

**Doctoral Student Research Briefs**

School of Education

Drexel University

**Parent Involvement in Early Childhood Education and its Impact on the Development of Early Language and Literacy Skills: An Exploration of one Head Start Program's Parent Involvement Model**

by

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# **Parent Involvement in Early Childhood Education and its Impact on the Development of Early Language and Literacy Skills: An Exploration of one Head Start Program's Parent Involvement Model**

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## **Abstract**

This qualitative study explored one specific Head Start program's parent involvement practices and the impact it has on preschool children's early language and literacy development. Findings revealed that this program utilizes a variety of methods to enhance parent involvement, however, it also identified that there are a variety of challenges facing this program when it comes to implementing best practices and attempting to create a reciprocal parent-teacher relationship.

## **Aim**

The purpose of this basic interpretive study was to explore one Head Start center's parent involvement practices to understand: Are parents learning from the information they are given? Are they utilizing the center's information and resources? Do parents believe that they are fostering early language and literacy skills in the home? By studying the essential components of the parent involvement model, this research sought to identify the parent involvement practices that contribute to the development of literacy and language acquisition in early childhood.

## **Problem**

A universal problem in our nation is the need to ensure that all children are provided the resources and environment to develop the early language and literacy skills that are needed to succeed.

Prior research has shown that the earlier parents become involved in their child's literacy practices, the more profound the results, as well as the longer-lasting the effects (Mullis, Mullis, Cornille, Ritchson, & Sullender, 2004). Furthermore, research has found that there is an overwhelming connection between literary resources in the home and the development of children's reading skills (Sheldon, 2009). Parental involvement in early childhood education is a significant factor in the development of language and literacy skills prior to entering school (Melhuish & Phan, 2008). Both participation in preschool-based activities and regular communication between families and teachers are related to young children's outcomes (Weiss, Caspe, & Lopez, 2006). Parent involvement in early childhood continues to positively affect a

child's academic achievement well into primary school, secondary school and even high school (Sanders and Sheldon, 2009).

### **Methods**

Qualitative research methods were utilized for this basis interpretive study in order to analyze the practices (e.g. parent communication, distribution of resources, and parent education) of one early childhood center over a period of time. Qualitative methods were appropriate for this study because they allowed the researcher to develop relationships with the participants through in-depth interviewing and observations (at the center and their homes) during the research timeframe (Creswell, 2014).

The triangulated methods used for this study were one-on-one interviews with administrators, teachers, and parents/families, field observations of home visits and parent workshops, and a survey distributed to parents/families. Content analysis and pattern coding were used to analyze the data and identify trends, patterns, and relationships.

### **Research Findings**

The data demonstrated that parents rely heavily on the program to teach them strategies and activities that can be used to engage in learning at home. The workshops proved to be the most valuable parent involvement piece of the program, however, attendance was very low with only about 12%-20% of parents attending.

Additionally, the research shed light on the challenges teachers and administrators face, both foreseen and unforeseen, when attempting to involve and educate parents. Lastly, the research revealed the significance of using home visits to establish relationships with and educate parents. Specifically, the role of fathers during home visits and the opportunity that these visits afforded teachers to engage with fathers.

### **Discussion**

This study evidenced that the foundation of this program revolves around building relationships with families that support their overall well-being, and the need to create ongoing learning and development for parents and families. This program emphasizes the importance of educating, forming relationships with, and supporting families, however, there are numerous challenges this program faces, most noticeably, communicating with and educating parents from diverse cultural and educational backgrounds.

The following conclusions emerged from the data:

- Teachers face significant challenges (both foreseen and unforeseen) when trying to involve and educate parents: language barriers, cultural differences, education level of parent, space to hold events, scheduling, and childcare
- The hands-on approach of the workshops with opportunities for rich discussions, adaptable and usable resources offered to parents, and inclusion of a bilingual facilitator proved to be the most effective way to educate and involve parents
- Conducting home visits provided teachers with an opportunity to engage with fathers and incorporate them into discussions regarding their child's learning and development
- A collaborative approach to goal-setting would prove to further engage and educate parents

### **Research Implications**

Information from this study provided a greater understanding of the value of using a variety of parent involvement methods, including hands-on learning through the use of workshops, to meet the needs of diverse families. Additionally, this research provided recommendations to the program to further improve their parent involvement approach, such as utilizing a strength-based approach, building on opportunities to involve fathers, and exploring the use of technology to communicate with families. The ultimate goal is for this program to educate teachers to best meet the needs of their diverse families through meaningful professional development opportunities' and nontraditional methods of communication. Lastly, long-term research studies that work to identify how schools can sustain the parent involvement efforts of early childhood programs would benefit students as they progress through formal schooling.

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### **About the Author:**

Lindsay Koch is a third year EdD student with research interests focusing on early literacy and language development. Before entering the EdD program, she was a reading specialist (K-5), and prior to that a classroom teacher. Lindsay has two Bachelor's degrees in Elementary Education and Early Childhood Education. While teaching, she pursued a Master's degree in Reading/Writing/Literacy from the University of Pennsylvania. Currently, Lindsay works as an adjunct professor of Early Childhood Education at Lebanon Valley College.