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Reading In Families: A Research Update

Linda Asmussen
Janet S. Gaffney

Asmussen and Gaffney have uncovered one of the many rich sources of research data inherent in the Reading Recovery program. The Ohio research studies (already some 13 volumes) have documented the success of Reading Recovery in the United States. Success like this produces a need to unravel the warp and woof to examine the nature of that success. Certainly there are many threads to examine. In this brief research update, they describe a current study to explore reading in the families of a sample of Reading Recovery children in Illinois. It will be interesting to compare their findings with Kathleen Holland's stimulating research exploring the parent and home literacy context of 13 Ohio Reading Recovery children in 1986-87, case studies conducted when Reading Recovery was in its infancy in the US. The Asmussen and Gaffney study explores the important dynamics of becoming literate at a time when Americans have more knowledge of Reading Recovery and a need to understand its impact on family literacy.

The Reading in Families Project is a new study examining the interconnections between school and home in families with a child at risk for reading difficulty. We have been collecting data throughout the 1990-91 school year in order to understand relationships within families *and* between families and schools as children are involved in Reading Recovery. The rationale for

this project developed out of prior research in the fields of education and family studies. First, previous school-home literacy research was unidirectional. Earlier studies focused largely on the influence that parents, primarily mothers, have on their children's academic performance and attitudes towards school. Missing from this literature was how the child's actions and attitudes might affect other family members or how what happens in the school affects the family. Second, family studies literature based on family systems theory argues that the unit of analysis when studying families must be the entire family system; i.e., all members of the household. In addition, analysis of relationships must be multidirectional. This approach, consistent with general systems theory, is based on the concept that change in one subsystem, for example a child, creates change in other systems (i.e., parents, siblings, the family as a whole). This theory, when applied to family systems, has as a basic premise that family members are interrelated, and an experience affecting one individual will affect all (Carter and McGoldrick, 1982; Goldenberg and Goldenberg, 1980; Minuchin, 1974). Thus, the system is dynamic, in constant flux, and change within the family and between the family and other systems is multidimensional and multidirectional.

In addition, although numerous studies have been conducted to document children's progress as a result of Reading Recovery (Clay, 1985; Clay, 1982; Pinnell, DeFord and Lyons, 1988), and Gaffney and her colleagues at the Center for the Study of Reading are in the process of studying teacher training, there are no studies which use the family as the unit of analysis. Based on the literature cited above, the Reading in Families Project was designed to address these questions:

1. What is the relationship between a child's participation in Reading Recovery and the literacy environment in the home? How does involvement in this project influence attitudes towards literacy and reading activities of family members?

2. What is the relationship between home factors (such as availability of reading materials, attitudes of parents or guardians, and reading activities of family

members) and a child's level of progress in Reading Recovery?

3. What is the nature of the relationships among family members, relevant to literacy, when a child is having reading difficulty, when a child is being taught in Reading Recovery, and when a child with previous difficulty is able to read at average levels?

To answer these questions requires a collaborative effort from children, parents, and Reading Recovery teachers. The data collection phase of this project began in October 1990 and has continued through April 1991. In October, families were recruited from a local school district implementing Reading Recovery, contacted by phone and invited to participate in the study. All families had a first-grade child identified by the teacher as having reading difficulties early in the year. An initial in-home interview was conducted by graduate and undergraduate research assistants to obtain information about family background, home literacy environment, and child and parent attitudes towards reading, and observe the Reading Recovery child read with parent(s) and sibling(s). Approximately every six weeks throughout the school year, research assistants have returned to the home to observe informal reading sessions with the Reading Recovery child and family members. Reading Recovery teachers also provide information from Reading Recovery lessons — child records of progress, and daily logs for each child on the number of books taken home the previous night and with whom the books were read.

Eighteen families participated in the Reading in Families study. Two-thirds of the first graders in the sample were boys, one-third were girls. Almost half the students in the project were receiving Reading Recovery services in school; the other half might receive Reading Recovery services later in the year. The majority of participants reside in married-parent families (50%), 28% in never-married families, 11% in remarried families, 6% in separated families and 6% in divorced families. The sample is 55% white and 44% African American. The diversity of this preliminary background information illustrates that children at risk for reading failure cross the lines of family structure and race/ethnicity.

This study can contribute to the development of family-systems theory in education and to the methodology used in home-school studies, but more importantly, the findings may help to uncover significant shifts in actions and attitudes among family members that support or hinder a child with reading difficulties. The study may enable us to learn how changes in a child's reading performance and attitudes toward reading affect other members of the family. For example, we will be able to compare the kinds of interactions that may occur when the target child reads with a parent and to a younger or older sibling, and note changes in the reading patterns of family members. Will younger siblings demonstrate increased interest in books? Will there be shifts in the communication system between the home and school? Will more books be purchased or borrowed from the library when the first grader emerges as a competent reader? Since children's progress in Reading Recovery is so accelerated in comparison to remedial programs, we are able to examine changes in a family unit within a concentrated period of time. We look forward to sharing the results of this study with parents, educators, and researchers.

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