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The Academic and Social Benefits for Preservice Teachers Working with Children and Families of Promise

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The Parents as Reading Teachers Nightly Encouraging Reading Success (PARTNERS) program provided preservice teachers service-learning field experiences working with families and children of promise. The PARTNERS program utilized preservice teachers to provide families dialogic reading training designed to increase children's oral language skills and family literacy interactions. This service-learning partnership provided powerful field experiences for the pre-service teachers involved. Preservice teachers were provided regular interactions with families and children of promise. This resulted in preservice teachers having an increased understanding of families of promise, a sense of empowerment, and helped preservice teachers realize their potential to be change agents in the lives of children and families of promise. The program helped parents gain a deeper relationship with their children, empowered parents and caregivers to be literacy models and teachers for their children, and affected the way that parents and caregivers interact with their children. Children whose parents or caregivers attended the dialogic reading training attempted and acquired significantly more words than children whose families did not receive training.

Many new teachers will begin their teaching careers in schools that have large populations of students who have limited English proficiency. It is estimated that 10.9 million children speak a language other than English in the home (Aud et al., 2010). However, the typical teacher candidate today remains a native English speaker with limited experiences in diverse settings (Nelson, 2004). In fact, according to the US Department of Education's report, "Addressing the Needs of Limited English Proficient Students", only 27 percent of classroom teachers report that they feel well prepared to teach students who are English Language Learners (ELL) (McKeon, 2005). Lazar (2001) explained "literacy educators are challenged to prepare a largely white population of future teachers to serve a growing population of poor children of color. How to help these future teachers develop the sensitivity, knowledge, and desire to serve these children is one of the most critical questions facing educators today" (p. 367).

One important component of teacher preparation is field experiences. Preservice teachers are required to participate in field experiences in almost all accredited teacher preparation programs in the United States (National Council for the Accreditation Teacher Education Accreditation Council, 2010). Field experiences provide students opportunities to apply what they are learning in their college classrooms and learn new things from actual interactions with teachers, students, and families (Clift & Brady, 2005).

Participation in field experiences in urban schools and underserved areas has been found to help provide preservice teachers: opportunities to confront their own biases about other cultures and families living in poverty (Sleeter, 2008), gain a greater understanding of diverse families (Hedges & Lee, 2010), and increase their confidence working with diverse

populations (Schaffer, 2012). Field experiences can be used to provide preservice teachers with practical, hands-on experiences working in schools that may be very different than they attended while children (Hammerness, Darling-Hammond, & Bransford, 2007).

Interactions with students' families and communities are an integral part of teacher education preparation. It is important that field experiences provide preservice teachers' opportunities to work with not only children, but also families from diverse backgrounds (Akibi, 2011). Sleeter (2008) recommends teacher education programs focus on preparing preservice teachers for the realities of today's schools and classrooms; gaining content and professional knowledge at the college level; and providing interactions in the diverse communities in which preservice teachers will likely be working.

Unfortunately, few teacher preparation programs help to prepare prospective teachers to work in communities or with the families of the students they serve (de Acosta, 1996; Hiatt-Michael, 2001). These experiences "beyond" the classroom are important for providing teachers with a larger picture of a teachers' role (Zeichner, 1996). They also allow teachers to experience more of their students' lives and help them understand the world that their students live in (Graybill, 1997). In addition to helping preservice teachers gain a greater understanding of their students and families, these diverse experiences with parents can increase both preservice teachers' confidence and competence (Foster & Loven, 1992).

Traditional field experience locations are often chosen around issues related to convenience and comfort for the teacher candidate. However, unlike traditional field experiences, service-learning experiences often place students in diverse schools and communities vastly different from those they have experienced previously. Service-learning experiences are designed to connect community service with academic learning, personal growth, and civic responsibility (Lake & Jones, 2008). Service-learning experiences have the potential to be much more meaningful than traditional field experiences because they provide benefits for both the preservice teacher and the community being served (Pappamihiel, 2007). Wasserman (2009) explains four ways that service-learning differs from traditional field experiences. Service-learning experiences benefit the community while providing personal experience. Reflection is used to help participants gain deeper knowledge of themselves and others. Participants are provided with opportunities to form relationships with people who are culturally different from themselves. And, through service-learning, preservice teachers are encouraged to serve underrepresented populations. Because of this, service-learning has been found effective in developing multicultural competencies in preservice teachers (Bollin, 1996; Boyle-Baise, 1998).

Current Study

The current study was designed to provide preservice teachers with a semester-long service-learning opportunity to work with children and families "of promise." Families of promise include children and families living in poverty, belonging to a cultural / ethnic minority, or whose first language is one other than English (Blasi, 2002). The study was designed to address the following research questions: What is the effect of weekly literacy training on parents' literacy interaction with their children? Does parents' use of dialogic reading techniques with their young child increase their child's expressive language skills? Does weekly participation working with children and families of promise increase preservice teachers' perceptions of their ability to work effectively with these children and families?

Preservice teachers conducted weekly parent training sessions on dialogic reading at a local school serving children and families of promise. The study design was meant to address dual purposes, to provide preservice teachers with experiences with parents, caregivers, and families they would not usually come in contact with, and to educate parents and caregivers about literacy skills related to dialogic reading in hopes of increasing preschool children's expressive language skills.

Dialogic reading is a technique designed to share the reading experience with young children. During dialogic reading a parent and child share the reading experience focusing more on talking about the pictures in the book than reading the text aloud. Dialogic reading has been shown to be effective in increasing young children's vocabulary (Hargrave & Sénéchal, 2000; Whitehurst, Falco, Lonigan, Fischel, Valdez-Menchaca, DeBaryshe & Caulfield, 1988; Arnold, Lonigan, Whitehurst, & Epstein, 1994) and expressive language (Hargrave & Sénéchal, 2000). Dialogic reading has also been successfully used to increase language in young children with language delays (Dale, Crain-Thoreson, Notari-Syverson, & Cole, 1996).

Method

The study took place in a school located in a suburban school district in Illinois with a large population of English Language Learning (ELL) families. The school district is the highest performing majority Hispanic school district in the state. It serves the second most severe Limited English Proficient population in the county. The school population is 52% low-income and has 71% limited-English proficiency. The district provides pre-school programs for 3-5 year old children classified as "at risk" based on screening results regarding expressive and receptive language, fine and gross motor skills, and social / emotional, and intellectual processing.

Participants

Parents and caregivers. The school incorporates daily mandatory family involvement as part of their preschool program. Preschool parents and caregivers spend the first fifteen minutes of school reading aloud with their children before leaving the school each day. This family involvement time was used for dialogic reading training for morning preschool families ($n = 21$) in the study. The afternoon families in the study participated in the school's traditional Family Time, which consisted of parents and caregivers being asked to read aloud to their children ($n = 19$). Further details about parental education and home language are provided in Table 1.

Children. There were 42 preschool children (26 boys and 17 girls) between the ages of 3 and 5 participating in the study through their participation in reading activities with their parents and caregivers at the school. On average, the children of the parents and caregivers in the morning dialogic reading group (13 boys and 9 girls) were 4 years 3 months ($SD = 6.09$ months) and the children of parents in the afternoon traditional Family Time group (13 boys and 8 girls) were 4 years 2 months ($SD = 6.66$ months).

Preservice Teachers. Five preservice teachers, and one recent college graduate, provided the dialogic reading training in English and Spanish for parents and caregivers of the children who were involved in the morning classes. Four of the preservice teachers were elementary education majors and one was a secondary education major. Four of the preservice teachers spoke Spanish. Two of them were native Spanish speakers. Another one

of the preservice teachers spoke Spanish as a second language and was a Spanish major in college. One student only spoke English. The recent college graduate was a native Spanish speaker.

Table 1

Characteristics of Parents from the Dialogic Reading and Family Time Groups

	Total Group (n=38)	Dialogic Reading Group (n=38)	Traditional Family Time Group (n=38)
Education			
Less than high school	21%	25%	17%
Some high school	16%	15%	17%
High School	34%	35%	33%
Some college	24%	20%	28%
College graduate	5%	5%	5%
Language at Home			
English	24%	20%	28%
English and Spanish	26%	25%	28%
Spanish	42%	50%	33%
Other	8%	5%	11%

Note. Data regarding 1 family in each group was not collected due to absence.

Intervention

Parents and caregivers in the morning classes received training over a ten-week period. Parents and caregivers received 15 minutes of dialogic reading training focusing on teaching a strategy that encouraged parents to Comment and wait, Ask questions and wait, and Respond and add more (CAR) for the first two Mondays of the program. The CAR dialogic reading strategy, designed by Washington Research Institute, teaches parents and caregivers to provide a language model (Comment and wait), encourage interaction and reflection (Ask questions and wait), and build expressive language (Respond and add more). The last three weeks focused on a technique designed by one of the authors called 1, 2, 3 Tell Me What You See. This strategy asked children to (1) comment on what they see (encourage expressive language), (2) parents and caregivers to teach new words (build vocabulary), and (3) to connect the story to the children's lives (connect to background knowledge).

After receiving training on Mondays, parents and caregivers watched the dialogic reading strategies being modeled with the entire class on Tuesdays. Then, parents and caregivers practiced the dialogic reading strategies with their children on Wednesdays. Two classes of morning preschool parents and caregivers were involved in the study. Therefore, even though our preservice teachers were working with families for the entire ten-week period, each class of parents and caregivers only received five weeks of training.

Measures

Adult – Child Interactive Reading Inventory. The literacy interactions of both morning and afternoon parents' and caregivers' who volunteered to be part of the study were videotaped in September before the study began and again in December at the conclusion

of the dialogic reading training sessions. Families were videotaped in a small resource room located near their preschool classroom. Literacy interactions were scored using the Adult – Child Interactive Reading Inventory (ACIRI) developed by Andrea DeBruin-Parecki. The ACIRI is an observational tool designed to assess parent / child interactions during storybook reading. The ACIRI measures both parent and child behaviors related to 12 literacy behaviors in three categories of reading including: enhancing attention to text, promoting interactive reading / supporting comprehension, and using literacy strategies. The items, categories, and total mean scores for the adult and child portions of the ACIRI were each found to be significantly correlated (DeBruin-Parecki, 1999). Alpha coefficients were calculated for both pre and post-tests, subscales, and overall. The ACIRI was found to be reliable with Alpha coefficients of .80 or above (Duran, 2008). The construct and consequential validity were also found to be high (DeBruin-Parecki, 1999). Versions of the ACIRI are available in both English and Spanish.

Test of Expressive Language. Students' expressive language was measured in early September and mid-December using the picture naming portion of the Individual Growth Developmental Indicators (IGDI) test developed at the University of Minnesota. When taking this test, children are presented with pictures on individual cards. They are asked to name as many of the objects on the cards as they can in 1 minute. The test administrator records the number of words correctly identified and the number of words attempted.

The picture naming portion of the preschool Individual Growth and Developmental Indicator (IGDI) has been found to be a valid and reliable measure of language development in young children. One-month alternate form reliability coefficients range from $r = .44$ to $.78$ (McConnell, Priest, Davis, & McEvoy, 2002). It has been found to correlate with results from other norm-referenced language skill measures for young children including the Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test (3rd edition) and the Preschool Language Scale (McConnell, Priest, Davis, & McEvoy, 2000). The assessment was administered in both English and Spanish.

Results

Parents and caregivers in the dialogic reading group exhibited significantly stronger skills in two categories of reading: promoting interactive reading & comprehension ($p < .001$) and using literacy strategies ($p < .001$) at post-test, as seen in Table 2.

Table 2

Post Literacy Interaction Results from Dialogic Reading and Family Time Groups

	Dialogic Reading Group (n = 21)		Traditional Family Time Group (n = 19)	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Attention to Text	1.42	.87	1.08	.68
Promoting Reading	11.05**	5.33	4.28	3.33
Using Literacy Strategies	.94**	.78	.25	.25

** $p < .001$

Note. Difference in mean post-test scores of the Dialogic Reading Group and Traditional Family Time Group tested for statistical significance with 2-tailed independent samples difference of means t-tests.

Pre-post differences of means tests for each of the groups were conducted. There was not a significant difference between pre- and post-tests for the traditional Family Time group. However, there was a significant difference between pre- and post-tests for the dialogic reading group. Children whose parents or caregivers received the dialogic reading training acquired significantly more words ($p < .01$) from pre-test to post-test than children in the traditional Family Time group. Differences of means between pre-tests of both groups, as well as differences of means between post-tests of both groups were also conducted. Children with parents in the dialogic reading training group attempted significantly more words than the traditional Family Time group at the end of the program ($p < .01$), as seen in Table 3. These results indicate a significant increase in language for the children whose parents received training. Not only were these children able to identify objects correctly in pictures more often than the children whose parents did not receive training, they also attempted to identify objects' names more often. This is important because often an attempt to identify a pictured object such as an "apple" resulted in the child saying a synonym such as "fruit" which was not counted as a word correct, but would indicate an increase in vocabulary.

Parent Interviews

Five parents and caregivers were interviewed at the end of the program about the effects the program had on their interactions with their children. Maria and Susan are both mothers with two young children. Jose and Bridget both have one child. And, Juan has three children. Maria, Jose, and Juan, are all native Spanish speakers.

The parents and caregivers interviewed identified many benefits of the dialogic reading training. They shared how the program helped them build a deeper relationship with their child, empowered them to be literacy models and teachers for their children, and increased student achievement.

Table 3

Picture Naming Results for Children from the Dialogic and Family Time Groups

	Dialogic Reading Group (n=21)				Traditional Family Time Group (n=19)			
	Pre-test		Post-Test		Pre-test		Post-Test	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Number Correct	11.45	6.32	14.32*	5.38	11.52	5.93	12.48	6.22
Number Attempted	19.27	6.78	24.18*	4.74	18.33	4.75	20.10	5.25

* $p < .01$

Note. Difference in mean pre-post scores of the Dialogic Reading Group and Traditional Family Time Group tested for statistical significance with 2-tailed dependent samples difference of means t-tests. Independent samples differences across groups for both the pre-test and post-test were also conducted.

Relationship building. Maria explained the benefits to their family time:

I learned how to understand and share a book with my child. . .It helped me and my daughter want to spend more time together outside of school because now I knew what questions to ask her while she was reading. Plus it helped us have more interest in books and literature.

Juan told of the insights he gained about his son:

I'm more conscious about what he may be saying and it's really a nice thing . . . I learn a little bit about the way he thinks for later books like things that I might think he might notice and things like that.

Parent and caregiver empowerment. Juan also spoke of how the program helped him feel more prepared to work with his child:

I really appreciate what you guys have done and that you have taken time out of your day to teach us and train us properly on how to share a book with your child because I can really say that I was not prepared . . . I feel as if this training helped me better prepare myself when teaching my child new strategies and I want to do with this little one what I did not do for my other children.

Bridget shared how the program helped her:

Plus this has helped me do more than just read to my child. Even though the book doesn't state more words, I feel as if I can add more words or ask my child to add more words to the reading.

Jose also shared a benefit for him was an increase in patience:

I have learned to have more patience. I did not have the capacity to be patient. And, I feel that you have showed me that. Especially at home, because every time we get home we read and I try to show them what I learned from the program.

Children's expressive language improvements. Susan explained the effect the program had on her child's expressive language skills:

My son now knows his colors and numbers a lot better and also tries to identify the object that he is looking at when I use the proper questions while reading the book. He says things like "the chicken is doing... it is over here by..." I believe that this program has really affected the life of my child. My child is four years old right now and did not talk as much as he should before he started this program. He has been seeing a speech therapist for two years. I really believe that my child has increased his vocabulary since this program started. With the books he attempts to talk more and share more what he sees in the books.

Jose also saw improvements in his son:

I really liked the way that you would train us on how to expand our child's vocabulary like . . . What color is that? What is that object? What is that character doing? . . . and I believe that this is a better technique for children when sharing a book because it has really helped my son a lot. He knows his colors and where a certain object is in the book such as "above or below".

Preservice Teacher Interviews

Preservice teachers were also interviewed at the end of the program to find out what they learned from the experience. They identified many benefits from the service-learning opportunity. They shared how the program helped them address misconceptions they held

and helped them realize their ability to be agents of change.

Addressing misconceptions. Two preservice teachers explained how participation in the program helped them address misconceptions. One native Spanish speaking student explained:

The families were not what I expected when I walked in. I was concerned that the families were not going to want to be part of the program and were not going to cooperate as much as they did. At first I was basing my thoughts off my previous experiences with families because I was always used to seeing the mom as, the leader of the child's education. Boy... was I wrong. There were fathers, grandparents, neighbors, uncles and even baby sitters involved in the child's education. This was amazing to see! At the end, the parents or guardians were very understanding and accepting of all we did during the program.

Another preservice teacher shared about her expectations:

I had originally expected the parents to be hesitant and "disapproving" of the program as a whole. But, the more that I worked with them, the more that I could tell that they were learning and becoming involved in their child's reading. The parents were very cooperative and seemed genuinely interested in encouraging their children with the CAR strategy and 1,2,3 strategy while reading, which was great to see.

Becoming agents of change. One of the native Spanish speaking preservice teachers told how participation in the program helped her understand her ability to be an agent of change:

Before this program started, I was nervous working with the child's parents or guardian as well as with young children. Though, as the weeks went by, I became less nervous and eager to help those families. They reminded of my own family when I was growing up. I came from a very humble Mexican family that had no support while we were in elementary education. Due to my parents' deficiency in the English language they never were part of our education other than during conferences. I did not have any older cousins or aunts/uncles around to share a book with. My parents' excuse would be that they did not know English. For that reason, I saw this opportunity as an opportunity to change that for many families. I do not want other children to grow up feeling helpless due to their parents' background education.

Another participant shared:

I learned that just in ten weeks we helped influence the lives of families because not only did we reinforce how to share a book with their child but, we gave them an opportunity to spend time with their child for 15 minutes of their day. In other words, if we did that in ten weeks, what can I do in a lifetime of teaching high-need students? I have always wanted to be part of a community that helps those in need and this experience has helped me get closer to my goal.

Limitations

There are several limitations to this study that require further research. This study included only a small number of preservice teachers. There was also a relatively small

number of children and families of promise involved. Also, attendance varied with families. The post assessment videos were taken with the same parent or caregiver as the initial videos to ensure consistency. However, sometimes children were represented by a different parent, childcare provider, or relative during the program. Therefore, some parents or caregivers received less training than others.

Further research is needed to see if the positive effects program participation had on preservice teachers, children, and families remains over time. Also, it would be valuable to see if this program would be equally effective for different and larger populations of preservice teachers, children, and families.

Conclusion

The goals of this study were to provide: training to encourage literacy interactions between children and families of promise, experiences in service learning to preservice teachers working with families and children of promise, and opportunities to increase the expressive language skills of the young children involved in this study. These objectives were met through the weekly dialogic reading program set up for preschool parents and caregivers. This service-learning partnership provided powerful field experiences for the preservice teachers involved. Preservice teachers were provided regular interactions with children and families of promise. This resulted in an increased understanding of children and families of promise, a sense of preservice teacher empowerment, and helped preservice teachers realize their potential to be change agents in the lives of children and families. Preservice teachers also learned to view and appreciate being bilingual as an asset rather than a “risk” factor. The program helped parents gain a deeper relationship with their children, empowered parents and caregivers to be literacy models and teachers for their children, and affected the way that parents and caregivers interact with their children. Children whose parents or caregivers attended the dialogic reading training attempted and acquired significantly more words than children whose families did not receive training.

Service-learning experiences have the potential of providing powerful and varied experiences for preservice teachers. This program provided an effective service-learning experience for all involved. Parents and caregivers received training. Children received increased interactions with their parents or caregivers. And, preservice teachers received invaluable experiences with children and families of promise. This program provides an example of the reciprocal nature of service-learning including benefits both for the community served and the preservice teachers serving.

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