

CHARACTERISTICS OF EFFECTIVE PARENT  
INVOLVEMENT MODELS FOR EARLY LITERACY LEARNING

by

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### **Abstract**

Using a review of the literature, parent involvement models for teaching early literacy skills are reviewed with the goal to identify common characteristics that when integrated produce successful programming. Three main areas are explored: The philosophy from which a model is conceived and administered, structural designs and their strengths and weaknesses, and trends in current models and how they connect with the changing climate of society. Four resulting characteristics are discovered, such as the importance of respect and incorporation of parents' cultural backgrounds, intentional parent training in literacy building, emphasis on parents as leaders, and availability of free materials and supports necessary in aiding with attendance. In response to the research, a community-based book club model entitled, *SPARKS to Reading* is created.

## Chapter I:

### Introduction

In a time when education is bombarded with mandates surrounding literacy, the majority of which hold a quantitative focus (Dudley-Marling, 2005). It is the intention of this paper to investigate a more qualitative or human relational side to teaching early literacy skills. In general, parent involvement in schools is recognized as a desirable happening, or is noted as having a positive effect in relation to gains in student achievement (Epstein, 1995; Fishel & Ramirez, 2005).

Using a review of the literature, this paper will review effective parent involvement models connected to teaching early literacy skills and identify the characteristics they have in common. It is my intention to combine the results of the study, an informal needs assessment of our rural, predominately low-income community, and my skills as an educator to create a unique, community-based parent involvement model centering on teaching early literacy development.

Evaluations of parent involvement programs have not always provided evidence of their effectiveness. However, the contemporary emphasis on parent involvement is based on the belief that parents and the home play a critical role in children's intellectual and social development (Mattingly, Prislun, McKenzie, Rodriguez, & Kayzar, 2003). Studies show a positive correlation between parent involvement and the development of early literacy skills (Dodici, Draper, & Peterson, 2003; Foster & Lambert, 2005; Jordan, Snow, Porche, 2000). Literacy skills heighten when parents involve children in literacy and language enriching activities like reading books together, playing rhyming games, singing songs, and drawing (Snow & Barnes, 1991; Weigel, Martin, & Bennett, 2010).

*Becoming a Nation of Readers: What Parents Can Do*, written by Marilyn Brinkley, (1988) is recognized as one of the first texts printed from a parent involvement standpoint. Derived from the Commission on Reading's 1984 report, *A Nation at Risk; Becoming a Nation of Readers*, Binkley acknowledged parents as key players in all stages of the reading process and named them as their child's first teacher (Ortiz & Styles, 2002).

Moving from a spark in the late 1980's and early 1990's, parent and family involved literacy programs have been instituted to help provide all children with early learning experiences that promote literacy learning. A large number of these programs address needs of children living in isolated areas or communities with fewer resources (Dail & Payne, 2010). Parent involvement in a child's early literacy development impacts levels of success when looking at letter identification, sound play, and vocabulary development. At some level, they can all be linked to the abundance or lack of home literacy experiences (Dodici, Draper, & Peterson, 2003).

### **Statement of the Problem**

The reauthorization of Title I by Congress in 1994 placed focus on the belief parent involvement is vital for student success. The NCLB Act of 2001 mandates that schools accepting Title I funding provide programs for involving the parents of children receiving services (Fishel & Ramirez, 2005). Communities and schools are making effort to promote parental involvement as a necessary part in teaching children to read, but it is no easy task. If children are to be successful, parents and teachers need to connect and work as a team moving towards a common goal (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998).

Many people still perceive the start of school or time in school alone as the only means through which students learn to read, strictly by the instruction of teachers. Great concern is

placed on the fact that children from low-income households are more likely to have trouble reading than their middle-class counterparts (Dickinson & Snow, 1987). A connection between early literacy skills and later school performance, along with indicators that children from low-income families tend to face greater academic risks, provide a rationale as to why effective early literacy activities with parent involved interventions are needed. (Dodici, Draper, & Peterson, 2003).

Educators often hold the assumption that parents are either not willing or not skilled enough to participate or truly make a difference in developing their child's early literacy skills. There are beliefs built on cultural or socio-economic biases. Even teachers who agree strongly with the idea of parent involvement frequently change their willingness to work with parents if their authority is questioned (Manning & Swick, 2006). To their defense, high pressure, politically driven rhetoric is forcing teachers to hold the blame of all things related to reading struggles, creating a rift between parents, communities, and educators (Dudley-Marling, 2005). This disconnect speaks to the necessity of promoting effective parent involvement opportunities as well.

### **Research Question(s)**

The reasoning and motivation for parental involvement is clear. Questions remain, however, on which format or formats are most successful, or how to best evaluate parent involvement models (Dail & Payne, 2010). This leads to the bigger question: "What are the characteristics of effective parent involvement models for successfully teaching early literacy skills?" For the purpose of reaching the needs of children and parents for whom I hope to offer community programming at the optimal degree, my research question will be expanded upon to

include: “What are the characteristics of effective parent involvement models for successfully teaching early literacy skills in a low-income, rural, community?”

### **Definition of Terms**

**Parent Involvement:** A term widely defined by Joyce Epstein and colleagues (Epstein, 1995; Epstein & Dauber, 1991), includes parenting, communicating, volunteering or attending, supporting learning at home, participating in decision making, and collaborating with the community or schools.

**Early Literacy Skills:** Six key markers have been identified in early literacy development, including: *Print motivation*, being excited and interested in books. *Phonological Awareness* or the ability to play with sounds in words. *Narrative skills*, being able to tell stories and describe things. *Enriched vocabulary*, knowing the name of specific things. *Print awareness*, noticing print in everyday things, and knowing how to handle a book and follow words on a page. Finally, *phonemic awareness* or understanding letter sound connections (Snow & Barnes, 1991).

**Reading acquisition:** Refers to the progression of early literacy behaviors of children, including knowledge of letter names and their sounds, phonemic awareness, transferring to phonics or early decoding abilities, sight word recognition, and word comprehension (Darling & Westberg, 2004)

## **Chapter II: Review of Literature**

In order to articulate common characteristics of effective literacy related parent involvement models that would benefit a community-based program to the greatest extent, it is important to review a variety of models utilized in both communities and schools to date. Parent

involvement is considered a positive asset in developing early literacy skills (Weigel, Martin, & Bennett, 2010). Therefore, programs reflecting all of the following models have been viewed as effective in varying degrees. Comparing models offers insight on what is most effective; thus, building the list of shared characteristics that can provide the maximum impact when developing a successful early literacy program. This chapter reviews models representing three underlying themes: The philosophy or viewpoint from which a program is created and administered, structural designs of programs, including both content expectations along with practical details and their strengths and weaknesses, and trends in current models and how they connect with the changing climate of our society.

Auerbach (1995) was one of the first to recognize that parent involvement models are created from a deficit or wealth (or strength-based) view of families. A deficit model tries to fix or even blame the family for not being involved enough in a child's learning experience while ignoring social, economic, and political contexts surrounding families and communities in which they live. Such programs provide strategies for parents to learn about reading, ideas for parents to read to or involve their child with early literacy activities, but have little regard to cultural sensitivity (Auerbach, 1995). In an article on families and literacy and the importance of resisting a deficit model, Taylor (1997) wrote:

It is essential that literacy programs recognize and honor not only the diversity of literacies that exist within families, but also the communities and cultures of which they are a part. The culture of the community and the experiences of the families who live in the community are an essential part of all literacy programs. This implies that program developers should respect local definitions of problems, needs, resources, and preferred courses of action (4).

Even Start, a parent and family involvement program developed by the U.S. Department of Education, was designed to increase learning in young children before they start school, especially in the area of reading. Aiming to reach families of low income, the government reacted to research showing disadvantaged children are more likely to have reading difficulties. (Dickinson & Snow, 1987). Even Start projects operate year-round and provide support services, such as child care and transportation. Even start content is known for instructing participants on adult literacy and parenting skills in general, and grant moneys also program interactive literacy opportunities, such read aloud sessions with response projects for parents and their children to attend. A percentage of an Even Start grant must address underrepresented communities and cultures. However, content expectations are standardized (Beder, 1999). Upon review, it could be considered a program formed from the deficit view.

Researching medium-term effects of Even Start, Gamse, Conger, Ellison, and McCarthy (1997) collected data on a subset of the children who were in the first national evaluation of the program. Students were either in first or second grade, with 72% (128 of 179) of those in the initial evaluation reviewed. School grades, achievement tests, attendance, Title I and Special Education placement and retention history were documented. The only difference discovered between former Even Start participants and a control group was that Even Start participants were less likely to be tardy. Researchers did suggest long-term effects of the Even Start program would need to be studied to see if outcomes are more powerful at a higher grade level (Amstutz, 2000).

Contrasting the deficit model, a wealth view of families embraces the idea that all families already have resources that can be used to enhance a child's reading development.

Programs developed from this viewpoint work to build upon the resources families possess. They see parents as collaborators in their children's literacy growth (Auerbach, 1995).

In an experience implementing Early Reading First programs in some of the poorest counties in America, parents have demonstrated they will do what is required to help their children succeed. However, researchers and teachers must work collaboratively with parents and talk to, not at or over them. Families are resilient, have many gifts, and are successful in many ways within their existing cultural contexts (Dail & Payne, 2010).

Utilizing the model of a community book club, parents in a rural, low-income community were provided two books with similar, culturally relevant themes. One book was specifically chosen for children, the second was an adolescent/adult book for group discussion. Conversation was held around the importance of creating a reading life and merging school and home practices. Instead of dictating to parents how and when to use the books, they were encouraged to brainstorm and develop practices that fit into their family routines. Parents were seen as partners and made decisions about how best to relate the materials to their children and integrate them into their family schedules (Dail, McGee, & Edwards, 2009).

Eleven book club meetings over a two year time period were held at local churches. At project end, ninety three people had attended a book club meeting at some time. Researchers interviewed thirty participants, videotaped meetings, collected field notes, and attendance sheets. Data analysis began at the first meeting and continued throughout the project. Identified as a wealth view model, parents, university involved teachers, and community members in the book club reported a gain of new literacy habits during meetings that influenced home literacy practices. Participants spoke about how before the book club they would have never imagined

enjoying a pastime of holding a book in hand, let alone going to the store or library to bring books home for their child. Comments were shared about the value and pride gained when being able to connect with others about a book, and how that pride was recognized by participant's children in the home. Overall, changes in behavior or practices included: reading more themselves, wanting their children to read more and reading with them, talking about books at home and with others, and acquiring more books for the home (Dail, McGee, & Edwards, 2009). Creating environments that value, support, and model literacy is acknowledged as a major component in promoting early literacy skills (Vukelich & Christie, 2004).

Recognizing evaluations of parent involvement models as difficult to assess, and with a lack of information on the topic, The National Center for Family Literacy (NCFL) conducted a meta-analysis examining parent involvement models and literacy to determine the impact of parent involvement on reading acquisition of children in kindergarten to third grade. The aim was to offer those working in family literacy situations ways to better equip parents to support children's literacy development. A secondary goal was to supplement recent evidence of parent involvement in general. Information gathered electronically addressed twenty different parent involvement interventions, involving 1,583 total families (Darling & Westberg, 2004).

For the purpose of the study, focus was placed on reviewing parent involvement activities that directly involved reading acquisition. Three questions were addressed including: "What type of parent involvement interventions took place?" "What type of teacher-parent interactions occurred?" (Such as direct training, parent workshops, or materials sent home); and, "What design of research was used in the reviews?"

Three models of parent involvement were identified and researched for the NCFL by Sénéchal (2002). The first had parents read aloud to or listen to a child read. Other than notes

from teachers suggesting to make time for reading and ask questions about the book, no specific training was given. The second model, involved Title I and classroom teachers working together to intentionally train parents to listen to their child read. Parents were taught to use corrective feedback, help beginning readers use phonetic and context clues, encourage self-corrections, and give appropriate praise. Parents were also instructed on how to read to children and model skills listed, and books chosen as appropriate and relevant to the child and family life were sent home by the teacher. In the last model, parents were again trained by teachers to instruct their children with explicit reading skills. This included aspects of the trained to listen model, but added structured exercises designed for specialized reading experiences. In half of the studies reviewed in this category, questionnaires, phone calls, or even home visits were made to check with progress. Moreover, in three of ten of interventions in this category, parents were taught how to teach using known reading programs (Sénéchal, 2002) including: *Teach Your Child To Read in 100 Easy Lessons* (Engelmann, Haddox, & Bruner, 1983), *The Reading Recovery Model*, and the *Reading Made Easy Program* (Harrison, 1981).

Students were evaluated using a variety of pre-and post-tests assessing basic skills for reading acquisition. Results showed overall any action of parent involvement and reading provided some gain in ability. However, further investigation indicated training parents to teach their child with specific exercises gained the greatest results over both having parents simply listen to their child without instruction, or listen to their child with training. Training parents to listen to their children and model reading skills were twice as effective as just listening or reading, and students in this category averaged a ten percent gain on standardized literacy tests (Sénéchal, 2002). Darling and Westberg (2004) noted that due to the variability of the different studies within the intervention types, results need to be interpreted with caution. Still, the

premise that parents receiving instruction to help support their child's literacy development will have greater impact than parents without training is highly likely.

Doyle and Zhang (2011) identified two of the most common community-based structures for involving parents in their children's literacy learning and then researched the impact of two eight week programs that replicated these models. The first, known as a parent-only model, involved 21 participants and offered parents the opportunity to attend evenings without their child. The second structure, known as a parent-child model, included 24 participants and invited parents to bring their children and learn together. In both groups, the children of participants were between the ages of three and five. The study did not directly target a specific income bracket for participants, and sessions were open to anyone interested. However, all families lived within a similar geographic neighborhood recommended by local school districts and community leaders as an area that would benefit from a parent-involved literacy program. At the end of the programs, parents were given a questionnaire in which they were asked to answer 11 broad questions, ranging from how welcome they felt, usefulness of context, response of children, and to what degree they used what they had learned at home. An identical set of focus questions were also asked during final sessions of each model (Doyle & Zhang, 2011).

During parent-only sessions, each week the facilitator introduced a new topic associated with literacy development, provided examples and resources, and outlined starting ideas for parents to use the materials at home. Parents were encouraged to work together in small groups or share ideas with the group as a whole as to how they planned to utilize their time, experiences, family traditions, or rituals to engage their children in activities related to the topic

presented. Upon returning the next week, time was allotted for parent perspective on what worked or didn't, or to share any new ideas that occurred (Doyle & Zhang, 2011).

Emphasis in the parent-only sessions focused on equipping parents with tools and activities that create and support a literary rich home environment (Doyle & Zhang, 2011). Facilitators often identify a common misconception amongst parents that reading is only about placing a book in a hand, when the definition of literary rich environment is continually expanding. Literary rich environments may be described as a place or support system that offers the availability of a variety books and other forms of print that are shared frequently and discussed in meaningful ways, such as making personal connections to them, and activities associated with becoming or being readers, responders, and writers. Research has shown the more types of reading materials and experiences in the home, the higher level of proficiency a child will achieve (NCFL, 2007). There are many forces at work when providing a literary rich environment, and holding a book represents only a fraction of the tools for developing readers. Supporting parents to understand the many pieces of literacy learning by modeling how to point to an object and say its name, or helping parents rhyme and play with sounds or follow a recipe with their child, can all be considered beginning steps to reading (Zygouris-Coe, 2007).

In the second group, or parent-child model, parents and children gathered in the afternoon. They listened to a children's book, learned poems, and sang pattern songs or nursery rhymes related to the story together. Toward session endings, program aids involved children in a shorter response activity related to the story, freeing parents to sit with a facilitator for discussion and ideas on supporting reading development at home. Parent sharing during this time was also encouraged, but constraints of the clock were noted (Doyle & Zhang, 2011).

Participants in the parent-only program attended an average of 7.5 out of 8 sessions,

while those in the parent-child program attended 6.8 out of 8 sessions. Childcare was pre-arranged by parent-only participants. Most utilized family members, though babysitting stipends were offered as needed. Using parent questionnaires, difference in attendance was accounted for by answers explaining parent-only members could still attend if their child became ill or behaviors made it difficult to get everybody out of the house on schedule. Care was already in place (Doyle & Zhang, 2011).

A heightened sense of responsibility was expressed by participants in the parents-only group, realizing they were the sole information providers of what happened between the program and home. Parents came to view themselves as learner and teacher (Doyle & Zhang, 2011). Enabling parents to recognize themselves as a lead teaching force in their child's learning by helping identify they have skills or experiences to share with their child around reading, even if they have low literacy skills, has shown positive impact on student achievement (Amstutz, 2000). In focus group discussions, parent-only group comments echoed that it was a relief to have time away from kids, have the focus placed on them as adult learners wishing to gain a foundation needed to support literacy development, all without feeling it was another event where they had to make sure their child was behaving correctly (Doyle & Zhang, 2011).

Numerous questionnaire responses also equated having zero requirements to parent in public during a session with a greater ability to actually learn. This connected to study results on whether or not parents utilized materials and continued to try ideas and activities shared at home with their child. T-tests revealed the mean score of the parent-only group (3.35) being significantly higher (2.28) than that of the parent-child group (Doyle & Zhang, 2011).

Fewer participants in the parent-child program described themselves as teachers or learners at the conclusion of sessions, but appreciated the experience to take part in a planned

activity with their child that was social and educational. Parents valued observing how their child reacted with other children and engaged or even achieved in activities in relation to other kids. Study responses showed increased discussion and notation by parents around social and interpersonal discoveries over reading. However, all parents in the parent-child group expressed a wish to learn more about supporting their child's literacy development (Doyle & Zhang, 2011).

Common areas reported by parents experiencing both structures were an appreciation and draw to the program in relation to free materials, including books, support with transportation and childcare as needed, and a general sense that leaders cared for children and families. In an open-ended response section of the questionnaire, a large number of parents wrote in that they were thankful facilitators did not speak down to them. Doyle and Zhang (2011) noted that without delving into the economic and cultural backgrounds of participants in greater detail as a part of the study, study results would likely benefit from individualized adaptation in different settings and situations.

Trends in school-based parent involved reading programs have come, gone, and come again. Perhaps the most recognizable school and family literacy experience is a parent-child reading night. As No Child Left Behind mandated Title I services to overcome a multitude of needs with minuscule budgets, while being held responsible for the parent involvement component of an entire district under the threat funding would be cut if not in compliance, skill and even good intention has been undermined. (Fishel & Ramirez, 2005). It is no wonder reading night in the library with a bag of popcorn and kids and parents in pajamas are as far as many school-based programs have gotten.

In spite of this, an extensive body of research that children with socioeconomic disadvantages face greater difficulty with early literacy development and tend to struggle more with reading and language functioning (Dickinson & Snow, 1987; Foster et al., 2005), combined with the fact our nation's number of children living in poverty has continued to rise (NCFL, 2007), has challenged educators to push beyond funding. More schools are experimenting with models that bring a mother, father, or grandparent directly into the classroom. Families who are able and made comfortable to go into the classroom and connect with their child's school as a volunteer or partner without being made to feel as less than a teacher are more likely to make positive contributions to their children's early language and literacy development (Porter DeCusati & Johnson, 2004).

One model of a classroom-based parent literary workshop named, "The Parent Program", was developed by primary level teachers in a low-income, small, rural school where approximately 64% of students received free or reduced lunch. The majority of Kindergarteners entered school far below the desired readiness level and teachers wanted to try and bridge the gap of missed skills before it expanded. All parents of the school's first grade classrooms were invited to take part in a year-long project welcoming them into the classroom for ten 45 minute workshops. The goal was to teach parents to directly support their child in building early literacy skills. Evaluation transpired through attendance records and short parent evaluation forms provided after each session, as well as a final questionnaire (Ortega & Ramirez, 2007).

Strategic lessons surrounding basic literacy skills, such as playing and learning with environmental print, using beginning sounds to encourage phonemic or phonological awareness, rhyming and making word families, and segmenting sounds to build words took place. Each session, teachers gave a ten minute mini-lesson, modeled what parents would do with their child,

and talked about why it was important in literacy development. Activities were planned to be fun and interesting, and teachers worked to use “real language” over educational terms. Funding for extra materials was received through a small grant provided by a community business group. Parent and child then had 35 minutes to produce sample work together. Title I teachers also came into the classroom, moving around the room to guide parents with tips as they helped their child and sometimes other children whose parents could not attend. Evening sessions were available once a month for those who could not attend during the day (Ortega & Ramirez, 2007).

Along with classroom activities, a field trip to the public library with the aim to teach parents how to use it most effectively for their child was integrated into the program. The larger goal was to get more books into homes and keep parents reading to and with children (Ortega & Ramirez, 2007). Adams (1990), one of the most vocal proponents for reading aloud to children, describes reading books to children as the most important activity for building the tools eventually required for reading to occur.

Attendance results showed that 80% of parents or family members attended at least one topic session and 38% attended more than four. Anonymous evaluation forms used a number scale, asking parents the level they understood the lesson presented and how confident they felt to help their child with the practiced skill at home. All ratings were four or five with five being the highest in understanding and confidence level (Ortega & Ramirez, 2007). Because the school was small, with people likely having close community ties, question could be asked about the level of honesty on such evaluation. Nevertheless, facilitators considered the program to be a success, as they took a school with almost no parent involvement to percentages that exceeded their initial expectation. Teacher reflection included insight that the more they saw their students interact with their parents, the better they understood a child and his or her strengths and

weaknesses, thus empowering them to individualize literacy instruction for each child to a greater degree. Comments were also made by parents that the program allowed them to feel more comfortable in the school environment and stronger relationships were developed between parent and teacher (Ortega & Ramirez, 2007).

Relational to poverty, discussion and concern on drop-out rates and absentee fathers in the past decade has initiated another trend in literacy outreach and parent involvement surrounding the importance of fathers reading to their children. Hall and Parker reported a USA Today article published on July 14, 1999 (1D), asked adults to recall who read to them when they were young, only 7% reported that it was their fathers; in contrast, 56% said that it was their mothers, which accurately describes educational research on the topic, although it is not extensive. With little movement towards change, this is unfortunate, as data collected by the National Center for Education Statistics indicated that children do better in all aspects of learning when their fathers are involved, even if their fathers do not live with them (Ortiz & Stile, 2002).

Project DADS was first conceived and established as a joint venture of California State University, Fullerton and New Mexico State University. Different than most of the models studied in this paper, university-community partnership is explored. Meetings took place on a university campus with university faculty facilitating, offering options as to time and days. In the initial program and study, 30 fathers were trained throughout a year period. Participants were identified as a diverse population, with a high percentage living with a low-income. Evaluation took place using a pre and post-tests to determine fathers' starting knowledge base and belief system in regards to reading and writing, and to measure what information was retained at the end. Questionnaires were also used to determine if and how fathers transferred information learned to using it at home with their child (Ortiz & Stile, 2002).

Fathers took part in six different learning modules including: Social interaction and play, reading books, pre-writing activities, using environmental print, technology connections (such as websites with literacy activities), and storytelling. In all aspects of the training, fathers were continually reminded of and explained the importance of their role as leader and group learning or a pair and share model used to make sure parent voices were heard (Amstutz, 2000) when discussing strategies to increase their child's early literacy growth. Facilitators demonstrated to them that even if struggling with literacy themselves, beneficial activities could be done, such as making up goofy songs using starting sounds of words, to looking at sports cards together, or pointing out the McDonald's "M" symbol on an outing (Ortiz & Stile, 2002). All of this would benefit their child's literacy learning. Such examples of researched based parent and child interactive literacy activities strengthen the literacy focus between both of them, creating more learning opportunities at home that benefit reading acquisition (Swick, 2004).

At the end of a year's time, 19 of the 30 fathers had completed every module. Within that group, 100% reported applying the training at home and finding it useful. Fathers reported they make sure to at least read a bedtime story to their child, but may also read together other times of the day. The environmental print module appeared to have large impact, as fathers reported great enjoyment reading comics, street signs, magazines, and even cereal boxes with their kids. Many fathers had begun to help their child begin to write their name or simple letters or numbers. All of the participants who completed the program said they would appreciate additional literacy training (Ortiz & Stile, 2002).

Research in early literacy development recognizes the role of parents as central to children's attitudes toward reading. Still both schools and communities can exhibit a disconnect

of ideas, commitment, and resources when working with parents. Finding or creating the right model for the need of an individual population is difficult or different task than educators are trained to do. Teachers are good at teaching kids in their classroom. Moving beyond this is a true challenge and one education has been facing for years. Schools and communities together should seek, consider, and place into action programs that encompass parents and entire families in beginning reading acquisition using many tools (Zygouris-Coe, 2007). Blending characteristics from the most effective parent involvement models for literacy is a crucial obligation only to be successful when coming from all places of learning.

### **Chapter III: Results and Analysis Relative to the Problem**

When reviewing the literature, four common characteristics of effective parent involvement models for successfully teaching early literacy skills are identifiable including: Respect and incorporation of parents' cultural backgrounds and life experiences (Auerbach, 1995; Dail, McGee, & Edwards, 2009; Porter DeCusati & Johnson, 2004; Taylor 1997), intentional parent training in literacy building blocks and teaching tools (Darling & Westberg, 2004; Ortega & Ramirez, 2007; Zygouris-Coe, 2007), emphasis on parents as leaders and learners over focus of facilitators leading parents and children (Amstutz, 2000; Doyle & Zhang, 2011; Ortiz & Stile, 2002), and availability of free materials and other supports necessary in aiding with attendance (Dail, McGee, & Edwards, 2009; Doyle & Zhang, 2011).

In almost all studies cited in this paper, researchers referenced the correlation between low-income environments and issues with literacy development (Dickinson & Snow, 1987; Ortega & Ramirez, 2007), often noting this relationship as a guiding factor in program or model development. A number of the studies reviewed took place in rural areas, or areas experiencing

factors of isolation (Dail & Payne, 2010), such as parents having difficulties with transportation or attaining materials. Therefore the characteristics outlined in this chapter inherently connect to the needs of communities demonstrating both factors. Researchers in a significant amount of the studies assessed acknowledged shortcomings in methods due to the fact most populations studied were small, parent involvement in general is difficult to measure, and that greater research was needed when looking at diverse populations (Darling & Westberg, 2004; Doyle & Zhang, 2011; Ortega & Ramirez, 2007).

The four characteristics directly meet the focus of the research question asked. My goal in response to the research, is to create a small, start-up, community-based parent-involved literacy program in the rural Copper Country of Northern Michigan, but clearly the characteristics listed meet needs for any parent involvement program, be it in schools, pre-schools, private educational enterprises, or community programming. How these characteristics are integrated in different ways or in new models, however, should not reflect the idea that one size fits all.

Research surrounding a wealth view model in programming, or the philosophy to see and treat all parents as already having starting insight or experiences to offer their child in relation to reading development (Auerbach, 1995), supports the outcome of parents tending to create more literary rich environments at home. Parents integrate what they have or how they see value in themselves along with approaches learned about helping their child become a reader. When parents are encouraged to define and implement how activities fit with their home schedule, belief systems, and personal abilities, it was reported that not only were more books read and brought into the home, but play with environmental print occurred in a way that suited

differences in families, thus making it more frequent as well (Dail, McGee, & Edwards, 2009; Ortiz & Stile, 2002). Comments shared by both teachers and parents in studies all stressed the importance of not speaking down to parents (Dail & Payne, 2010 ; Doyle & Zhang, 2011; Porter, DeCusati, & Johnson, 2004). Although these studies were more qualitative in nature, and actual gains in early literacy skills or reading ability of individual participants were not measured; the connection between children living in literary rich environments and greater reading success has been proven (NCFL, 2007). Respect and incorporation of parents' cultural backgrounds and life experiences when involving parents in early literacy teaching models enhances this relationship, making it a key characteristic in effective parent involvement models.

In regards to content of parent involvement models , the more a parent is intentionally taught or trained around what early literacy skills are and how to help teach them their child, the more successful a child becomes with literacy development (Doyle & Zhang, 2011; Swick, 2004). Specific topics, such as phonemic or phonological awareness, rhyming and word families, and segmenting sounds, to more open-ended skills such as how to read-aloud to a child, using environmental print and telling stories around the dinner table are building blocks in literacy development (Darling & Westberg, 2004) that can be taught and integrated into the home. Parents involved with intentional literacy training reported that they gained greater information and used what was learned with their child more often in the home over parents who attended trainings without specific tools provided (Doyle & Zhang, 2011; Ortiz & Stile, 2002) . Nevertheless, many literacy models in both communities and schools do not offer direct training to parents.

For example, during “reading hour” at the library, or similar community and in-school programs, parents are invited to come and listen to a book with their child and take part in a

literature related response. This is valuable when taking into account a child's social and emotional development and it is always considered positive when a parent spends time with a child and a book (Doyle & Zhang, 2011; NCFL, 2007). However, in terms of meeting literary teaching goals, this model is lacking. Facilitators may talk about the importance of parents reading with children, and often books are sent home by the armfuls, but no intentional training occurs. Though a predominant example of positive child development, promoting attendance as a principle or single way for parents to help their child become readers could be misleading. In a similar example, teachers often send books home in a bag or bucket with students and tell parents to read them at home. A parent of a first grade child, I recently received such a bag with only a note with it saying, "Reading books together helps kids become readers". There was no "how to" provided.

Initially parents may not know what they are missing or where to start in terms of teaching strategies. Once introduced and helped to put what they've learned into practice, in almost all studies examined parents desired and requested to learn more (Dail, McGee, & Edwards, 2009; Doyle & Zhang, 2011; Ortiz & Stile, 2002). To be most effective, parent involvement models benefit by offering intentional training in literary building blocks and teaching tools.

Another structural issue attends to whom the teaching or modeled goals are focused. Perhaps it is time to shift the paradigm in parent-involved literacy learning by placing emphasis on parents as leaders and learners, over a more traditional focus of facilitators leading parents and children, therefore seeing parents and the education they can pursue as an opportunity for life-long learning. Continual benefits of parents viewing themselves as leaders in their child's life, even if they themselves are not strong readers, have been documented (Amstutz, 2000; Dail,

McGee, & Edwards, 2009). This could imply that models need to be created for parents to attend programs without worry of having to parent their child while trying to retain new materials, such as the book club, parent-alone, and DADS models (Dail, McGee, & Edwards, 2009; Doyle & Zhang, 2011; Ortiz & Stile, 2002). In these studies, parents reported changing their own reading habits and understanding of what literacy is, creating a more literate environment at home, and applying strategies learned at home over a significant period of time.

For some educators, it may be difficult to agree with a view where children, in a sense, are not part of the direct teaching equation with parents. Yet as a highly educated teacher and mother myself, it occurs to me the countless times I sought needed information with my children with me, such as in a community development meeting or a sermon at church without notable success. As “skilled” as I may see myself, being committed to helping my children act in an appropriate manner, or worrying about what might come next with them did impair my ability to take in the material presented. Therefore, I would argue this is not an issue of income or education level, but a life reality that kids keep one preoccupied. If taking children out of the model for interested parents to engage, knowing that they will then have more enthusiasm for reading and the ability to retain more knowledge that can be brought home to their children, this is a model worth exploring.

In combination with the success of reviewed parent-only models, seeing the variable of the Parent Program study also offers insight (Ortega & Ramirez, 2007). Parents worked directly with children in the classroom, yet from the minute they walked into school, faculty saw them as capable to aide not only their child, but others in need. Mini-lessons were directed by the teacher to get everyone started, but emphasis remained on viewing the parents as leaders (Ortega & Ramirez, 2007). The Parent Program model was able to address both parent and child needs at

once, with parents reporting they felt comfortable to use and continued to integrate strategies at home. These results together with information on parent-only models persuade the examining of a middle-ground. Instead of swinging the pendulum all the way to one side or the other, training sessions with parents alone could be held utilizing intentional training modules, combined with intermittent practicum sessions where children are involved. Such a model mirrors how universities instruct teachers in training at present.

A common theme throughout, was the importance of providing availability of free materials, specifically books (Dail, McGee, & Edwards, 2009; Ortiz & Stile, 2002) and other supports necessary in aiding attendance. Such support included help with transportation, child-care directly on site or stipends for babysitters at home (Doyle & Zhang, 2011). Another trend was offering choice in terms of day and time of meetings. Often programs presented the same material in more than one session of the training, and parents were invited to give input on what time or format of programming worked best for them. Programs that offered parents choices in how they could attend, learn, and use the materials at home delivered greater successful.

“Why didn’t I help with homework

Because the door is noking

the kid is yumping

the food is burning

Time runs fast”

-Rosa

(Auerbauch, 1989, p. 166)

Rosa is a mother that I assume is not much different than those I hope to reach and support with literacy learning for their child. Integrating the four characteristics discovered as a

part of my paper will only achieve the utmost effectiveness when parents such as Rosa are kept at the forefront of continual reflection, planning, and project implementation.

#### **Chapter IV: Recommendation and Conclusion**

Parents are a child's very first teacher or role model, and children pay attention to their behaviors (Binkley, 1998). By implementing the four characteristics identified in the research: Respect and incorporation of parents' cultural backgrounds and life experiences, intentional parent training in literacy building, emphasis on parents as leaders and learners over the focus of facilitators leading parents and children, and availability of free materials and other supports necessary in aiding with attendance, a community-based, predominantly parent-only book club model entitled, *SPARKS to Reading* (Seeing Parents As Readers, Kids Soar) will benefit families in our rural, low-income, northwoods community.

In response to the research evaluated, parents of targeted four- or young five-year-olds displaying indicators of entering Kindergarten below benchmark in regards to early literacy skills will be invited to attend. A cooperative effort to identify participants will involve local child development councils and area Headstarts. The program will take place twice a month covering ten sessions.

The program trial will lead one group only, keeping numbers small. Progress and experiences of participants will be assessed by administering pre-and post-tests of children's literacy awareness or skills using MLPP (Michigan Literacy Progress Profile) evaluations surrounding phonemic awareness, concepts of print, known words, and letter/sound identification. Questionnaires for parents will be given to gauge home outcomes, including change in parent and child's habits and overall feelings around literacy learning activities. Weekly response sheets will judge two questions: "What is the main idea in the mini-lesson tonight?" and, "At what level do I feel comfortable to bring this home and teach it?" Final questionnaires and interviews will occur after the last session.

The late Peter Benson, author of *Sparks: How Parents Can Ignite the Hidden Strengths of Teenagers* (2008), described a spark as a discovered interest or gift, that when identified and nurtured brings joy and direction to life. Sparks are generated from the inside and pulled outward of a child. This philosophy directly matches the wealth view model (Taylor, 1997), as it acknowledges that just as adults need to be seen as already having something to bring to the learning table, so do children and young adults. Benson perceived igniting sparks as a way to change a life or attitude from one of surviving to actually thriving (2008). A “find the spark” concept or view can be related to everyone, children and adults included. In my journey to develop a community-based parent-involvement program for teaching early literacy, three forms of sparks will be linked to literacy program goals:

- 1) What are the sparks needed to ignite early literacy skills and how do we light them?
- 2) What uncoverable interests or sparks could encourage a child to want to engage more with letters, sounds, beginning level reading books, and storytelling or beginning writing?
- 3) What sparks or attributes of parents and their lives connect in ways that they can individualize what literary experiences look like in their home? What is unique about their inner gifts that will allow them to create the most workable literary-rich environment for their family?

A book club model innately addresses the characteristic of respecting and incorporating parents’ cultural backgrounds and life experiences. It also places emphasis on parents as leaders and learners over the focus of facilitators leading parents and children. Book clubs naturally place people in roles where ideas, responses, and participation are built in. Group learning and a sharing process, over a one person facilitated task occurs. *The SPARKS to Reading* program,

transpired from a parent-only model (Doyle & Zhang, 2011; Swick, 2004), will give greater opportunity for parents to process and retain information without having to worry about their child during the session time period. Another association is that sharing books allow readers to offer personal life connections. Increased detail surrounding participants' cultures, beliefs, and life experiences are discovered and can be integrated as they learn to teach their children.

In an act to avoid stereotyping parents in relation to cultural, socioeconomic, or life backgrounds, while also considering funds are lacking for educational programming, effort will be made to seek volunteers from a group of retired teachers or librarians, naming them "Literary (or Spark) Guides" over using the term leaders during sessions. Another option is to utilize teachers in training, possibly in collaboration with a local university. Unmistakably our schools are filled with exceptional teachers, skilled in teaching early literacy skills. Still, by seeking program guides out of the system, participants will perhaps feel as if being more on an even playing field. Along with this, such volunteers aren't responsible for the numerous aspects of running a classroom. Teachers working honorably day in and day out, while dealing with parent issues regularly, may unknowingly bring stereotypes to the activity at hand (Manning & Swick, 2006).

In terms of structure, among many experiences, sessions will demonstrate the characteristic of providing intentional parent training in literacy building. A session outline includes: Check-in and adult book choice discussion for thirty-five minutes, forty minutes of an introduced a mini-lesson, combined with parent to parent, or parent to guide modeling, practice time, and roleplaying. A final fifteen minutes will allow parents to meet in small groups in order to discuss how what they have learned will best integrate into their family life in the coming weeks. Refreshments will be made available at the end of group discussion time.

Given a number of options, all books selected for parents to read have some connection to revealing one's inspiration in life. Book titles follow: *The Spark* (Bacon, 2006), *The Red Book: Igniting Your Divine Spark* (Beak, 2006), *Thirty Ways to Spark Your Inner Genius, A Little Every Day Deck of Cards* (Maisel, 2008), and *Sparks* (Benson, 2008). Book choices for adult reading will be determined by the group's literacy level and interests. Awareness that a common level of reading ability may not exist, selections chosen represent a variety of levels and formats, one being a simple deck of cards with minimal print that expresses a single idea on each card. Another option is that books could be read on audio for those who wish to join and share, but might struggle to get through an entire book.

On this note, it is possible completing an entire book may not become an absolute, as excerpts from many sources could be used. Offering choice as to what parents want to read and how they feel they could best learn, also noted in characteristics related to availability of free materials and other supports necessary in aiding with attendance, means willingness for guides to listen to the needs of participants is essential. Group members could link up as partners or in small groups to read together or touch base using the internet or phone during the weeks between sessions. In the first trial session, all parents and guides will read and discuss the same material at the same time. However, a possible variation on this could be to use a literature circle model (Daniels, 2002), where small groups or partners read different literature and report to the group in creative ways.

The goal of the mini-lessons will be to provide parents understanding of concepts presented, along with teaching strategies that detail how to read to or with a child, habits or ideas for creating the most effective learning space at home, phonemic or phonological awareness and letter/sound play, word families and rhyming, storytelling and language sparkers, segmenting

words and syllable games, sight word hunts and multisensory tips, how to add a spark to learning (integrating likes and interests into literacy activities), technology connections, and blending.

Children will be invited to attend two of the sessions. The first being during the topic of adding sparks to learning, and the closing session will take place at a local library as a celebration of parents and children together. Sing-alongs, visual cues and motions connected to literacy skills, as well as other strategies learned throughout the book club will take place in a party type atmosphere. Meeting at the library also allows opportunity for parents to get a library card and see what is available so that books continue to be brought into the home even after sessions end.

Two specific children's books have been chosen as building blocks for parent learning and parent-child interaction. Both books present a spark theme. The first, *Gathering Sparks* (Schwartz, 2010), a picture book with large minimal print on each page, has been chosen for guides to use when modeling how parents can most effectively read to or with their child. The book then is sent home as a starting gift or interest builder for the child. In connection with this, a parent self-help checklist (Smith, 1984), offers additional insight on implementing intentional literacy skills. The checklist allows parents to monitor progress at home over the entire program time, consequently placing materials and leadership into their hands.

The second children's book, *Spark The Firefighter* (Krensky, 2008), will be explored and sent home to help parents introduce their child's "Sparks For Reading Folder". The folder holds at-home materials and activities connected to the mini-lessons. Spark the Dragon desperately needs to get a job on the fire department, because he has a big secret. He is afraid of fire. Spark realizes the only way to conquer something that might seem different or scary is to pull out his courage from inside of him, face his fear, and work hard. Once this happens, life gets quite exciting (Krensky, 2008). Parents, now seen as their child's teacher or reading leader,

help kids make the connection that new things at home with the folder and ways of learning about books may seem a bit different or even scary at first, but as long as they pull out their courage and work hard to face what they are helped to learn, they'll succeed just like Spark the Dragon.

In initial stages, materials for mini-lessons and folders will be gathered from personal teaching supplies, as well as using online resources, such as Reading A-Z (<http://www.readinga-z.com/members/index.php>), and Pre-Kindergarten Family Fundamentals from the MLPP site: ([http://www.michigan.gov/documents/Pre\\_Kindergarten\\_Literacy\\_Activities\\_66520\\_7.pdf](http://www.michigan.gov/documents/Pre_Kindergarten_Literacy_Activities_66520_7.pdf)) Although school assessments surrounding literacy continue to rework or rename themselves, MLPP is one of the only evaluation models that offers a parent connection component. Many of the activities are similar to what children will see once in Kindergarten and can prepare them in a multiple ways.

As time and mini-lessons build, and parents recognize their unique gifts or abilities nurtured by the adult book choice and responses, informal discussion will integrate the topic that people tend to live a fuller life when finding and using their personal strengths. In the same way, it can be assumed that as readers, we excel to a higher level when basing practice and reading choices around things to which our interests or gifts relate (Baker & Wigfield, 1999). If kids are active in sports, letter and sound connection could be yelled out loud when throwing a ball back and forth. If a child loves baking, reading recipes opens new doors to literacy learning. Artists may enjoy creating letters in paints, sand, and shaving cream. *SPARKS for Reading*, could also be viewed as sparks for optimal learning.

One topic not addressed in the research reviewed, are the practical aspects of working and creating a program in a low-income, rural environment. A few studies reported securing

small grants, but this is not something to be depended upon in the current financial climate, particularly in regards to education. Having done community organizing in Northern Michigan's Keweenaw Peninsula around the area of parent involvement and supporting children with disabilities, a key observation for success came when understanding the value of building relationships.

Due to the fact the newly developed model is an independent endeavor; there may possibly be greater options for implementation, as programming will not be required to fit other's schedules or expectations. Imperative, however, is being sure participants can take part, while recognizing the characteristic that having no cost placed on them is crucial. Ideas for working with little to no budget can mean seeking a meeting place at a church or back room of a local coffee shop willing to offer space. Refreshments are often offered by local sub shops or bakeries when adding a sign or coupons on the table recognizing their business. A book stipend for the three required texts might be provided by a local reading council or Great Start Initiative, or a community organization willing to hold a simple fundraiser, such as a soup and pie lunch. As much as the parent-only model drives this program idea, knowing this particular region and its needs, childcare on site may need to be arranged in order to gain attendance. Area youth groups, babysitting classes, or high school level child development classes often have students needing to pursue volunteer hours.

Two major areas in consideration of further research are recognized. The first is the overabundance of technological resources that promote themselves as tools to help children become readers. From educational television shows, to websites with learning activities as well as parenting tips, it would be interesting to see what the research says on their impact in regards to parents being involved with their child's literacy learning. Such resources and even public

service announcements on the importance of parent reading to children have been around for an extended period of time with no rise in reading scores in our country being reported. However, literature on technology and its benefits still deserves review, particularly on how technology could merge into a teaching setting where parents take the lead on ways it could best be integrated into their home and family life.

The second area of further research to be acknowledged is a review of the literature from the teacher perspective. My paper displays an imbalance, as much of the research and analysis centers around putting parents at the core of the solution in non-traditional ways when creating parent-involved literacy models. While writing my paper, it was in no way my intention to put practicing teachers down, yet I do think by moving away from an old system, new ideas are easier to explore. Nevertheless, greater information on teacher beliefs, experiences, and ideas surrounding parent involvement would be of value.

In conclusion, *SPARKS to Reading* conveys many messages and contributions to parent involvement and a child's literacy development. The program's positive themed umbrella addresses all characteristics determined by the research reviewed in my paper.

Attention to finding one's spark places natural reminders for guides to make sure they are truly getting to know participants and recognizing the diversity and gifts of families. Whether needing to adapt program materials, or more importantly to identify leadership traits parents are already able or capable to offer with the right supports, the theme validates a respect for differences. Parents who discover their personal assets may recognize a deeper sense of themselves as leaders in their child's literacy growth. Intentional training involving an overlying message of what is possible brings a quirky and fun dynamic to what could be an overwhelming amount of content. Finally, *SPARKS to Reading* will encourage parents to find the unique ways

in which they choose to integrate materials at hand. This trait or characteristic was most tied to families that create a lifestyle that provides a literary rich environment. As a result, children in these homes have greater chance to succeed as readers.

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