

The Parents' Academy: A Program for Supporting Caregivers in Fostering Literacy Skills

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Abstract

This article describes a program for supporting parents and caregivers of K-4 students at an urban university's charter school. To create this program, university faculty and school administrators developed a series of workshops to foster school-home literacy connections. Information about surveys, meetings and program implementation are provided in a grounded theoretical framework. An emphasis is given to parents' role construction and self-efficacy related to their involvement in the education of their children.

Universities and schools can serve as mutually accessible resources for each other when they form partnerships. Both institutions play a major part in preparing young people for productive societal roles. Schools provide universities with future students; school-university partnerships have the capability to promote higher education aspirations for children and their families. Partnership initiatives can improve the academic, behavioral, social, and emotional development of school students when collaborative planning between university and school staff includes a blend of expertise from both university and school personnel. In addition, partnerships frequently lead to collaboration with local and regional community agencies. University students (preservice teachers and therapists and well as graduate and doctoral students) are afforded actual dynamic field experiences in which they gain first-hand knowledge of their discipline. School staff are provided with a supportive network of mentors and research expertise to advise their pedagogy and curricula. According to Noguera (2003), the importance of reciprocity and combining the strengths of both the university and the school are critical in bridging the gap between research and practice, creating a relationship of interdependence, and achieving their missions.

Widener University personnel and departments have taken active roles in supporting the Widener Partnership Charter School (WPCS) through consulting, fundraising, and outreach. There has been continuous involvement with parents through consultations and committees, but to date no work has been done to provide workshops initiated by the university to help parents with their children's school-related achievement while at home. University-school partnerships must include parents in a participatory role in addressing achievement so that children explicitly receive the message that achieving at school is important for life, not just for school. In order to establish an interdependent relationship among parents, school, and university, five scheduled "Parents' Academy" sessions were designed to foster and enhance parents' engagement with their children's academic and literacy growth.

The benefits of school and family partnerships are well documented (Lefever-Davis, Johnson, and Pearman 2007; McLaughlin and Black-Hawkins 2007; Walkington 2007). Parents play a powerful role in their children's literacy development and research indicates their willingness to help their children with reading and writing at home (Power 1992). Although the link between teacher and parent partnerships is understood, less is known about the relationship between university programming and parent involvement. Unfortunately, despite the importance of university-parent partnerships, limited data exists to guide this process.

Why Parent Involvement Is Important

Fifty years ago, the War on Poverty Act focused on early childhood programs which enhanced the development of economically and socially disadvantaged children through comprehensive educational, health, and family services (Cook, Klein, and Tessier 2004). The Head Start Program was a result of this act. Head Start and other early education programs funded at this time were targeted to serve poor inner-city children. Sustained effect studies of Head Start participants as well as participants of recognized variations of the program revealed the positive effects of such programs on academic achievement and employment status (Pungello, Campbell, and Barnett 2006). However, the War on Poverty has not been won. Many American families live in poverty today. According to the United States Census Bureau, figures for 2008 reveal that 39.8 million people live in poverty. Less than 9 percent of those in poverty are White; 23.2 percent are Hispanic; and 24.7 percent are African American.

Hart and Risley (1995, 46) produced a seminal study that compared the language-centered interactions across socioeconomic groups of professional, middle-class, and welfare families. The study focused on conversations between parents and preschool children that took place within the homes for each of the three groups. It was found that a significant evaluative aspect in childcare settings is the amount of talk that occurs between children and their caregivers. The researchers themselves stated that they "were astonished at the differences the data revealed." Differences were identified in language style and sociability across the three groups. The volume and quality of language exchanged in professional homes was higher than that in middle-class homes and significantly higher than that in welfare homes. Equalizing children's early experiences and expressive and receptive language transactions seems crucial to equalizing their readiness for school-based learning.

In current times, the education of young children has taken on a multidimensional perspective. "A paradigm shift toward shared community accountability for children's school readiness has prompted increased collaboration among local agencies and organizations" (Winter and Kelley 2008). The collaboration that exists in the university-charter school partnership described here has a multidimensional perspective. Home-school connections are valued, as evidenced in both the Parent/Caregiver Council and the Parents' Academy. The Parent/Caregiver Council is a group of actively involved parents, school administrators, and teachers who are

committed to raising funds for field trips, assemblies, book fairs, and other educationally related projects for the school.

University-school connections represent a variety of services that provide academic and social support for families. University-based service organizations and honor councils provide funds, materials and volunteer hours to assist families. Local agencies, including the regional literacy council and the mayor's office, have been brought aboard to help with adult literacy and employment information. According to the school's principal, parents have increasingly availed themselves of the support offered by local agencies. These parents demonstrate an increased comfort level by going to the school for a variety of reasons.

Research on effective schools has shown the importance of developing strong home-school connections and demonstrates the importance of schools' and teachers' efforts to involve family and community members in children's education (Sheldon and VanVoorhis 2004; Taylor et al. 2000; Zellman & Watterman 1998). In particular, research identified the positive correlations between parent involvement and academic achievement of students, including teacher ratings of school competence; students' grades; achievement test scores; lower rates of retention in grade; lower dropout rates; higher on-time graduation rates; and higher rates of participation in advanced courses (Anderson and Minke 2007; Hoover-Dempsey et al. 2005). Parents' Academy seeks to foster meaningful home-school connections while engaging parents in interactive literacy activities to foster their children's academic achievement.

School-based learning builds on home-based and other preschool learning situations. As children transition from home to school, they apply their language styles and skills to classroom contexts. Proficiency of language is gained when children are engaged learners in language-enriched classrooms in which they are read to by adults, spend daily uninterrupted time independently reading, and respond orally and in writing to both texts and authentic learning experience (Allington 2008).

Acquiring language proficiency does not start and stop in the classroom. The context of the home and the child's interaction with family members remains a critical piece in fostering literacy growth throughout the school years. Families help children construct meaning about everything involved in their daily lives. Participation in interactive home literacy activities helps children to practice language and social skills. Such activities should be enjoyed and encouraged in the home.

History of a University-School Partnered Charter School

The WPCS is the first university-based charter school in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. Established in 2006, the school is located adjacent to the university campus. During the initial year, the school served only kindergarten and first grade

children. In each subsequent school year a grade was added. Currently in its fourth year of operation, the school has an enrollment of 250 students from kindergarten through fourth grade. The school's charter is based on a kindergarten through fifth grade structure. The university administration and faculty are committed to making the charter school a central component of a service-oriented partnership with the urban community. The charter school serves the families of the local public school district.

The School of Human Service Professions (which includes the academic units for Education, Social Work, Clinical Psychology, and Physical Therapy) has been especially active in assisting with issues and challenges faced by the school's students, their families, and the faculty. For example, before the school opened, Education, Social Work, and Psychology faculty participated in screenings of children about to enter kindergarten. Children were administered readiness tests and parents were consulted about family/life issues that could impact the students' progress in school. Each area of the SHSP faculty is a part of the Parents' Academy. Social work and Psychology faculty and students contribute to the well-being of students and their families on a regular basis and are a welcome presence in the school. They address issues from caregiving to unemployment and routinely assist families as needed.

Graduate students of SHSP provide a range of support services to WPCS children and their families as part of their course work at Widener. Professors guide the students' interactions and recommendations to the families. Additionally, many facilities at the university, such as the library, art gallery, and Science Teacher Center, are available to the students of WPCS. Since WPCS is adjacent to the university, walking field trips to these facilities is an easy means of extending learning experiences for the children. The university also supports WPCS through the development office, which engages in corporate, foundation, and government fundraising efforts for the school.

The university has a strong commitment to service in the urban community in which it is located. Service-learning classes are commonly offered to both undergraduate and graduate students from across the disciplines. Effective partnerships between schools, universities, and parents are a vital part of community growth. In today's increasingly challenging social and economic environment, it is important that universities reach out to the community in an effort to build social capital (Buys and Burnsnall 2007). Community engagement is a central mission of the university and Widener partnership goals are on par with university research and teaching expectations.

Designated a third-class city, the metropolitan area in which the university and the charter school are located has a population of nearly 40,000 residents; the majority of the residents are African American (75 percent) and there is a 5 percent Hispanic population. The median income is \$23,700 per household.

The city's school district has been recognized as an underachieving district, according to scores on state-mandated tests for several consecutive years. Under the federal No

Child Left Behind law, students attending a Title I school designated as “in need of improvement” have the right to attend a higher performing school in the district.

The mission of the WPCS is to develop K-5 students with the behaviors, task commitment, and creativity to succeed in the current educational environment. The student-centered environment of the school holds high academic and behavioral standards for all students. In addition, parents and caregivers are considered equal partners with the school in the education of their children. Curricular goals and objectives are aligned with state academic standards. Core areas of reading/language arts, math, science, and social studies are taught and enhanced through interdisciplinary themes. Students participate weekly in art, music, drama, physical education, and Spanish classes. Field trips and assemblies are considered worthy learning opportunities for students’ engagement with new knowledge sources as well as response activities in their class work as follow-up to the experiences.

Now in its fourth year, WPCS is a thriving learning environment for both elementary and university students. The elementary students are immersed in a literate environment that integrates curricula through themes and incorporates technology routinely in instruction. Smartboards, computers, books, word walls, and writing materials are everywhere in attractive, spacious classrooms. The school’s library contains a vast supply of new and time-honored books in a very inviting setting.

University students have frequent access to WPCS through required field experience for methodology courses, service-learning course projects, observational opportunities and even volunteerism. Undergraduate and graduate students increase their knowledge of educational and social issues pertinent to an urban school during their site visits. They continue to process their own learning through classroom discourse that follows the visits and in research papers and other written assignments related to their studies.

The importance of the current educational environment cannot be understated; however, the ultimate goal of the university-school partnership is to enable students to become self-motivated, competent, and lifelong learners. As they mature into young adults and residents of the city, students educated at WPCS will have the capabilities to contribute to the vitality of the region because of the content and dispositions they learn at WPCS.

Planning the Literacy Sessions

Education faculty of the university’s School of Human Service Professions have participated on a curriculum committee for WPCS since the school’s inception. The topic of working more closely with parents evolved from one of the curriculum meetings focused on a discussion about literacy instruction. It was decided that a group should convene to define a purpose and an agenda for a series of workshops for parents.

Planning began a year before the first Parents’ Academy session would take place. The principal, the Dean of the School of Human Service Professions, the Associate Dean of

the Center for Education and a member of the reading faculty met to discuss the issues of generating more parent involvement, creating a comfortable atmosphere for the interaction between presenters and parents, and enabling WPCS parents to foster a more language-rich culture in their homes.

As the discussion during the initial planning meeting progressed, it was decided to survey parents and WPCS teachers. As major stakeholders in this endeavor, their input would be important to creating a purposeful agenda for the upcoming sessions. A survey was drafted and the principal disseminated the survey in a timely manner. Once the surveys were returned, the professors who would serve as the major presenters of the literacy workshops began to meet regularly to prepare the format of sessions, order materials, and do myriad other tasks related to the preparation of the Parents' Academy. The presenters determined the practical needs for each session: do what is best to meet the needs of familial support by providing basic supplies for use at home, and having incentives for parents to return to subsequent sessions. They also met with representatives from publishing companies to determine which materials would be family-friendly as well as useful for demonstrations throughout the workshops. The idea was that the presenters would model and discuss the materials used during the session and then give those materials to the parents to take home. Basic school supplies as well as books, magazines, writing materials, and reference materials were ordered.

The WPCS principal and the presenters met in person (and over several telephone and email messages) to determine dates for conducting the sessions at the school. Dates were selected to span the school year that would not conflict with other school events. The SHSP Dean was kept apprised of each planning stage with copied email messages or memoranda mailed to him.

The presenters decided which sessions they would co-present, present individually, or present with others. These decisions were based on the professors' foundational knowledge of best practices in each planned session's topical areas. They also brainstormed ideas for documenting the events of each session and scheduling time to share reflections about the expected and actual outcome for each of the sessions.

Generally, the sessions are designed to begin with a whole-group activity which allows the parents to discuss concerns they have about any issues that may impact their interactions with their children while helping them with learning-related matters. Having the parents talk with others at their tables and then share as a whole group creates a venue for honoring their concerns, providing generalizable feedback, and assessing needs that might be addressed in subsequent sessions. During some sessions, the parents will be divided into two groups so that those who have children in kindergarten and first grade will work with one presenter, and those with children in grades two through four will work with the other presenter. The whole group will convene for the conclusion of each session for summative comments as well as for time for socializing.

Since we have just begun the sessions for the Parents' Academy, we hope to revisit this topic in a later publication to report on the specific and generalizable results of our work with parents.

Survey Results

During the 2008–2009 school year, teachers and parents were surveyed to generate information about their perception of need for literacy workshops for parents. The surveys for the two groups were similar in that they asked which topics were deemed most needed. The surveys also asked about logistical concerns for providing the workshops. The teachers' survey asked for ideas to encourage parents/caregivers to attend the sessions, and how the teachers would be willing to participate in the sessions.

Sixteen teachers responded to the survey: two from each grade level (K-3) and six from the special subject areas. The teachers felt that parents would be encouraged to attend if food and childcare were available during the sessions. Providing resources and materials for parents to keep and use at home with their children was also a priority recommendation of the teachers. Teachers expressed an interest in attending the sessions and doing connected follow-up work with students in their classes. Only a few teachers expressed an interest in sharing information with parents during the Parents' Academy.

Seventy-five responses were received from the parents of the 200 children attending the school at that time. Parents expressed a strong interest in the topics of writing/spelling and homework help. These results were a clear indication that parents needed and valued literacy support at home. Logistically, parents requested that the one-hour sessions start at six o'clock in the evening. This early evening start time would allow parents to check on children's arrival home from school and have a meal together before attending the session. At the conclusion of the one-hour session, parents and caregivers could then return home in time to take care of their families' bedtime routines and preparations for the start of the next day.

First Year Goals

Increased time involved with literacy activities, stronger motivation to read and write, and quality language-centered interactions between children and adults through everyday parenting are certainly desired outcomes of the Parents' Academy. However, each of these outcomes is less important than establishing strong, committed parent involvement as the essence of our work with parents. Rather than promote a one-dimensional perspective such as "how to help your children with reading," we hope to incorporate a multi-dimensional perspective that gives parents the fortitude to believe in themselves as viable adults and critical players in their children's development of lifelong literacy.

In order to create a firm and lasting foundation, we are focusing on psychosocial aspects that will effect sustainable change for the families: developing parents' sense of role construction, increasing parents and caregivers' feelings of self-efficacy, increasing the adults' ability to accept support from others, and improving the adults' views of their own participation on behalf of their children's academic and life achievements. Each of the four building blocks of the foundation is discussed in the following sections.

Role Construction

Parent participation can be enhanced through the development of parental role construction. Parental role construction includes a sense of personal or shared responsibility for the child's educational outcomes and concomitant beliefs about whether one should be engaged in supporting their child's learning and academic growth. Several factors influence parents' role construction for involvement, including parents' beliefs about how children develop, what parents should do to rear their children effectively, and what parents should do at home to help children succeed in school (Hoover-Dempsey et al. 2005).

Parents with strong role construction involve themselves in their children's academic lives. Hoover-Dempsey et al. (2005) identify these parents as those who believe they should be involved, believe their involvement will make a positive difference, and perceive and accept invitations to be involved in their children's academic lives. This characteristic is a powerful motivator of parents' involvement in their children's education. Role construction is also an attribute that can be developed. Often, urban parents who participate in workshops to train them in at-home literacy practices possess weak role construction.

Throughout the year-long literacy series of the Parents' Academy, parents are involved in programs to promote active and positive literacy engagement with their children while at the same time increasing role construction and partnership expectations. One of the ways we hope to accomplish this is to open each session with an activity that allows parents to engage with each other in shared reflection, or to self-reflect, about the issues they deal with that impact their families. Listening to and acknowledging their concerns should honor the realistic life situations they face. It should also help establish a common ground for our own interaction and partnership with the WPCS parents rather than create a wall separating experts from non-experts.

Role construction is also shaped by expectations of parents related to schooling. Schema theory illustrates how background knowledge and experience shape our views and actions (Anderson and Pearson 1984; Bransford et al. 1980). Parents with weak role construction often experienced difficulty themselves learning. It is not surprising then that like other inner-city parents, WPCS parents would have weak role construction and tend to be uninvolved in their children's academic lives. At the same time role construction is subject to social influence and therefore is fluid and adaptable. Parents' Academy serves as the impetus to foster parent involvement

through the development of parents' role construction. Parents' Academy participants will engage in positive and ongoing home and school dialogue and school community activities to foster parent awareness and long-term involvement.

Self-efficacy

Like role construction, self-efficacy plays a significant role in the decisions parents make about the goals they choose to pursue and the effort and persistence they are willing to exert in working toward the accomplishment of those goals. Self-efficacy theory suggests that parents make their decisions about involvement in part by thinking about the outcomes likely to follow their actions (Morris and Taylor 1995). Parental sense of efficacy for helping the child succeed in school includes the belief that personal actions will help the child learn. Many WPCS parents experienced limited academic success themselves and consequently find it difficult to picture themselves possessing the ability to facilitate change and help their children. The Parents' Academy develops parents' views of themselves as agents of change and invigorates their sense of importance and necessity in the academic lives of their children. Like parental role construction, self-efficacy is socially constructed and grounded in personal experience, vicarious experiences, and verbal persuasion. Practice is important in developing self-efficacy. Throughout the year-long literacy series, Parents' Academy participants engage in positive literacy experiences that utilize modeling and scaffolding to support parents to successfully face individual academic successes and challenges.

Ability to Accept Support from Others

Positive school staff attitudes toward students' families and communities are particularly important to parental empowerment and involvement (Hoover-Dempsey et al. 2005). This inclusive attitude emanates from the school principal's practice and is essential in developing, supporting, and maintaining a welcoming climate. Regular classroom visits and consistent public advocacy for school improvement are essential and well-tended responsibilities that foster a positive school climate. WPCS's principal embodies these attributes. Consequently, after four years, parents have begun to accept school-initiated support and to communicate more regularly regarding student and personal needs.

When school staff reach out to parents, it seems to be the first step in forming a partnership regarding students' achievement. Establishing a welcoming climate becomes a reality when parents trust that the school is with them and not against them. Initiating the Parents' Academy at WPCS is also a trust-building enterprise. Parents will need to accept the support being offered to them by university rather than school personnel. Fortunately, the first steps of ensuring the parents' ability to accept others forged by the principal and teachers has prepared the way for conducting literacy workshops with the parents.

Parent/Caregiver Participation on Behalf of Children's Achievements

Parents from this disadvantaged socioeconomic community are interested in their children's literacy learning. Preliminary data collected during the first year of this program, as well as feedback from participating parents, identify a willingness of these caregivers to support their children through home activities and school involvement. Initial parent interviews indicated that participating parents hoped to become "better equipped to assist children at home" and "to do what has to be done" to allow their children "to continue their education through the 12th grade." Parents consistently attended and participated in the workshops. In total, five sessions were held during the 2009–2010 academic year. As partners, the university and charter school are in the planning stages for this program for year two.

Research on parent involvement demonstrates a link between parent involvement and schooling outcomes (Marschall 2006). Therefore, parents with children at Widener Partnership Charter School must participate in the education of their children and the development of the school community. While attendance at all Parents' Academy workshops are not mandated, parents must select from a variety of options offered during the academic year and remain active partners with the school in educating their child.

Initial findings from parent interviews indicate increased literacy interactions between these caregivers and their children and overall increased parent/caregiver participation in their education. Parent comments indicated that these sessions "introduced literacy games and activities that provided the techniques needed" to help their children. Participants also believed that these sessions helped them develop an understanding of the role they played in their children's literacy development and success. While only preliminary analysis of Parents' Academy data has been conducted, it is clear that these caregivers understand that "school does not stop at 3:30" and that as parents they remain "the beginning, middle, and end for their child so they must be involved."

Conclusion

The partnership between the university and the charter school is meaningful in several ways. First, it has improved the quality of urban elementary education, because of the resources available through the university. Literacy and technological resources, the use of university facilities, and the shared expertise of university and school personnel have each played a role in providing WPCS students with a unique educational advantage when compared to other public school children in the same city.

Second, the partnership has helped to enhance the professional development of the charter school's teachers through graduate courses as well as the on-site training they received from (1) observing the professors and university students as they engaged with the elementary students and with each other, and (2) from participating in individual or group meetings with university personnel on issues involving the students and/or their families. Teachers have had the opportunity to work with experienced educators from the university and with community leaders. Preservice teachers

(graduate and doctoral students in education) have had the opportunity to see the dynamic, cascading effects of urban life on education and the impact that school interventions can have on student achievement.

Third, immersion of teachers and faculty in the community in which the children and their families live has created advantages for both families and school staff. The school is not a standalone entity; it is now connected to the community through families, agencies, businesses, and of course, the university. During the four-year existence of WPCS, strong collaborations have become evident between the school and the university as well as between the school and community agencies/resources.

Fourth, the Parents' Academy has deeply immersed faculty from the School of Human Service Professions in communication with both families and teachers at WPCS, as well as with each other. It has also informed us about the ongoing nature of the work that we must continue to do to scaffold support for WPCS children and their families. Providing support for inner-city parents in role construction, self-efficacy, accepting support from others, and participating in home-school events to enhance their children's academic and life achievements has the potential to revitalize families and the community at large.

Helping parents to partner with their children in learning is one of the main goals of the university-school partnership and the Parents' Academy.

The university-school partnership and the Parents' Academy are systemic structures to provide hope for inner-city families and enhance the promise the WPCS children will have as adults to make a difference in their community and in the world. Helping parents to partner with their children in learning is a powerful way to promote positive change for families that may otherwise remain powerless.

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