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# Promoting Family Literacy: An Opportunity for Suburban University-Inner City Agency Resource Exchange

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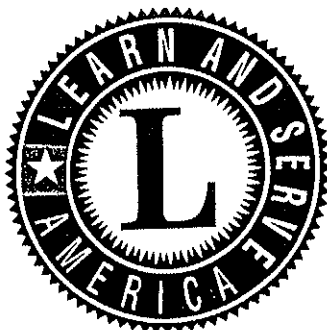
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The Family Literacy Project is a preventive program designed to increase lower income children's language readiness for school. The project's approach to literacy enhancement involves both tutoring the children and training the parents to be more effective "first teachers" of the types of emergent reading skills that are prerequisites to formal elementary school reading instruction. Forty-five undergraduates were trained as literacy facilitators and met on a weekly basis with ninety preschoolers enrolled in Head Start or with participating parents (N=20). The specific tutoring of the children varied according to the child's specific areas of language strengths and weaknesses. The parent training utilized the "Parents as Partners in Reading" literacy curriculum (Edwards, 1990).

The need for such preventative efforts is clear. The Carnegie Foundation's report on school readiness found that as many as 35 percent of children entering kindergarten are unprepared for formal education with deficits in "language richness" seen as a "moderate-to-serious" problem for 88 percent of these unprepared youngsters (Boyer, 1991). Children from urban, lower socio-economic backgrounds are at high risk for underachievement, school adjustment difficulties, and dropping out of school (Children's Defense Fund, 1992; Tuma, 1989). The benefits of preventive efforts focused on literacy enhancement also seem obvious. Children who enter school better prepared for school should do better; parents who have a positive sense of

their own reading competence will be more likely to remain actively involved in their child's school-related activities.

As the Family Literacy Project is in its infancy, we do not have long term evidence of its effectiveness to reinforce the short term gains we have documented (Primavera, Malone & Geller, 1994). What we have been impressed by, however, are what Seymour Sarason has called the "unintended consequences" of the intervention. Everyone involved have benefitted in ways beyond the main focus of the intervention. That is, this project has brought together two very divergent sets of individuals, psychology undergraduates from predominantly middle to upper middle class backgrounds attending a suburban, almost bucolic university setting and parents and their children from a poor, frequently violent, inner city environment. Cultural and racial differences abound.

Interviews with participating parents, children's artwork and storybooks, and facilitator's journal entries and questionnaires provides ample evidence that the benefits reaped from this project go far beyond enhanced literacy competence. We would like the Working Lunch to focus on what we found from both qualitative and quantitative data to be the "unintended consequences" of the project. That is, negative stereotypes were decreased, a respect for cultural differences was increased, strengths were seen where only deficits were expected, and, for the psychology students, textbook learning "came alive" to enhance their understanding of both normative development and the

complex social issues faced by children, their families and professionals attempting to apply the research-practitioner model in real world settings.

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## Promoting Family Literacy: An opportunity for suburban university-inner city agency resource exchange

The term "resource exchange" has been used to describe an exchange between individuals or groups in which "people learn to see themselves and each other as very differentiated resources that literally expand not only knowledge of one's environment but the possibilities for influencing and changing it as well (Sarason & Lorentz, 12)". The underpinnings of resource exchange can be traced back to the beginning of human existence when individuals began to ask the questions "What do you have that I need? What do I have that you need? Can we make an exchange?" Although at first glance resource exchange seems little more than a barter system, the term is meant to suggest a deeper more meaningful interaction. In this interaction, individuals recognize that they possess limited resources. To compensate for such shortcomings, individuals enter into an union so that they may "use each others resources in a mutually satisfying way, in a way that dilutes the consequences of an individual's limited resources (Sarason & Lorentz, 6)".

An example of resource exchange can be found by examining a recent literacy program piloted at several Head Start sites in the Bridgeport area. This program involved an interaction between inner city families and Fairfield University students with the overall goal of increasing the children's language skills. To achieve this end, college volunteers worked one on one with the children in their classroom on a weekly basis. In addition, students also worked with the inner city parents teaching them how to more effectively read to their children. While the program did successfully increase children's language skills, several "unintended consequences" were also found to have occurred. These gains, which went above and beyond our anticipated goal, affected all those involved. Therefore, the program is a successful example of

Sarason's notion of resource exchange.

To begin with, the program had a positive effect on the parents who took part. In terms of self-esteem, the parents reported feeling more confident in their reading skills. Before the program, many of the mothers were not comfortable with their own reading skills, and therefore, were uneasy about reading to their children. However, after the program, the mothers felt much better about themselves as competent readers and teachers for their children. In addition, they reported feeling better about themselves in general. For example, one mother stated: "I feel much better about myself. I don't stutter anymore and my self-esteem is much higher than it was before the program." The mothers also reported feeling very good about themselves when their children responded positively to the techniques that they learned in the program. The mothers reported feeling an enormous sense of accomplishment.

Another unintended consequence was that of social support. The parents were very positively affected by this group of parents and students who would meet once a week to share not only tips about reading, but also ideas and common concerns. One mother claimed that the program's greatest success was that "the student facilitators and parents acted as a support group for each other. People listened to each other and shared concerns." Another mother responded: "knowing that the people were here every week to help each other and just be together was the program's greatest success." By looking at these results, it is very evident that the parents found comfort in that once a week they could go to a place where there were other people in similar situations who shared their same concerns and interests. Also, the weekly sessions offered a place where their feelings were validated.

Self-esteem and social support are two primary predictors of well-adjusted behavior, and well-adjusted behavior leads to healthy parenting. Therefore, the program was very successful in that it helped to produce healthy parents who in turn will be better teachers for their children. In this case, "healthy parents" refers to those

involved in their children's education as opposed to maladjusted parents who send their children to school expecting them to learn everything from teachers.

Lastly, findings were reported which demonstrated that other members of the family benefited from the program as well. For example, in two-parent families, spouses of the parent who participated in the program became more interested in reading to their children. Also, the mothers stated that their other children have demonstrated positive effects as well. For example, the mothers used the techniques they learned from the program with their other children and one mother reported that her older daughter's grades on her report card improved, her reading increased from a first grade level to a third grade level, and she became more interested in reading and in school in general. Other mothers agreed in that their older children now want to sit and read to the younger children, that they are more excited about reading, and that their reading and writing skills have improved tremendously. Also, the mothers reported that they now see college as more attainable for their children and for themselves. Actually, one mother is going back to college and her decision was partly based on her interacting with the college students in the program.

While the parents were gaining from the students, the students were benefiting from their interactions with the inner city families. Participation in the program led to a breakdown of many of the stereotypes that the students held about the people of the inner city. Although most of the students, when asked directly about any stereotypes that they held, failed to specifically state any, their responses to a number of other questions led us to the conclusion that certain preconceived notions did indeed exist. For example, many college "coaches" expressed surprise that the children they worked with were so bright and eager to learn. They stated that they thought the children would somehow be "different" or that they would require special treatment. The students were amazed to find, however, that as the saying goes "Kids will be kids." Like any other three or four year old, these children have the same internal needs.



They desire attention, seek mastery of skills, and strive for independence. Literacy coaches who had originally expressed uncertainty and apprehension about working with "these" kids, quickly found that their fears were laid to rest.

While the students were learning that underneath the differences children are all the same, they were also beginning to gain a much greater sense of the differences which existed; that is, the differences in the lifestyles and opportunities available to these children were becoming increasingly apparent. Students were beginning to understand the odds placed against the children. Stories of death, violence, and crime are commonplace for these children, a fact that shocked many of the students and led to a greater appreciation for their own childhood. One volunteer, after playing house with a child in which the child said "get down the police are here with guns", reflected that "House sure has changed a lot since I was a kid." Literacy volunteers found themselves beginning to understand the many layers of problems which exist for these children. Many compared the children to children from Westport that they babysit for and were shocked to see the stark contrast which existed in the life experiences of the two groups. The students noted that many of the inner city children have likely experienced more hardship in their short life than they themselves have in twenty years.

Student facilitators who worked with the parents also reported similar changes in their beliefs. Students stated that before the program they held stereotypes, for example that inner city parents lacked motivation. After participating in the program, this stereotype was dissolved. They discovered that the parents were extremely concerned with their children's well being and that they were anxious to learn anything that would lead to happy, well educated children. Similarly, other students mentioned that before the program they thought that inner city parents did not value education. They discovered, however, that these parents do value education and that they want to give their children the educational opportunities that they often did not have. The

Students also realized that the mothers are very knowledgeable and creative which contrasted with another stereotype that they previously held, namely that inner city mothers are not intelligent.

When thinking about this breakdown of stereotypes, it is important to keep in mind that the lifestyles of the inner city mothers differed greatly from those of the student facilitators. For example, in general, the mothers earn an income of less than \$9,000 per year while most of the students are from middle to upper middle class suburban families. Another difference is the fact that, in general, the students have grown up knowing that they would one day go to college because that is the "thing to do" after high school. The inner city mothers, on the other hand, have not been given the same opportunities and college is often not a reality for them but rather a dream.

While it is possible to see that stereotypes were breaking down for students who participated in both aspects of the program, it is also important to note that the program was fostering a greater understanding for the complexity of the social situation within the inner city. Many students described what they saw as a "vicious cycle" in which the parents, often poor, illiterate, or substance dependent, pass these problems on to their children and their children's children and so on and so forth. This cycle is fed by the inequality which exists in many aspects of society, including education. Given that this is so, many of the student volunteers began to better understand the behaviors of many inner city families. Many began to see that for individuals robbed of legitimate means for success, there is often no other way out.

Again, the students working with parents seemed to echo the same sentiment. As a result of working with the inner city parents, the students' knowledge of social issues such as poverty, crime, and unemployment increased a great deal. Students claimed that before the program they knew about the social issues mentioned above, but now they understand that many of these families are caught up in the destructive cycle as a result of lack of resources. Many other students made the point that

participation in the program made social issues a reality and not just topics on the evening news. A common theme among the student responses was that "instead of blaming individuals, society in general has a lot to be blamed for."

The students are now thinking more critically about the social issues that are affecting inner city parents and their families. During the program, students heard many stories about seven year old children selling drugs and about the violence that plagues these children's' neighborhoods. They now realize that many factors need to be considered when thinking about social issues. For example, besides the fact that many of the schools and neighborhoods that these children call home are very dangerous, the school systems lack the money, teachers, and proper resources to teach the children effectively.

While the students did indeed gain a greater understanding for the complexity of the social issues, perhaps more importantly, they began to acknowledge their role in ending the cycle. Throughout the questionnaires there was a sense that "what I did really mattered", that it made a difference to these children. While the government, communities, and families need to act to end the cycles of illiteracy and poverty, the students who participated in the program began to accept that they too needed to share the responsibility. Rather than merely blame the victim (in this case the child or the parent), students emerged from the program with a greater dedication to helping and an optimism that, through their efforts, a certain amount of change was possible. They identified the problems and, more importantly perhaps, discovered that they themselves were a valuable and necessary part of the solution.

Clearly all of our literacy volunteers gained something from the program that they could not have learned in a classroom or from a textbook. The children were not statistics anymore but, rather, they were names and faces. The problems no longer held simple labels like poverty and illiteracy; rather they became complex and real issues which pervade the life of so many. These are things which could not have been

learned without firsthand experience. As one student said, "I could never have read in a book what it's like to see the children's' smiles and tears "

There is one last group who profited from this resource exchange who must not be overlooked, namely the Head Start teachers. While it was not expected that the program would have any significant impact on this group, three teachers have asked to return to school themselves partly as a result of their interaction with the college students. This request is just one more example of the widespread impact that the program had on all those involved.

In conclusion, the program was an immense success not only for its literacy gains, but for the many "unintended consequences" described above. One student perhaps best summed up the program as "a unique experience in which all parties, consisting of very diverse individuals, gained something extremely valuable which they could not have gained without this direct interaction". This sentiment reflects Sarason's own view of resource exchange as an opportunity which "allows one to see ways whereby the needs and resources of groups ordinarily seen as differing from each other can now be seen in relation to each other (Sarason & Lorentz, 12)".

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