

A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF THE
EVEN START FAMILY LITERACY PROGRAM

by

Sarah Ruth

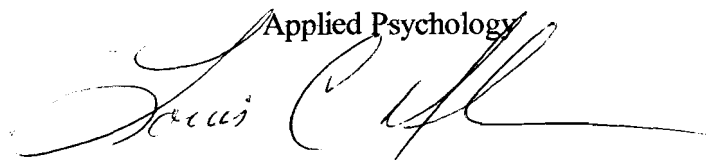
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Dr. Lou Milanesi
Research Advisor

The Graduate School
University of Wisconsin-Stout

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The Graduate School
University of Wisconsin Stout
Menomonie, WI 54871

Author: Ruth, Sarah M.

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ABSTRACT

The ADVOCAP Even Start Family Literacy Program is a program which provides participating families with an integrated program of early childhood education, adult basic education, English as a second language, parenting education, and interactive literacy activities between parents and their children. As required by the stipulations in the Even Start Family Literacy Grant, they are required to have a local evaluator monitor the program and report to the state of Wisconsin every year. The current evaluations that are done are strictly quantitative in nature and are outcome derived based upon the requirements of established core indicators. Recommendations for improvement of the program are derived from outcome data. A qualitative study which interviews participants would be beneficial to the program. The results of the study

would allow insight into strength and weakness areas as well as guide the improvements of shortcomings detailed in the local evaluation.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

ADVOCAP is a community action agency serving the people and communities of Fond du Lac, Green Lake, and Winnebago counties in Wisconsin. ADVOCAP has a large Literacy Services Department in which the Even Start program is a part. Even Start is a family literacy program which provides educational activities that involve the parents and children together. The program invites parents to become partners in their children's education while allowing both parents and children to reach their full potential. The purpose of Even Start is to integrate early childhood education with adult literacy instruction. Even Start recognizes that parents are their child's first teacher.

The Even Start program would not exist without its principal partners and their contributions. Barlow Park Elementary, Moraine Park Technical College (MPTC), Ripon College, and the University of Wisconsin Extension Services (UW-Extension) are the four key contributors. Other collaborators include the Job Center, Ripon Public Library, Princeton Public Library, Kingston Public Library, Markesan Public Library, Waupun Public Library, Green Lake Public Library, Berlin Public Library, CESA 6 and the Fond du Lac and Green Lake County Department of Health and Human Services.

- Barlow Park Elementary – Provides classroom space, offers family and education program opportunities, onsite supervision for scheduled activities and after school programs, provides child care, and custodial, administrative, and staffing support.
- Moraine Park Technical College (MPTC) – Provides and English Language Learner (ELL) and ABE instructors at the Barlow Park site, availability of the GOAL lab for

GED's in Berlin, and in service training, community outreach, technical training, and administrative support.

- Ripon College – Provides student volunteers that provide ESL tutoring instruction through the community ELL class.
- University of Wisconsin Extension Services (UW-Extension) – Provides family living agents that teach monthly parenting classes.

Statement of the problem

The Even Start Family Literacy program receives federal grant money. The stipulations of the grant require that a quantitative evaluation be done by a qualified individual once per year. Currently, the quantitative study indicates there is a consistent problem with certain segments of the client population. However it fails to provide information regarding why these shortfalls are observed. Further information is required to supplement existing evaluative procedures.

Purpose of the study

A qualitative study would be beneficial to help identify barriers the participants have to attendance and find a means for dealing or overcoming the barriers. As a way of continuous improvement, it is also necessary to receive feedback from the participants on how they feel the program is running and any comments or concerns they may have.

Questions, Objectives or Hypothesis

Acquiring the data from a structured qualitative survey would allow the researcher to help the organization. Their data could be analyzed using content analysis to isolate common themes regarding barriers to access. Once identified, these themes could be prioritized based on their observed frequency and appropriated remediation actions plans could be developed, piloted, and deployed. Currently, the Even Start Program does not have the means to effectively examine the data.

Justifications or Significance

The purpose of the study is to obtain qualitative data from the staff of the Even Start Program. The data was derived from a recent survey that they gave to the participants themselves in order to examine reasons for lack of attendance and the need for continuous improvement. Other open ended questions were asked to examine strengths and weaknesses of the program.

Definition of terms

ADVOCAP – is a community action agency serving the people of Fond du Lac, Green Lake, and Winnebago Counties.

MPTC – Moraine Park Technical College

UW-Extension – University of Wisconsin – Fond du Lac, Extension

CESA 6 – Cooperative Educational Service Agency

ELL – English Language Learners

ABE – Adult Basic Educatio

GED – General Educational Development

HSED – High School Equivalency Degree

SPSS – Statistical Package for Social Sciences

PACT – Parent and Child Together

Limitations of the study

Due to the small nature of the initial study, external validity may be limited to a similar site. The small sample size restricts the study to only descriptive statistics. Also, the low literacy skills and language barriers may have affected the way the participants answered the questionnaire.

Methodology

The methodology consists of a questionnaire that was given to all the participants of the Even Start program. The questionnaire was derived from the Even Start staff based on qualitative questions they wanted to find out about the program including reasons for lack of attendance and strengths and weaknesses of the program.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

The available research in family literacy contains three main categories. These include models of family literacy, importance of family literacy, and factors to success. This review of the literature will highlight each of the three categories and expand on important elements of literacy.

According to Nuckolls 1991, Models of family literacy are very diverse and can be home based, in schools, storefronts, prisons, libraries, and other facilities, but they all share the idea that parents are the key to their child's literacy and are qualified to pass on their skills in shared literacy experience. By pushing the limits of the parent's proficiency, we can also push the limits of the student's potential (Nuckolls, 1991).

Models of family literacy that will be discussed include intergenerational literacy, PACT, ESL, and Even Start.

Intergenerational literacy is a term used to describe new instructional programs that hope to increase the reading skills, attitudes, and behaviors of adults and children and thus break the cycle of low levels of literacy. To some, the term means someone who is older (a senior citizen, and adult, or a teen volunteer) reading to someone who is younger (a preschool or elementary school child). The reading pair may be composed of family members, or the persons may be unrelated. Those intergenerational programs that are called family literacy programs denote the close relationship between the adult and child (Jongsma et al., 1990).

The goal of intergenerational literacy is twofold. To teach the students how to fully participate in American life and to build and challenge knowledge that is already present in all families (Paratore, 2006). In order to accomplish this, children must be exposed at an early age and the child's parents' literacy skills are critical to their development. A child from a non-literate family is at a great disadvantage, which continues as the child goes through school (Glover & Mitchell, 1991). Intergenerational literacy is the only way to break the cycle and improve both child and parents education.

PACT (parents and children together) is an attempt to partner the child, parent, and teacher together in a safe environment where both can learn new skills and learn to play together effectively. The main goals of PACT are to improve the communication skills of parents and children and help the parents learn the value of interaction and play with their children (Glover & Mitchell, 1991). PACT is an important element of family literacy should be included in every program.

ESL is another element of family literacy. As the ESL population continues to grow, there is an increasing amount of literacy development skills needed in our country. The ESL participants are extremely eager to participate and experience exceptional benefits in terms of basic English literacy skills and enhanced employability (Fitzgerald, 1995).

One of the main forms of ESL is competency based education with includes basic survival skills include basic survival skill such as answering personal information questions, using public transportation, or obtaining food and shelter; or more academic or work related skills such as taking notes during an academic lecture, following directions for a work related task, explaining one's position on an issue, or distinguishing between fact and opinion in a newspaper article. Thus, a competency based education can be used

for learners with academic, employment, and self enrichment goals as well as for those with basic survival goals. (Peyton & Crandall, 1995)

Even Start is a federally funded family literacy program in the U.S. which includes intergenerational literacy, ESL, and PACT. An extension of Head Start, Even Start is designed to improve the literacy level of both parents and children through curriculum that integrates early childhood education, parenting education, and adult literacy education (Yaffe & Williams, 1998). Adult participants spend 6 hours per week in either ESL or ABE classes, as well as parenting education and PACT. Children of preschool age are involved with Head Start or are tracked in the public school system. Core indicators are recorded and evaluations are completed on a yearly basis. In 1998, Yaffe and Williams report that the Even Start program reports positive outcomes for both parents and children. However, the evaluation of 18 Even Start projects found no statistically significant or educationally important impacts on Even Start Families (St. Pierre et al, 2005).

Another main category found in the literature is the importance of family literacy. The research has found that children whose family members read to them, are more likely to be able count to 20, write their name, and read or pretend to read (Holloway, 2004). Three main factors that limit the amount of time that parents can spend time reading with their children include the increase in single parent families, employment of both parents, and divorce (Smith, 1991). As a result of this, one million student drop out of high school every year and hundreds of thousands of people find themselves without a place in today's job market (Glover & Mitchell, 1991). Family literacy can help break this cycle and in turn help parents and children succeed.

The final category is the factors that make a successful family literacy program. Ownership, involvement, and understanding, recruitment and retention, as well as evaluation are

important for success of literacy programs (Nuckolls, 1991). As discussed earlier, early childhood education, parent education, ESL or ABE, and PACT are all important elements to a successful program. Schools also need to be involved, view families as partners, and tailor their program to the needs of their community (Morrow, 2004).

Another element of a successful program is competent and energetic teachers. Most ESL literacy instructors work part time without contracts or benefits, and the volunteers have only 15 to 20 hours of training (Crandall, 1994). It is a difficult job and most ESL teachers would prefer to teach in a school system where the pay is better. Programs must consider this evidence and focus their budget in the correct areas.

In summary, I have discussed three main categories including models of family literacy, importance, and factors to successful programs. The literature has shown all elements of family literacy and much is to be learned from the evidence. Family literacy is extremely important and a successful program will work on multiple generations and promote the vitality of our country.

CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGY

Description of methodology

The methodology that I used was a questionnaire that was derived by the staff of the Even Start program to find out information about their current participants. They also examined the quantitative evaluation that was done in 2004 and created questions based on the outcome data.

Research design

This was a descriptive study that used qualitative data derived from the questionnaire the staff presented to the participants. This study uses four different types of research design. First it uses content analysis to isolate the types of barriers the participants encounter as well as constructive appraisal and criticism of the program. Next, a simple frequency analysis is used to prioritize the data. This is followed by a program model development to plan remediation. Finally, logic modeling is used to organize the remediation.

Subjects

Even Start will serve 25 families, 35 adults, and 45 children in the 2005. Eligibility for the program requires that the family has at least one child under the age of 8 that has demonstrated a literacy need and is enrolled in the ADVOCAP Head Start program or Barlow Park elementary in Ripon, WI. The adult participants are at a low literacy level, trying to obtain a GED or HSED, needing to gain job skills, or are taking ELL classes.

Instrumentation

The questionnaire was created by the staff of the Even Start Program to find out information about the program that was not clear in the quantitative evaluation. The quantitative evaluation data shows what areas of the program need improvement, but does not explain why or how to improve. The questionnaire, which is qualitative, consists of three categories including attendance, likes and dislikes, as well as continuous improvement. See Appendix A

Procedures

The questionnaire was administered to the participants during their regularly scheduled classroom activities at both Prairie View and Barlow Park. Ten questionnaires were sent in the mail to be returned anonymously to the main Prairie View office.

Data collection

A questionnaire was given to a member of each family involved in the Even Start Program. The adult family member was to fill out and return the questionnaire to either Barlow Park Elementary or the Prairie View Center; Assistance was available by the Even Start Staff during tutoring sessions if the adults needed help. The questionnaires were only seen by the Even Start staff and interpreter, so that confidentiality was obtained. Data collection took place from April 1 – April 15 to assure each family had ample time to complete and return the questionnaire.

Data analysis

Data analysis was done using content analysis which is a way of organizing qualitative data and points out commonly used ideas or terms. Some descriptive statistics were used, but inferential statistics was not due to the nature of the data and the small sample size.

Limitations

There are three limitations to this study. One limitation is that there are only 25 families which is a small sample size. Also, due to the low literacy skills and language barrier, some participants may need assistance and would not want to share their ideas with the people assisting them. However, the participants were told the nature of the research and the importance of continuous improvement and how valuable their cooperation was. Finally, due to the small nature of the study, external validity may be limited to a similar site.

Summary

In summary, a questionnaire was given to all participants of the Even Start program. The questionnaire was derived by the Even Start staff to find out qualitative questions about the program. The questionnaire was handed out during their regularly scheduled classroom time and assistance was given when needed. Data analysis was done using descriptive statistics and content analysis.

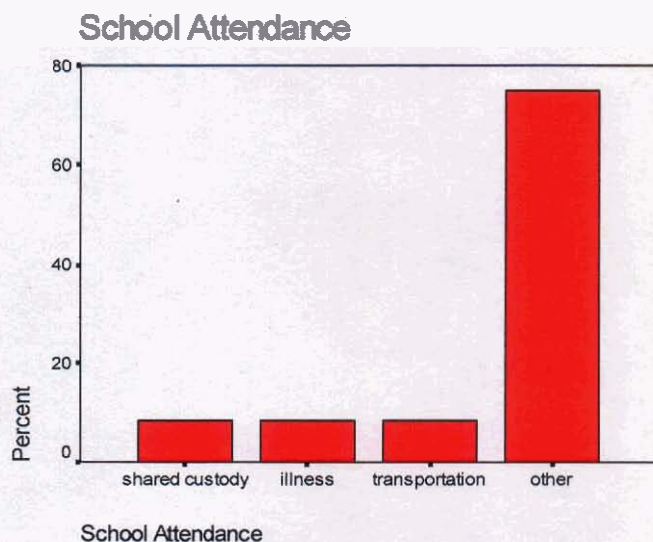
CHAPTER FOUR

RESULTS

Results

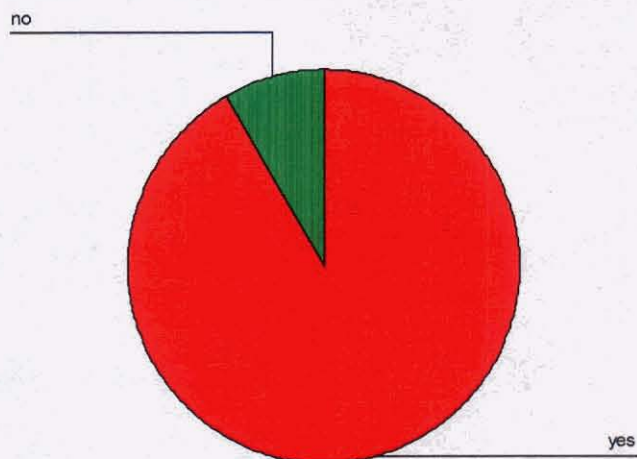
The questionnaire was very useful in producing clear results. Frequencies were used to show the results of six questions and content analysis was used to examine all of the qualitative data.

The first question analyzed was reasons that make it difficult for your child to attend school regularly. No clear reasons were given for this question and the majority of the people asked listed other as the main reason and shared custody, illness, and transportation were all checked one time.



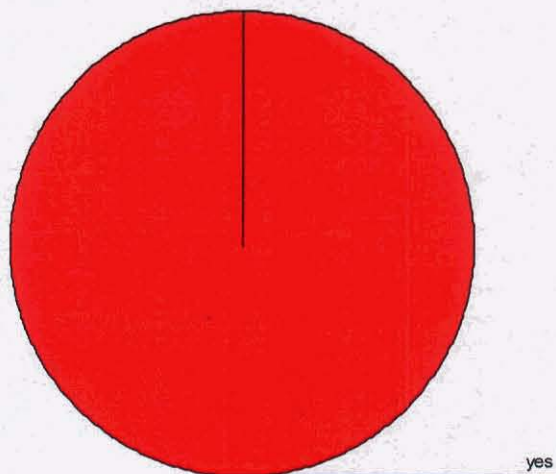
The participants were asked if they were willing to go to the public library and take part in activities set up there to meet the 6 hour requirement. 92% answered yes while 8% answered no.

Are you able/willing to go to the public library?



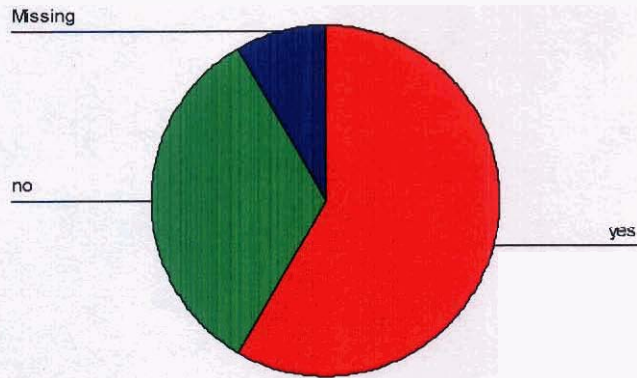
100% of the participants surveyed said they would attend a monthly family activity outside the regular classroom activities.

Would you attend a monthly family activity?



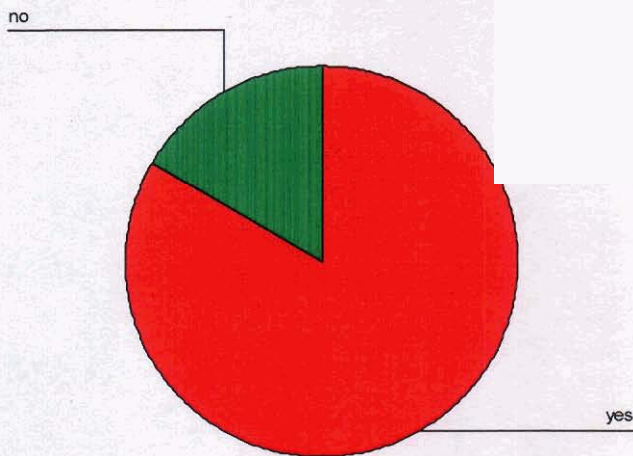
Only 64% of the people would be willing to take on more of a leadership role, whereas 36% would prefer not to. One person did not answer the question and is shown as a missing value.

Interested in taking on more of a leadership role'

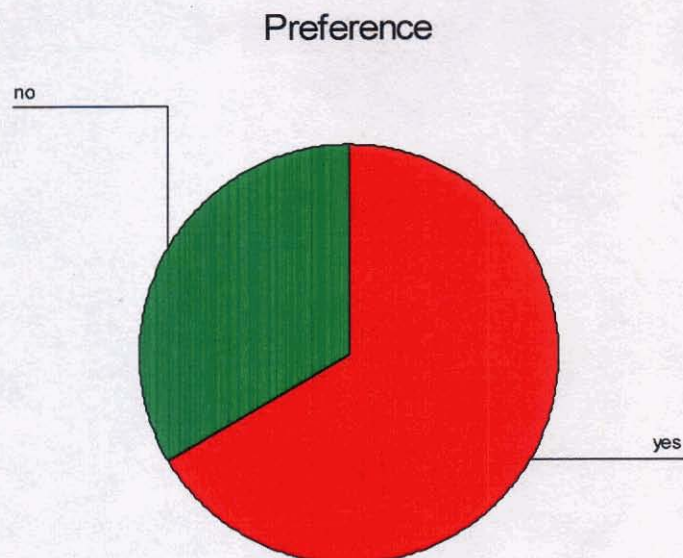


A large percentage of people thought that they have more of an active role in their child's education due to their participation in Even Start. 83% of the people answered yes whereas 17% of the people said no.

Do you feel that you have more of an active role



67% of the people surveyed had a preference between Barlow Park and Prairie View whereas 33% did not care. Of the people that preferred one over the other, 3 people chose Barlow Park and 3 people chose Prairie View.



The content analysis revealed three main ideas. Using emergent coding, the qualitative data was analyzed and transportation, PACT, and age oriented activities were the three areas that stood out. Transportation or any words that deal with transportation were counted and people mentioned it 11 times. This seems to be a main problem with attendance. PACT was mentioned 6 times and when it was mentioned they raved about how much they liked it. Age oriented activities was not as big of a concern, but it was mentioned three times and most comments were only hit on one time.

Evidence

One of the main reasons that this study was conducted was to find out reasons for lack of attendance among the participants. Based on the questionnaire and the content analysis, it is concluded that many of the participants have problems with transportation. Some of the reasons stated include gas prices, reliable vehicle, and long commute.

Unanticipated findings

Based on the content analysis, many of the people surveyed concluded that PACT is one of their favorite parts of the program. This conclusion was unanticipated although very useful knowledge for the organization.

Summary of Findings

Findings suggest that the research questions of this study need some more attention. Transportation is a major issue and arrangements should be made to either pick up participants or form a carpooling plan. One of the other findings was that their needs to be more age appropriate activities for the children. Although this issue was not as important as the other findings, it should be addressed.

In summary, it appears that the majority of the people are very satisfied with the program, however, some logistics such as transportation and more age appropriate activities are not extremely difficult to overcome. The program could be more successful with the participants participating to the full extent.

CHAPTER FIVE

DISCUSSION

Summary

This study has gone in depth about the Even Start Program and how the purpose of the program is to integrate early childhood education with adult literacy instruction. The principle partners and collaborators were identified and program details and classroom experiences have been shared. The literature review highlights the models of family literacy, importance of family literacy and the factor that make a successful program. Since the main purpose of the study was to gain feedback from the participants, a questionnaire was filled out by the participants to find out valuable information about the strengths and weaknesses of the program as well as reasons for lack of attendance.

Limitations

Due to the small nature of the study and individuality of the program, this study cannot be generalized to the main population. However, some of the ideas and the questionnaire could be tailored to ones own study to find out valuable information about their own program.

Conclusions

Based on the foregoing study the results contain three main points. These include the need for transportation, the fulfillment the participants gain from PACT, and the need for more age appropriate activities for the children. Transportation was a problem for the majority of the participants. They stated that gas prices were too high, the drive was too far, or their cars were not reliable enough. According to Morrow (1994), family literacy programs need to be tailored to fit the needs of their community. Since transportation is a huge need, carpooling or the Head Start bus should be considered. In the literature, PACT is used to improve the communication

between parent and child (Mitchell, 1991). Since many people expressed their jubilation for the PACT program and it is considered a very important element, Even Start should consider making PACT a bigger or longer portion of their program. Finally, several participants thought that their needed to be more age appropriate activities for the children involved. One element of a successful program is having competent and energetic teachers that can be creative and come up with new activities without expounding the resources. Crandall (1994) discusses how literacy instructors often are underpaid without contracts or benefits. Exceptions to increased salaries should be given to those teachers who show extreme potential.

Implications

As previously mentioned, family literacy programs need to tailor their program to meet the needs of the participants. Even Start has done a good job of providing food for the participants they come during dinner hours, and have scheduled Saturday mornings instead of all evening for people who may work 2nd shift. Transportation is a big expense, but also a big burden for many of the participants. The rural area and lack of public transportation also makes it more of a difficult issue to deal with.

Recommendations

One recommendation for further research would be to conduct one more survey asking questions regarding all aspects of the transportation problem. There could be an easier solution if we were to have more information. All we know now is that it is a problem for most participants.

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APPENDIX A

EVEN START FAMILY LITERACY QUESTIONNAIRE

1. What activities would you like to see added to the program?

2. What resources would you or your family like to learn more about?

3. What are some things that make it hard for you to come to class regularly?

4. Check any items that make it difficult for your child to attend school regularly

shared custody illness transportation oversleep other

5. What would make it easier for you to attend class 6 hrs. per week?

6. Are you able/willing to go to the public library and take part in activities set up there to meet the 6 hour requirement? Yes No

7. Would you attend a monthly family activity outside the regular classroom activities?

Yes No

8. Would you be interested in taking on more of a leadership role in this program?

Yes No

9. Do you feel that you have more of an active role in your child's education due to your participation in Even Start? Yes No

10. Do you have a preference in either the Barlow Park or Prairie View Site? If yes, please explain. Yes No

11. What are your favorite parts of the program?

12. Do you have any additional comments or concerns you would like to share?
