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Personal Transformations: Changes in Self & Literacy Engagement through Even Start Family Literacy Program Participation

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Introduction and Background

Illiteracy is a major social dilemma facing countries in the developed and under-developed world. The problem has far-reaching implications as it threatens the economic and social vitality of a country. Within this globalized world, a country's competitiveness depends on the resources within that country and, in particular on its social and human capital. Indeed, the human capital indicators of a country, particularly, those based on literacy rates affect the country's labor productivity and (GDP) Gross Domestic Product (Coulombe, Tremblay & Marchland, 2004). Elish-Piper (2007) draws attention to the increasing expectations for adult literacy in the United States over the last century, particularly as it relates to one's status, employment and ultimate productivity.

In an effort to address these challenges, the United States primarily through the Department of Education, administers various programs related to for combating societal problems such as illiteracy. One such publicly funded program is the Even Start Family Literacy Program. Administered by the Office of Elementary and Secondary Education, the Even Start Program, according to The Department of Education (2007), "offers grants to support local family literacy projects that integrate early childhood education, adult literacy, parenting education, and interactive parent and child activities for low income families" (§ 2). The Department of Education offers considerable funding and supports the program's aims of improving parents' literacy/basic education while helping them engage fully in educating their children towards helping them attain their full potential as learners.

Intended for a disadvantaged population, Even Start focuses on four key components: (a) early childhood education, (b) parenting education, (c) adult education, and (d) parent-child joint literacy activities, known as Parent and Child Together Time (PACT). McKee and Rhett (1995) indicate that "Even Start programs offer at-risk children and their families a chance to 'start even' with other families" (pp.155-156). They further catalog objectives of the Even Start Program as "three interrelated goals: (1)to help parents become full partners in the education of their children; (2) to assist children in reaching their full potential as learners; and (3) to provide literacy training for their parents" (McKee & Rhett, 1995, pp. 157-158).

Purpose & Significance of Study

The purpose of this study was to examine how family participation in Even Start programs contributes to family literacy engagement and individual self-development. It sought to understand how parental participation in the program influences their reading behaviors and other literacy practices, as well as highlight observed changes and transformations in their personal development and in their parenting practices. This study specifically sought to answer the primary research question, "How does participation in the Even Start Family Literacy program contribute to individual transformation and family engagement in literacy practices?"

This study is significant with implications to theory, practice and policy specific to family literacy. The first item of significance relates to the development of family engagement and literacy practices on the part of parents who participate in the Even Start Program and the second relates to the observed or notable changes in their personal development and parental practices.

Participation in Even Start programs involves planned activities and efforts that one expects to influence family literacy practices positively. On the other hand, an exploration on the influence of participation in an Even Start program on a parent's self-concept and self-efficacy is crucial as it ultimately affects the entire family unit. This study provides us with an opportunity to do what King and Wright (2003) see as enabling "our field to benefit from careful examination of the changes learners experience and value"(p. 231).

On a theoretical and yet practical note, the study is significant as it examines how family participation in Even Start contributes to changes in self and family engagement in literacy practices and development. This is important as it may provide an inside look on this process of development and, therefore, provides clues for practitioners and researchers in the field, contributing to existing literature available on the issue. It is also significant as the results of the study make possible suggestions for further research. The study highlights implications related to program planning and facilitation and instructional strategies.

It also underscores implications related to program assessment as it accentuates outcomes that may or may not be explicit to the program's intended goals. On a policy level, the study is significant as it may contribute to a deeper understanding and appreciation for the way in which parents experience the program based on current regulations and structures. This can have implications for policy at the program, district, and national/government level.

Methodology

Using a qualitative research design, this study sought to identify, document, and examine the influence of the Even Start program in personal transformations and changes in literacy and family engagement on the participation of parents in an Even Start program.

The sample was selected primarily based on two criteria: English Language proficiency and length of enrolment and participation in the Even Start program. Each participant was enrolled for no less than 6 months and the adult instructor assisted in selection; based on my inability to speak Spanish, she sought to select students who possessed a fair command of the English Language in order to accommodate reasonable communication between the participants and myself as the researcher. Since the purpose of the study was to explore the transformations resulting from participation in the Even Start Program, a reasonable participation time was not only prudent but also necessary. The selected sample for this pilot study consisted of two instructors one for the adult education program and the other, an early childhood education instructor and eight enrolled parents. All participants were females from Mexico who all self-identified as Hispanic

The center was selected as it hosted the Even Start program (comprehensive, due to Parent and Child Together Time [PACT] component) from which I wanted to select participants to interview.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data for this qualitative study were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews. Questions were open-ended and participants were allowed to express themselves on other matters related to the questions/subject as they saw fit. The parents' questions focused on their educational background as well as on areas related to self-transformation, while the instructors' questions focused on demographic data, their educational backgrounds, as well as their

perceptions related to the parents' transformations. For this study, the teacher for the adult component and the teacher for the child component were interviewed to gain insight into their perceptions about the program and the transformations and personal development experienced by the parents.

In terms of analysis of the data, the thematic analysis approach was useful as it assisted in identifying recurring themes throughout the data. Using this analytic approach, the process resulted in the identification of several overarching themes. It enabled me to maintain focus on the content of the narratives presented by the participants and each narrative was thematically analyzed and presented under major themes, as they were found recurring in the transcripts.

Findings

Reflecting on the research question that asks how family participation in Even Start programs contributes to family literacy engagement and individual self-development, the findings are classified according to personal transformations occurring within several themes. These themes include parenting skills development, critical thinking skills, literacy practices, English communication skills and self-esteem/confidence/self-efficacy and critical thinking skills. Supplementary changes and findings of importance and interest relate primarily to the supportive environment and are classified under the theme environmental support for learning.

Discussion and Implications

Realizing the tremendous worth of the Even Start program relating to these self-changes identified in this preliminary study, there are significant implications for practitioners in the field of Adult Basic Education, Family Literacy and Early Childhood Education. Their role is significant because of the influence they have on the participants. The findings of the study suggest that the teachers become role models for the parents and are a key source of support for them. Practitioners should also recognize the value of their work on the participants in terms of their personal and professional development. As instructors, there is an inherent authoritative and expert power over their students, thus highlighting the magnitude of their span of influence. This is especially important for the impact on the family unit as well as the community in general. One notable element of the program is the PACT component, and practitioners can effectively use the period effectively to deliver important messages to the participants as it relates to family engagement, literacy practices and even social responsibility. Practitioners are influential and can assist these marginalized women to negotiate their lives within power structures in their environments. They can also help these families become more critically aware of the social contexts that characterize their lives.

The findings also suggest that since the program positively influences this segment of the population, it is useful for policy makers to see the value of the program and continue to provide support its sustenance, further growth and development. This would greatly affect the community and lead to an overall improvement in the standard of living for that often-disadvantaged group. Focusing attention on this program, reducing obstacles to participation by increasing accessibility could improve, for example, the educational level of attainment, graduation rates, and employability resulting in citizens that are more productive.

Researchers too, recognizing the great value of the program, could focus further research on examining (in detail) the barriers to participation and especially as experienced by fathers. The majority of Even Start programs are utilized by women. It is also important to recognize that the influence of the program on the community and families could be far reaching if more fathers

were participating in the program. The context within which these families live and operate is challenging and complex, therefore research is fundamental in unveiling hegemonic structures that affect this population, and encouraging inclusivity.

In summary, the findings of this study indicate the need for high quality, interactive services for meeting the objectives of the Even Start Family Literacy Program from which parents and children benefit as well as the community as a whole.

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