, make certain that teachers understand the program's value. 9) Promote on-going dialogue with the staff, either at the school or district level, to insure that concerns which arise are dealt with in a timely fashion.

Budget and record-keeping 10) Work ahead to get a budget in place for books, record-keeping forms, token rewards and certificates (if desired), and clerical staff. 11) Devise a manageable record-keeping system. Consider collecting information on a mechanically scored answer sheet that can be placed directly into a computer for storage. If possible, use school-based personnel to keep track of their own schools before sending it to a district office. 12) Create an exit form for parents to complete if they decide to

drop out of the program. This form should help alleviate unnecessary teacher follow-up.

Conclusion

Project CAPER emphasized that reading is an important activity for the whole family while promoting good feelings between students and their parents. Parents began to appreciate that, in order to develop lifelong readers, reading had to occur on a regular basis outside the classroom environment. Using parents to model this behavior enhanced students' attitude toward reading.

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