

THE EFFECTS OF EARLY LITERACY DEVELOPMENT ON ACADEMIC SUCCESS  
IN THE EDUCATIONAL SETTING AND IMPLICATIONS  
FOR EDUCATIONAL LEADERS AND TEACHERS

by  
Julie A. Antilla

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**Abstract**

Early literacy skills are learned and developed prior to a child entering formal education. Parents, as the first teachers of their child, play a pivotal role in their child's overall literacy development and readiness for school. Ensuring that early literacy practices occur, especially reading aloud to a child, will not only prepare a child for kindergarten, but will affect their literary success throughout their entire education and even into adulthood. The dynamic and ever-changing structure of the family and home life, coupled with an overwhelming amount of children lacking early literacy activities in the home, necessitated the development of early childhood education programs and funding. Even though early childhood education programs have made a significant impact by providing early learning and preparing children for formal education, they do not serve all students; therefore many children still lack the literacy skills necessary to begin school. Educational leaders and teachers must be prepared to face the challenges of ensuring that every student, regardless of academic ability and literacy development prior to school, meet grade level achievement standards. The implementation of literacy interventions must be fully supported by educational leaders with essential training for teachers on best practice and implementation into the curriculum, supported by a nurturing and supportive relationship between the school and home, to best provide for the literacy needs of all students.

## Chapter I: Introduction

### Introduction

The ability to read and process information is a necessary part of our educational experience. The teaching of reading and writing is key for the formation of literacy as young children attend school, through adolescence, and finally as they emerge as competent and educated adults. Literacy is now, more than ever, essential for basic survival on a day-to-day basis. The student that struggles to read will struggle in all subject areas, affecting and perhaps perpetuating a negative attitude towards reading and school in general.

An early introduction to reading before the elementary school years can greatly increase literacy development and reading comprehension. Literacy scholars advocate that reading to preschoolers helps prepare them for greater success in school (Anderson & Cheung, 2003). If a child does not have this early introduction to reading from their parents/primary caregivers, the child is essentially behind coming into school. Moreover, an early introduction to reading fosters the development of a positive attitude towards reading (Lawson, 2012). If a child comes into the elementary school setting with no prior experiences with reading: the school, teachers, and principal need to be very aware of the different interventions to use to educate the child in reading comprehension and literacy development. Educational leaders must address the needs of families, even before the children reach school age, to ensure the academic success of all students.

Education should be equitable. Research indicates that students with pre-reading promotion in the home have an educational advantage once they begin elementary school. Studies have been conducted to determine how parental /caregiver implementation directly affects student literacy. "Understanding the role of home literacy practices in children's language

and literacy development during the preschool years has important implications for children's later literacy success" (Roberts, 2005, p.48).

### **Statement of Problem**

Reading comprehension is when a student has the ability to read for understanding and knowledge. Literacy development is the overall scope of reading and writing skills and emergent literacy skills include phonological awareness, phoneme blending, segmenting skills, and knowledge of print concepts. Advocates for literacy education heavily promote introducing literacy concepts to children as young as one year old, yet United States illiteracy rates continue to rise. Teachers in the pre-school and elementary grades focus on developing oral language skills coupled with emergent literacy skills that have been shown to facilitate the reading process, because studies have shown that reading problems are usually first seen in the very early stages of reading acquisition and they are very hard to overcome (Developing Emergent, 2003). Extra attention and help is a necessity for those students struggling with reading and is essential during the very first years of education.

Even though reading is primarily governed cognitively, it is also influenced by affective functions and research has found that the two do not operate independently of one another. There are many factors to consider that are part of the affective domain, including attitude towards reading, interest, motivation, reading for enjoyment, personal interests and values, and self-concept (Garrett, 2002). Getting students to make connections to books and reading is vital for the continuation of reading on their own and for pleasure.

“The extent to which children are successful with reading and how much they actually read is directly related to how they feel about reading (Report, 2000). In addition, some personal attributes and environmental factors that negatively influence the attitudes children have toward

reading. These elements are: achievement, self-concept, parents and the home environment, instructional practices and special programs, gender, test intelligence, socioeconomic status, and interests” (Garrett, 2002, p. 21). This is especially important for educators and principals to consider when making decisions about their school’s reading curriculum.

"The relationship between the skills with which children enter school and their later academic performance is strikingly stable. For instance, research has shown that there is nearly a 90% probability that a child will remain a poor reader at the end of the fourth grade if the child is a poor reader at the end of the first grade. Further, knowledge of alphabet letters at entry into kindergarten is a strong predictor of reading ability in 10<sup>th</sup> grade," according to Ernest L. Boyer, (1991). For educators, being aware of all of the factors that are involved in successful literacy education programs and knowing students attitudes towards reading will greatly benefit the students’ individual literacy gains. Educators must implement the best practices of literacy education into curriculum and daily lesson plans, not only to produce literate members of a society, but also to build a love for reading and a joy and contentment that will serve their students well throughout their lives. Educational leaders must take into careful consideration their part in each student’s literacy development, even though it ideally should occur before the child even enters school.

### **Research Question**

How does early literacy development prepare a child for academic success in the educational setting and what are the implications for educational leaders and teachers?

**Definition of Terms**

**Emergent Literacy Skills:** The skills, knowledge, and attitudes that are necessary for the development of reading and writing – are important for later reading success (Roberts, Jurgens, & Burchinal, 2005).

**Home Literacy Environment:** the experiences, attitudes, and materials pertaining to literacy that a child encounters and interacts with at home (Roberts, Jurgens, & Burchinal, 2005).

**Literacy:** viewed as a comprehensive set of skills involving the ability to use and comprehend printed information (Athanasou, 2011).

**Phonological Awareness:** the understanding that oral language is made up of sounds or groups of sounds. The process of developing phonological awareness begins when a child recognizes that speech is composed of words (Pikulski, 1989). This understanding is then extended until a child is able to recognize that words are composed of sounds, or phonemes, and he or she is able to manipulate those phonemes to accomplish various tasks (Developing, 2003).

**Reading:** a process rather than a set of skills to be mastered; Readers must interact with text by problem solving – difficult words; complex syntax and organization; and obscure references, settings, or concepts are challenges that proficient readers meet and overcome (Coddling, 2001).

**Reading Aloud:** Reading books to young children constitutes a very common adult-child early literacy activity. This interactive context is considered productive in promoting literacy because it is viewed as contextualized, meaningful, and motivating for young children (Aram, 2006).

**Reader's Workshop:** a children's and young adult book club – a literature appreciation class that intentionally delivers story by reading out loud (Follos, 2007).



## Chapter II: Review of Literature

### Home Literacy Environment

The process of literacy development is complex, involving many variables and experiences that intricately overlap each other. Literacy development begins at birth as a young baby hears and begins to interpret meaning from the spoken word. The child's environment and parental literacy interactions are key components to the overall literacy development of a child prior to formal education. Socio-economic factors serve as consistent predictors of, not only academic success through a child's entire education, but also show a strong correlation to early literacy development, or the lack thereof.

Research conducted on early learning has exploded in the past two decades as educators and researchers search for answers to improve literacy development at every level. Many believe that incorporating pre-schooling literacy development is critical for a child's overall literacy and language development. Researchers also continue to seek and determine what types of early literacy learning practices have the most success and how they are implemented during the child's pre-school life. In his report of the National Commission on Reading in 1985, Richard Anderson stated, "The single most significant factor influencing a child's early educational success is an introduction to books and being read to at home prior to beginning school" (Arnold & Colburn, 2006, p. 31). There are significant implications for educators and educational leaders in view of the fact that literacy is present in almost all aspects of life, especially in the school setting. These implications lead us to consider the question, How does early literacy effect the overall academic achievement and success of a child as they progress through school and become adult members of society?

### **Home Literacy Practices and Their Effect on Student Achievement**

Roberts, Jurgens, and Burchinal (2005) conducted a study that sought to find and determine the connections between a child's literacy skills upon entering kindergarten and if literacy practices in the home had any effect on literacy development once a child began school. Four specific home literacy practices were measured: shared book reading frequency, maternal book reading strategies, child's enjoyment of reading, and maternal sensitivity of literacy activities. The extent of how these four specific literacy practices impacted the global measure of the home environment was also examined. Studying the extent of the four home literacy practices and the role that the home literacy environment has in language and development revealed a connection between emergent literacy skills and literacy home practices of children between the ages of three and five years of age.

The study includes data collected during each child's first five years of life through their entry into kindergarten. Results from the research revealed that maternal sensitivity had a significant impact on the child's receptive vocabulary. Maternal sensitivity was measured within six different dimensions: warmth, sensitivity, responsiveness, encouragement of initiative, stimulation value, and elaborateness. Shared book reading was also shown to have a positive effect on vocabulary development of children; mothers who used multiple reading strategies had children that scored higher in vocabulary development between three and five years old. The number of times a child was read to and the child's enjoyment of reading showed no significant relation to the measured outcomes. A significant finding from the research revealed that the HOME (the global measure of the home environment) was the most consistent predictor of literacy skills of the children studied. The HOME provided an accurate predictor of the level of

receptive vocabulary development at ages three and five, and the level of early literacy skills of preschool age children and of children upon entering kindergarten.

Roberts, Jurgens, and Burchinal (2005) concluded that of the four literacy practices studied, as well as the measure of the overall quality and responsiveness of the home environment, that the most consistent and strongest predictor of children's language and literacy skills was the HOME. In relation to each individual literacy practice, the home environment contributed over and above each in predicting a child's early language and literacy development.

The HOME may assess several parameters of a child's language and literacy environment (i.e., the primary caregiver's emotional and verbal responsiveness, acceptance of the child's behavior, organization of the environment, academic and language stimulation, and maternal involvement with the child) that together have a greater impact on a child's language and literacy development than isolated literacy practices. It may thus be tapping some of the same underlying constructs as the individual home literacy practices we studied. (Roberts, Jurgens & Burchinal, 2005, p.350)

With current research discoveries on the impact that parental reading aloud has on a child's literacy development, including oral language skills, print knowledge, and phonological awareness, Lawson hypothesized that reading aloud to a child could also impact the development of skills, such as sustaining attention until completing a task, and the emotional development of the child as well. "The parental practice of reading stories aloud to children is generally acknowledged to have a powerful influence on their language development, their emergent literacy and on their reading achievement" (Lawson, 2012, p. 257). According to Cunningham and Stanovich (1997), children experiencing literacy experiences prior to kindergarten are more

likely to read early and to read well, which has a positive effect on their overall education. Children lacking lengthy reading opportunities prior to starting school are more likely to have difficulties, which unfortunately continue throughout their elementary and secondary school years, negatively affecting their performance in all academic classes (Felton, 1998). Although there is much research concerning the connection between parental reading aloud and academic performance, there is currently little that examines how parental reading aloud can positively impact student behavior and emotions.

The ideas presented by Lawson (1998) are founded upon many different areas of research. Based on research pointing to the importance of emotion in learning, the many different roles of emotion in relation to language and literacy learning, how language development is an internal process, and the development of children's initial discourse skills, Lawson explores how and why parental reading practices greatly impact complex skills associated with student success in the academic world.

Lawson explains that there is emotion conveyed by speech by way of prosodic cues, the pitch contour, tempo and rhythm, loudness, and timbre when a person speaks. Prosodic cues help the listener to understand the spoken message, as well as the emotions of the person speaking. According to Plante, Holland and Schmithorst (2006), infants prefer speech patterns that include prosodic information; it is a natural occurrence that parents (including adults and children in general) speak to infants in a sing-song prosodic manner. Neurophysiologically, these interactions build a foundation in language development and comprehension. The emotional ties that an infant develops with a parent or caregiver are deeply imbedded in infant-directed speech, not only facilitating an emotional bond with that person, but allowing them to develop and

practice using their own prosodic elements of speech. Thus, it is a crucial part of the early development of literacy skills for the child.

### **The Role of Socio-Economic Factors in Literacy Development**

There are many variables in family composition that effect literacy education in the home. Different forms of parental involvement, socio-economic status of the family, school and community connections, and family structure all play a role in the education of children. "For example, Coleman argues that the low dropout rates in Catholic high schools can be partly explained by the fact that Catholic school communities, supported by the church, create and enforce strong norms against dropping out" (Anderson & Cheung, 2003, p. 414).

A topic that is largely debated is how cultural resources affect a child's education. Many argue that children in families of high economic status have access to more resources and have a higher promotion of education in the home. An embrace of a 'scholarly' culture "is related to interest and cognitive ability required for reading activities" (Anderson & Cheung, 2003, p.413). Anderson and Cheung (2003) conducted a study that sought to reveal if family structure does indeed affect the educational outcomes of children, and to determine if a relationship existed between cultural resources and social resources in the family.

Using graphical chain models and longitudinal data, the researchers compiled data from the National Child Development Survey (NCDS) from Britain. They determined five different hypotheses before the study began: (1) Family size has a negative correlation to intellectual performance; (2) Children from two-parent natural parent families have better academic success compared to children raised in single-parent homes; (3) The cultural practices and scholarly activities of parents and children have a positive correlation to intellectual performance; (4) Higher levels of social resources for children and families will determine better academic

performance, and (5) it will be early in the child's school years that the effects of cultural and socio-economic status will be most noticeable (Anderson & Cheung, 2003).

The National Child Development Survey is a longitudinal study including children born in Britain during the week of March 3-9, 1958, in a single cohort. The data includes documentation of nearly all realms of childhood; including family structure, social interaction in the home, children's daily activities, social status of the family, parent-school contact, health and well-being, and many other areas. The initial sample size was 17,414 babies, and the NCDS designed the sample to be representative of all children in Britain. The data was collected at six different times: shortly after birth in 1958, when the children turned seven in 1965, when the children turned 11 in 1969, when the children turned 16 in 1974, in 1981 as adults at 23 years old, and finally when they turned 33 in 1991. Test data was collected and recorded directly from schools when the children were 7, 11, and 16, and each individual was interviewed at age 16 onwards (i.e. waves three to five). After eliminating individuals due to areas of lacking information, the analytical sample size was 7010.

The findings from the graphical chain model revealed that social resources of parents directly affected the reading habits of children, but cultural practices had no real significant impact on a child's early academic achievement. Family structure impacted child's academic performance in elementary school, but did not directly impact that child attaining a university degree. This finding supports that children from single-parent families read the same amount at home as do two-parent natural children. However, social class and parental education strongly affected the amount of social and cultural resources that a student had. Finally, results show that reading outside of school hours to be very important. The encouragement and promotion of

reading and the amount of time parents read to their children directly benefited the children's educational outcomes (Anderson & Cheung, 2003).

Not surprisingly, these findings suggest above all else that social class is undoubtedly important to education outcomes. They also suggest, however, that active parental involvement can play an important role in mediating inequalities in education. The results of this study imply that as well as policies geared towards widening university access, government initiatives should encourage parents to be actively involved in their children's education. New policy initiative should also provide greater encouragement to children to participate in scholarly activities outside of school. (Anderson & Cheung, 2003, p. 420)

As education reform constantly evolves, so do government initiatives proposed and implemented to increase academic success in the educational system. In her article, McGencey explores the Obama administration's \$500 million Race To the Top—Early Learning Challenge as showing an immense need in the United States to improve early childhood education programs and the importance of those programs for the educational success of children and the livelihood of the country. McGencey explained that quality educational programs must be in place to provide early educational programs for children in need. All children benefit from these programs, but the children that need them the most come from low-socioeconomic homes that, on average, lack enriching early childhood educational experiences. McGencey (2003) also discusses how many low-income children have lower executive functioning skills, including: concentration, attentiveness, and impulse control, and oftentimes score lower on preschool cognitive tests. David Berkham and Valerie Lee's (2002) research shows that low-income

children score two-thirds lower than children in the highest income group on early literacy skills prior to kindergarten.

Donald Hernandez cites startling statistics that warrant attention in his report *Double Jeopardy: How Third-Grade reading Skills and Poverty Influence High School Graduation*:

- One in six children who are not reading proficiently in third grade do not graduate from high school on time, a rate four times greater than that for proficient readers.
- Drop-out rates are highest for the low, below-basic readers: 23 percent of these children drop out or fail to finish high school on time, compared to 9 percent of children with basic reading skills and 4 percent of proficient readers.
- For children who were poor for at least a year and were not reading proficiently in third grade, the proportion that do not finish school rose to 26 percent. That is more than six times the rate for all proficient readers.
- The rate was highest for poor black and Hispanic students, at 31 and 33 percent, respectively—or about eight times the rate for all proficient readers.
- Even among poor children who were proficient reader in third grade, 11 percent still did not finish high school, That compare to 9 percent of subpar third-grade readers who have never been poor. (McGencey, 2011, p. 56)

For educators and educational leaders, this statistical evidence has immense implications for the home, classroom, and beyond. There is a need for quality learning experiences to occur before a child ever walks into a school. Educational leaders need to consider the role that they play in securing those quality educational experiences for future kindergarten students so each individual child will be ready to learn. Reaching out to and educating parents is a vital piece to this puzzle, and a challenge that must be met.



Many teachers and educational leaders do reach out to parents to ensure the academic success of their students. Oftentimes there is frustration in knowing that a parent is not fulfilling what a teacher views as a simple request: read to your child. With so much information presented to parents about reading to their children and how it will help them to be more successful when reaching school, one question is continuously raised by educators and counselors: Why are parents and caregivers not reading to children? Surely parents are bombarded by the messages of the importance of reading to children through television ads, radio, library outreach programs, pre-school programs, literature given from the hospital after birth, and the many other media used to promote this message. Parents of school-age children, especially the early years, receive the request of reading to their child from the teacher. Perplexed by the fact that parents were not reading with their child per her request, one teacher conducted personal interviews of parents of kindergarteners and first graders who did not read to their children and posed questions to try to help her to understand the lack of reading environment in their homes. Below are a sample of the questions asked and responses:

**Q1: What does reading to your child mean?**

"I think it means helping your children sound out words."

"Reading means opening the book and reading to the end, just try to get the job done

My problem is my children won't sit still."

"Could it mean selecting fun books for your child?"

"I really don't know what teachers mean when they say, Read to your child."

"I don't read that well myself so I don't read to my child."

"I don't know how to get started."

**Q2: Why do you think your teacher often requests that you read to your child?**

"Because it is good for them, I think."

"That's something teachers tell me every year, but they don't tell me what they mean."

"Maybe it is something that kindergarten and first grade teachers just say to parents, I don't know. I get so tired of them saying the same thing every year. I don't even know what they mean, anyway."

"Books can help our children learn to speak better."

**Q3: Do you understand what the teacher means when he or she asks you to read to your child?**

"No, I don't know what the teacher means."

"No, I don't know the correct way to begin reading to my child."

"I don't know what to do when I open the book. I mean I don't know what to do first, second, third, and so on."

"I wish somebody would tell me what to do, because I am fed up with teachers saying, Read to your child."

"I am tired of teachers saying, 'Your child would do so much better in school if you read to them and talked to them.' I do talk to my children. Maybe I don't read to them cause I have difficulty reading myself."

**Q4: What difficulties have you encountered when you have attempted to read to your child?**

"I guess my answer to this question is if you can't read or don't feel comfortable reading, you ain't gonna want to read to your children."

"I try to read, but I guess I am not doing it right. My child becomes bored, not interested in the book, so I quit trying to read."

"I don't know what books to read to my child."

"Because I don't read well, I don't make time in my schedule. I just pray that they will learn to read in school."

**Q5: Is storybook reading an important part of your daily interactions?**

"No, storybook reading is not an important part of my daily interactions with my child" (This comment was made unanimously by the parents). (Edwards, 2005, p.7-8)

The responses made to these questions can provide valuable information for professional educators and parents alike. A parent that has trouble reading will experience problems reading to a child. More than likely, the parent will not be able to provide for their child in this manner and will become frustrated when educators ask them to do so. The Read to your Child directive is very vague leaving parents asking themselves what exactly they were to be doing. "Perhaps one of the reasons storybook reading was not an important part of the parents' daily interactions with their children is that many of them were unable to assume the responsibility of being their child's first tutor in 'unraveling the fascinating puzzle of written language'" (Edwards, 2005, p. 8). If the parent or caregiver in the home struggles with reading, relating a joy of reading to their child will be very difficult.

Teachers are able to determine if a child struggles to read and in which specific areas - problems might exist. They are trained and educated in the newest and most effective literacy teaching principles and practices. Teachers often have contact with the parents or caregivers of

their students, yet it seems like a piece of the puzzle is missing. Knowing the aspects of the parents' education and home literacy environments could help strengthen the connection between home and school and literacy development. Instead of telling parents to read to their children, teachers may have to teach parents how to read to their children. With challenges like cultural diversity, changing family demographics, time constraints, economics, and emotional issues, the evident need for parent teacher collaboration is so very necessary for positive literacy gains for students.

### **Long-term Effects of Literacy Development**

With tremendous technological advances in recent years, people are surrounded by “the printed word” everywhere they turn. Email, blogs, Facebook, Twitter, and texting necessitate strong literacy skills as more and more technologies requiring reading are infused into the workplace. The student that struggles throughout school in developing literacy skills will continue to struggle in their adult life, creating harsh implications for career options.

A study conducted by Athanasou (2011) examined literacy levels of adults and how reading is part of the foundation of career development. The Wide Range Achievement Test (WRAT3) which assesses educational achievement in basic reading, spelling, and math skills was given to 465 people, ranging in age from 14 to 79 (with the median age being 36 years). The literacy component focuses on recognizing and decoding words and does not test for reading comprehension. Each test was given individually and the data was used to provide a narrow focus on reading abilities of adults in the working population.

The results from data revealed that 50% of the participants had a reading level of 7<sup>th</sup> grade or below. The reading scores varied across social factors, with high scores reported in all major occupational groups. Laborers, on average, scored lower than adults in professional

careers. Of significant importance is Athanasou's previous data examination of the 1970 Youth in Transition study cohort, who were tested via the Australian Studies of School Performance in 1980. The children's academic achievement was tested when they were ten years old, and a follow-up mail survey was sent to each in 1991 to obtain occupation status. The results of the test and survey showed that educational and occupational outcomes were related to the literacy levels from elementary school; "literacy at age 10 was a predictor of education—vocational achievement in one's early 20s (some 11 to 14 years later)!" (Athanasou, 2011, p. 16).

Implications for educational instruction and the broader theoretical issues concerning this study are that reading level at the elementary level is linked to future occupational achievement. Students with lower reading abilities at the elementary level will be less likely to attain certain careers if the educational system they are part of does not include curriculum to accelerate reading potential and learning. In a world of continued technological advances and literacy expectations, if the struggling elementary student's literacy needs are not met, opportunities for post-secondary education and career options will be limited.

### **Early Childhood Education**

Research shows that an overwhelming amount of children in the United States are not academically ready to begin kindergarten. Education reform during the past two decades advocates that a crucial step in preparing all children to be "school ready" is to create programs to ensure it. An article by Doggett and Wat (2010) reported on data presented by different states in the U.S. that began prekindergarten state-mandated programs and their effectiveness. The article began by presenting statistical data provided by West, Denton, and Germino-Hausken (2000) concerning the educational level of low-income children before entering kindergarten. Through their research they found that 30% of low-income children are unfamiliar with print

until kindergarten. They also found that 17% of children from middle-income families and 8% of children who had a parent with a bachelor's degree or higher also could not recognize print. Research from Coley (2002) suggest that about 60% of low-income children do not even know the alphabet prior to kindergarten, and that more than one third of middle income children are at the same level. These research findings suggest that significant gaps in education and ability occur prior to beginning school for American children. The research also suggests that concentrating only on low-income children to provide rigorous pre-kindergarten programs for must be reconsidered for the inclusion of all children who would benefit, including middle and upper-income children as well.

According to Doggett and Wat (2010) there are forty states plus the District of Columbia that offer state-funded prekindergarten programs. Each state aligns their pre-kindergarten programs with state standards and the curriculum programs of the elementary schools. Professional development and teaching practices are designed and implemented by state curriculum guidelines as well. Even though the United State's federal program, Head Start, promotes quality pre-kindergarten education, it currently only serves America's poorest children, including only half of the children that qualify for assistance. Many states initially began their own state programs aimed at the lowest-income students, but found that there were impressive achievement gains for middle-income children involved in pre-kindergarten programs as well. Data from a study conducted in Tulsa, Oklahoma, measured achievement gains of all children in the pre-kindergarten state program, showing a 41% higher score for letter-word identification and 17% higher spelling scored for middle-income students who attended pre-kindergarten compared to those who did not. Since middle-income children constitute more than half of all children who become special education students or do not graduate, educational reformists must

address state and federal funding issues for the inclusion of all children in exceptional pre-kindergarten programs.

When the New Jersey Supreme Court found that the state of New Jersey was not enabling all children to meet state education standards in the *Abbott vs. Burke* court trial in 1998, the state established and implemented a rigorous, high quality pre-kindergarten program in the 31 lowest-income school districts in the state. The programs were available for all children that were 3 to 4 years old, regardless of economic background, and were held to the highest of standards, including developmentally appropriate curriculum, comprehensive early learning guidelines, small class size, low child to adult ratios, teacher requirements including college level education and a “PreK to 3<sup>rd</sup>” credential, and financial resources for procuring early childhood specialists and master teachers (Doggett & Wat, 2010).

Two years after the initial implementation of the program, an evaluation was completed on the program with researchers providing data that was collected as they tracked student progress through the 2<sup>nd</sup> grade. Compared to students who did not enroll in pre-kindergarten, those who were in preK classes showed significant language, literacy, and math skill improvement upon entrance into kindergarten. The preK students also performed significantly better in language comprehension, vocabulary skills, and math skills through 2<sup>nd</sup> grade, and were 30% less likely to repeat a grade after being in the program for one year. That number rose to 50% of students being less likely to repeat a grade after two preK years. Because of its initial and continued success, New Jersey includes a strong preK curriculum as a part of its public education plan (Doggett & Wat, 2010).

The evidence from New Jersey’s success, as well as other states who have bought into integrating preK into public education, suggest that the achievement gaps of middle-income and

low-income children will never be closed unless they are dealt with prior to kindergarten. Educational reformers need to consider in utmost urgency the impact that early childhood education plays in the overall development of the child.

### **Early Childhood Education Programs Minimize Achievement Gaps**

Not unlike other states in the U.S., Michigan seeks to understand the underpinnings of how and why student achievement data has a direct relation to the economic status of a student. According to the Michigan Department of Education, most concern rests on the fact that low-income children begin public education well behind upper class children. Because students are so far behind initially, they will more than likely be behind for the rest of their school years, oftentimes repeating grades and unfortunately dropping out of school. According to T. Howard (2010), “the term ‘achievement gap’, refers to “the discrepancy in educational outcomes and access between various student groups in the United States, in particular African American, Native American, certain Asian American, and Latino students on the low end of the performance scale, and their White and certain Asian American counterparts at the higher end of the academic performance scale” (p. 3). In Michigan, for example, only 13% of low-income 11<sup>th</sup> grade students met the Math standard on the Michigan Merit Exam compared to 39% of all students. Results from this standardized test show that there are gaps in achievement scores between each income group across all subject areas.

The gaps in student achievement prompted the design and implementation of publically funded preschool programs to provide much needed assistance for socio-economically diverse families in Michigan. The Great Start Readiness Programs (GSRP) shows promising results in terms of closing achievement gaps in student achievement by addressing the needs of students during the very influential pre-school years. A longitudinal study of the program was conducted

between 1995-2011 to measure both short term and long term effects of the program. Results from the study showed that kindergarten through third grade teachers ranked GSRP students significantly higher in readiness to learn, retaining learning, attendance, interest in schoolwork, and initiative compared to similar peers. At the fourth grade level, teachers rated GSRP students significantly higher on literacy knowledge, thinking skills, and successful progression to the next level compared to peers. Finally, at the 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> grade levels, GSRP students scored five percentage points better on the Michigan Merit Exam in Math, and seven percent better in language arts. GSRP students had a higher rate of graduating on time compared to non-GSRP students (58.3% vs. 43%), and GSRP students of color had a much higher number of students that graduated on time (59.7%) compared to non-GSRP students (36.5%) (Michigan, 2013).

The results from Michigan's longitudinal study of the Great Start Readiness Programs provide a framework for educational reform in this country. If the goal is to make education equitable, then it must be made equitable at the start. Waiting until a child begins school is, unfortunately, too late.

### **Literacy Education and Interventions in the Classroom**

The classroom has the greatest capacity, second only to the home and family of a child, to provide quality educational experiences and interactions to support and strengthen literacy development. Van Hees (2012) conducted a study to determine the effectiveness of teachers' verbal interaction with students in the classroom and its effects on literacy acquisition. Since low socioeconomic schools have a majority of struggling students, creating an atmosphere that will increase students' literacy acquisition and development is of utmost importance. A child's literacy abilities directly affect how they learn in the classroom upon entering formal education. Research conducted (Moses, 2005) found that "Children from socioeconomically advantaged



communities in New Zealand generally start school with a working vocabulary of 6,000 or more words in English. They have well-established and age-appropriate language resources that enable them to express their meaning orally” (Van Hees, 2011, p.47). “Evidence (e.g., Hattie et al., 2005; Goldenburg, 2001) suggests that, on average, children from low socioeconomic communities start school with a receptive and expressive vocabulary of less than half this number” (Van Hees, 2011, p. 47).

A child’s literacy skills, specifically verbal memory, receptive and expressive language, receptive vocabulary, and phonological awareness, are very strong predictors of future reading ability. Also, due to the environment of the public education classroom, a child must have effective verbal skills to fully participate in all learning opportunities. Global research examines if classroom teachers are using the most effective methods and creating the most beneficial learning environments for the optimal literacy development of the child. Van Hees’ (2011) study focused on patterns of interaction and expression in the first two years of public education to identify their overall effectiveness for literacy development of each student.

Teachers from four low socioeconomic Auckland schools, Years 1 to 2 classes, volunteered to participate in the study. A total of 80 students participated, with 12 students randomly chosen for the case study. Data was collected by each classroom teacher, including the CombiList Assessment to measure expression and participation in the classroom at the beginning of the study and a second CombiList Assessment given 6 months later. During the six months between the two assessments, teachers attended five workshops and implemented specific interventions in their individual classrooms for a total of 10 weeks. The British Picture Vocabulary Scale Assessment was also given to the students at the same time as the

CombiListAssessment. Three 30 minute teaching lessons were also recorded in each of the four classrooms during both data collection times as well (Van Hees, 2012).

The teacher workshops incorporated linguistic and interactional theory and practice emphasizing specific attention to student expression in the classroom. The workshops encouraged teachers to implement practices and behaviors to enhance the expressive interactions of the students. Two of the four teacher's vocal interaction with their students was microanalysed in parallel with a case study student analysis to explore patterns of interaction and expression in the classroom. Prior to attending the workshops, the teachers controlled most verbal interaction in the classroom, speaking the most, while students listened and hardly spoke. Interventions presented in the five workshops inspired teachers to infuse collective dialogue within their lessons, prompting discussion led by and involving the students. This resulted in more complex conversations between the teacher and students, and student to student, and students were much more engaged and expressed themselves as a higher level. Teachers were also trained in workshops to shift the manner in which they posed questions to their students. Instead of asking yes/no, single-word response style questions and questions requiring minimal expression, teachers prompted, probed, and used contributory statements to encourage students' expressive responses about their thoughts.

Results from the data analysis of the 12 case study students showed distinctive increases in vocabulary development for all 12 students, 75% starting off with below normal scores for their age group. Of the 12 case study students, six were closely analyzed in areas of verbal confidence, fluency, and complexity of expression and results from the study showed significant increases in the ability to express longer, use more grammatically complex utterances, and have considerably more fluency and confidence while speaking. "This study strongly suggests that it

was the changes to the teachers' knowledge and practice, and their explicit attention to creating optimal conditions for student interaction and expression, that were critical in making a difference in student outcomes" (Van Hees, 2011, p. 56).

A conclusion drawn from this study is that a child's communication skills and ability to understand language has both a direct and indirect effect on that child's transition to literacy. Van Hees also believes that results from this study have strong implications for teachers in the classroom, and that it is imperative to provide optimal classroom conditions for the development of oral expression ultimately affecting literacy development. By making changes to interactional and language patterns used in the classroom, teachers in this study created rich oral and expressive environments, increasing the quality and quantity of student verbal expression and effectively eliminating gaps in literacy development for students that were below grade level achievement expectations.

### **Literacy Education at the Elementary Level**

The belief that "phonological awareness, letter knowledge, as well as early writing among pre-kindergartners and kindergartners often comprise the best predictors of reading and spelling acquisition later, in school" (Aram, 2006, p. 491) provided the basis for a three year study to investigate early literacy interventions and teaching. Through his research, Aram explores a literacy program that infuses storybook reading with alphabetic skills because, "Reading books to young children constitutes a very common adult-child early literacy activity. This interactive context is considered productive in promoting literacy because it is viewed as contextualized, meaningful, and motivating for young children" (Aram, 2006, p. 490).

The quasi-experimental study by Aram (2006) compared literacy gains in children from alphabetic skills programs versus storybook reading. The study also examined literacy gains

when infusing the two together. Three different yearlong interventions: storybook reading, alphabetic skill lessons, and a combination of the two, were compared to a control group that did not use any interventions. The study was conducted in Jaffa, Israel, and included 12 preschools that followed the same curriculum in the public education system. The participants of the study were 315 children from very low socioeconomic backgrounds. Each classroom had one full time female teacher and one part time female teacher. Teachers went through extensive training pertaining to the interventions they would infuse into their individual classrooms; these new interventions were added into the preschoolers' regular curriculum and were initiated in the beginning of November after students became acclimated to the new school year.

Six trained graduate students gathered data and assessed the preschoolers using a pretest in November and a posttest in June measuring literacy knowledge. Students were divided up into two age groups: 3-4 year olds and 4-5 year olds. A two-way multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was conducted to compare scores from the pretest to the posttest and to measure literacy gains in the three different intervention groups and comparison group (Aram, 2006).

Results from Aram's (2006) study indicate that a combined program of storybook reading and alphabetic skills showed higher student progress overall compared to either of them being implemented alone. An interesting finding indicated that the training of the teacher in the use of the interventions was a very important component to the progress and success of the students. Compared to other research, this study found that the interventions could be infused in the "typical" classroom with a regular curriculum, compared to using a block schedule, computer programs, or a tutoring program. Aram (2006) stressed, though, that a significant amount of training for teachers was key to the success of the interventions used, and that incorporating age-

appropriate lessons and activities while being sensitive to student abilities and preferences enhanced the success of the program interventions.

An important finding related to continued school success of students was that the combined group (both alphabetic and storybook interventions) had the highest gains in vocabulary development, ultimately preparing them for future success in reading comprehension. The younger age group of children progressed more than the older group in receptive vocabulary skills, suggesting that storybook reading programs are very productive for preschool age children, coinciding with Whitehurst et al.'s (1999) findings that "Younger children...are at a more sensitive period for verbal development and thereby benefit more from literacy programs that focus on language" (Aram, 2006, p. 508).

An article written by Rebecca Jones adds another dimension to the research that early literacy programs foster literacy skills that will furnish success for students. In her article, it is stated that there was a time when illiteracy of high school graduates was a national crisis. The way to combat this was to ensure that every student could read by third grade. With that said, it was a huge shock when the 2005 NAEP (National Assessment of Educational Progress) reported that only 3 out of 10 eight-graders met reading proficiency standards (Jones, 2007). It is evident that literacy skills must be a focus throughout elementary school years, as well as through middle and high school too. Consideration for incorporating different literacy intervention plans according to the needs of all students must be a priority to ensure the success of the child.

Much research is being conducted in the use of technology for the teaching of literacy skills. One program, called PLATO (Programmed Logic for Automatic Teaching Operation) was used in a quasi-experimental study to measure the effects of literacy development among kindergarten children participating in the study. PLATO incorporates interactive activities,

stories, and games within a unit of study. The initial intention of studying this program was to see if technology could replace human teachers, and the research indicated that the program is successful but only as a tool that “real” teachers can implement into their own curriculum (Bauserman et al. 2005).

The participants in this study were kindergarten children from two different urban schools that were within the same school system. To be included in the study, each individual child had to read below the standard oral reading ability on the Woodcock-Johnson Passage Comprehension Subtest. Pretest and post-test scores were derived over an eight-week period to compare student literacy gains between the school that used the PLATO system and that school that did not.

In the experimental school, teachers received two days of training on using PLATO and ongoing professional development. Four computers were set up in each kindergarten classroom and teachers were asked to include PLATO in the rotation of daily student center time. The average amount of hours that a student completed tasks on the PLATO system was between five and six during the eight-week period. Students worked through the PLATO computer tasks at their own pace and progression. Students in the control group had computer time that included alternative kindergarten literacy and math computer programs instead of the PLATO system.

The children that used the PLATO program outperformed the comparison group in listening comprehension, knowledge of print concepts, and phonological awareness, therefore there are implications for classroom practice. To incorporate a computer software program like PLATO could involve a huge amount of funding, depending on the programs costs. Professional development would also be necessary to train educators on how to use the program to match the curriculum they teach. Many programs are designed to adjust to each student’s level of mastery,

therefore creating an individualized program, which allows students to work at their own pace and within their zone of proximal development. The researchers in this study feel further research would be very beneficial because “knowledge of print concepts in kindergarten children has also been shown to be a strong predictor of beginning reading success” (Bauserman et al. p. 49) and they feel it would benefit early literacy instruction.

In her article, Manning (1998) shares the importance of using literature in the classroom to best teach how the written language works. From her experiences as a faculty member of the School of Education at the University of Alabama, she firmly believes in the power of reading aloud to students. Hearing literature read to them is part of most students’ elementary curriculum, contributing greatly to literacy growth, comprehension skills, and appreciation of literature as that child moves to middle school, through high school, and beyond.

Growth occurs. Students gain much when listening to good literature; enjoyment of literature is experienced, an appreciation for good literature is promoted, vocabulary growth occurs as they hear unfamiliar words in context, information is learned, a positive attitude toward reading is fostered, listening skills are improved, an understanding of story structure is developed, comprehension of text is developed and knowledge of syntax is expanded. (Manning, 1998, p. 88)

As an educator and parent, Manning believes that the promotion of parents and adults reading to young children has roots in the belief that children should hear close to 1000 books prior to starting formal education. She believes that this practice aptly prepares them for learning literacy skills upon entering kindergarten. Listening to books, stories, poetry, basically any written text, should not end in elementary school, but extend throughout a person’s lifetime. Listening to literature beyond the elementary school years will continue to play a role in

vocabulary acquisition and listening comprehension for all students. It will truly impact students who struggle early on in elementary school, and help to bring them up to grade level expectations in terms of overall literacy development.

There is much, in terms of international evidence, suggesting that students report not only reading less, but having less enjoyment in reading, as they progress through school. Recent reports from the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) and the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) provide alarming statistics that suggest children, especially in England, read less independently and find less pleasure in reading. In England, 42% of 10 year olds reported rarely reading literature for pleasure in the PIRLS study in 2006 – a third higher than the average internationally. Results from the 2002 PISA student questionnaire showed that for 15 year old students in England: 30% never or hardly read for pleasure, 19% felt that reading was a waste of time, and 35% said that they would read only if it was required (Cremin, 2011). 2010 PISA student questionnaire results reveal the same trend in England and throughout the rest of the world. Literacy experts suggest that discovering the roots of this problem begin with studying teachers’ literacy beliefs and practices, and knowledge and use of current literature in the classroom (Cremin, 2011).

Cremin (2011) explores how teachers’ knowledge of literature for young people and their own understanding of themselves as readers has an impact on students in the classroom. The United Kingdom Literacy Association (UKLA) conducted a two phase project from 2006-2008 called “Teachers as Readers: Building Communities of Readers.” The first phase was from 2006-07 and included surveying 1200 teachers about their own reading habits, and their knowledge and inclusion of children’s literature in their classrooms. From 2007-08, Phase two



was conducted seeking to research the development of literacy instruction in a project that included 43 teachers from five local authorities.

The Phase One survey of 1200 teachers (half working with 5 – 7 year olds, and half working with 7 – 11 year olds, was completed during the autumn term of the school year in 2006. Results from the many questions on the survey revealed that 73% of the teachers had read for pleasure during the last month, with 40% choosing popular fiction, crime novels, and thrillers as their personal preference. Only 6.5% of teachers reported that they had recently read children's fiction. Answers on the questionnaire showed a strong correlation between teacher's favorite books from childhood and the texts that they used as part of their curriculum.

When teachers were asked to list six "good" children's authors, six poets, and six picture book authors, 64% were able to name five or six authors, but only 10% could name six poets. Only 58% of the teachers could name one, two, or no poets, with 22% unable to name any poets at all. Only 10% of the teachers could name six picture book authors, while 62% could name one, two, or none. Since 87% of the teachers reported using their own preferences and repertoires to guide their choices of reading materials for their classrooms, there are serious concerns for the researchers conducting this study. A high percentage of teachers used what is deemed as "popular" fiction, often by the latest and hottest "popular" authors, in their classrooms with little knowledge of types of global literature.

The results from the survey suggest that teachers may not have knowledge of a variety of writers to make proper recommendations for all of the different interest levels of students. Researches were also troubled by the teachers' lack of knowledge of children's poets and picture book authors. Because many educational experts believe that a teacher's choice of books and literature taught in the classroom, as well as recommendations to individual students, has a

profound effect on literacy development and enjoyment, research needs to be continued to be studied in this area. Research suggests that teachers of literacy need to be much more aware of a variety of authors and genres to better serve their students' needs. Educational leaders and reform cannot ignore the rising number of high school students that find no enjoyment or pleasure in the written word (Cremin, 2011).

### **Literacy Education at the Middle and High School Level**

It is very important for parents and educators to understand that struggling readers usually continue to struggle with reading throughout their education. "Roughly 80% of high school dropouts are poor readers and students who are poor readers have trouble in all of their subjects in school and constitute a large proportion of students who coast, become disciplinary problems, and -- in too many cases--go on to populate the nation's prisons" (Coddling, 2001, p. 22). When children do not have a jump-start on literacy before entering school, educators need to be prepared with the best interventions possible to bring the children that are behind up to speed with the rest of the class. It is detrimental to the child's education to be reading at grade level by the end of 1<sup>st</sup> or 2<sup>nd</sup> grade. As research continues to be conducted in this area, it is evident that reading is a process instead of a set of skills to be mastered.

Readers interact with a text and apply strategies very similar to problem solving - "difficult words; complex syntax and organization; and obscure references, setting, or concepts are challenges that proficient readers meet and overcome" (Coddling, 2001, p. 23). Proficient readers move through the reading process successfully because they have mastered these skills, while the struggling readers haven't determined how to do that yet. Three schools: Bell Multicultural High School, Salmon River High School, and Sheldon Clarke High School, found that a huge issue making them struggling schools were the large number of students (middle

school and high school) that were not proficient readers. The National Center on Education and the Economy (NCEE) and the America's Choice School Design received a five-year contract to work with these three schools, along with five other pilot schools, to help solve their educational woes and help build literacy development. NCEE began by convening at the National Symposium on Adolescent Literacy in March 2000 where experts in this area submitted papers that were reviewed. From numerous presentations and examinations of the written submissions, NCEE developed a literacy course to be field tested on eight school campuses, with 20 schools total participating, during the 2000-2001 school year (Coddling, 2001).

The schools incorporated NCEE's reading and writing literacy course called the "Ramp-Up to Advanced Literacy Course" for one full school year. The class/course was held five days a week with a 90-minute, double block period. The design implemented four different parts that were interwoven together including a Reading Instruction Block, Independent Reading Block, Read-Aloud Block, and a Project Unit Block. The Reading Instruction Block served as a time for teachers to work one on one with students to observe their progress. Teachers were trained to analyze reading performance and to adjust instruction for each student (Coddling, 2001).

The Independent Block was a 10 to 20 minute time allowance for silent reading where students chose materials that were age-appropriate and to their liking. "Within school days that are otherwise crowded by competed demands for students' time and attention, the time that an Independent Reading Block provides is essential to raising reading proficiency" (Coddling, 2001, p.23).

During the Read-Aloud Block, students learn comprehension skills and accountability to the text by observing a proficient reader think aloud. The teacher or proficient reader reads aloud and makes comments like, "'This is how it relates to me,' or 'I'm thinking of this other

character” (Coddling, 2001, p.24). Many skills are learned, including: “deciding what is important in a text; drawing inferences; summarizing and synthesizing information; creating mental images; and making connection between text and personal experience, other texts, and knowledge about the author and the rest of the world.” (Coddling, 2001, p.24).

The final block is the Project Block, which includes units developed for the course engaging students in author and genre studies. Also part of this block is the very important element of cross-age tutoring. Students create their own books to use for sharing and tutoring of younger students. “Because people learn best when they teach others, students master the skills that they teach their young partners” (Coddling, 2001, p.24). Perhaps an even more important gain, the students build friendships/relationships and become aware that they are role models, which creates excitement and vigor for reading and writing.

From taking this course, struggling readers formed relationships with teachers, peers, and tutees and developed new reading habits. When students that struggle with reading are in middle/high school, it is often motivation that holds them back. They have struggled for so long that reading is a huge turn-off. In addition, the student may be embarrassed of their reading inability. The nurturing atmosphere and the pride of being a tutor in the NCEE program were elements critical in building the positive attitude towards reading and building self-confidence.

A voluntary summer reading intervention was put into place at a university campus in a rural Midwest area. At-risk students were paired up with preservice teachers working on reading endorsement licensure. Leal, Johanson, Toth, and Chin-Cheng (2004) conducted this study to explore how tutoring by preservice reading endorsement students effected at-risk children’s’ reading skills. The group also collected data to determine effective strategies and the factors influencing student progress and to identify differences by gender, grade level, and setting. Data

was collected for six years from six different groups. One hundred seven students were paired up with 107 tutors. Among the students, 25 – 35% were Special Education students with an IEP in place and an additional 25% were identified as at-risk. The tutors were undergraduate preservice teachers working on a reading endorsement to add on to their license.

The time frame for the tutoring sessions was ½ of school year. Thirty 1-hour sessions were held twice a week at the child’s school and at a university that was near the school district of the students. Activities and instruction material were tailored for each student’s needs based on test results and tutor’s observations. The capstone assessment and activity included the student writing and illustrating their own book and attending a year-end “Author’s Party” (Leal et al. 2004).

Qualitative findings indicate that both tutors and students were receptive to almost all of the strategies and assessment implemented. “The book authoring, in spite of deadlines and pressures, was loved by tutors and children alike and appeared to account for much of the motivation for both tutors and students (Leal et al. 2004, p. 79). Positive results not attributed to specific strategies were the close relationships established between tutor and students and the knowledge gained by both tutors and children about learning styles and developmental levels.

Quantitative findings examined variables of grade level, gender, and data collection sites and found that there was no differentiation in gains because of them. The average gain in grade level by students was 1.1 years for word recognition and reading comprehension, and 1.2 years for listening comprehension. These results indicate the effective one-on-one tailored tutoring was successful.

One of the key aspects of this study was the infusion of writing into the program. The authorship of their own book as well as many other shared writing pieces was integral to

students' reading growth. "It is the key that unlocks the reading potential" (Leal et al. 2004, p. 83). Another vital aspect was the program design to tailor lessons for each child based on his/her needs. "Operating within Vygotsky's zone of proximal development built both the relationships between student and tutor as well as contributing to the motivation and success of both" (Leal et al. 2004, p. 84). Finally, the bond between tutor and tutee created a win-win situation for personal and educational growth and development.

As high school graduation requirements continue to increase and high stakes standardized test scores impact school credibility/ranking and, in some cases, funding, raising the achievement of low performing students is at the forefront of school leaders' and educators' attention. To help struggling students at the high school level, many schools opt to provide more time for students in efforts to bring them up to grade level expectations. Many schools provide students with the opportunity to re-take standards based end of course exams or graduation exams and offer test preparation courses during the summer to ensure student success. Other schools offer a fifth year of high school to students that need it, while others opt to provide transition programs and classes to help students "catch up" to grade level expectations allowing them to then take "regular" classes when they are ready.

According to Balfanz et al. (2004) there is little research and very few schools that attempt to close achievement gaps by providing catch-up or prep classes that enable student success by way of rigorous, standards-based, college preparatory sequenced high school courses. Since current school reform is centered on providing remedial-style classes that teach basic skills with low expectations, there is very limited data on the feasibility and rapidity of accelerated, high expectation courses offered for below grade level students. Because high school drop-out rates continue to rise in the U.S., and because the outcome for low performing students in high

poverty schools leads to negative consequences for not only the student, but society as a whole, Balfanz et al. (2004) conducted a study that suggests a different approach to “typical” remedial curriculum design.

This study measured the gain in student achievement in two different school districts that implemented the Talent Development High Schools (TDHS) ninth grade instructional reading and mathematics program. For the main study, three schools from a school district in Baltimore participated by using the field test version of the TDHS program. Student performance data was compared to three control schools of similar demographics within the same school district. All of the schools were high-poverty with dropout rates of 50% or higher, very low attendance rates, and 70% fewer seniors attending school from the number of students beginning high school in 9<sup>th</sup> grade. At various degrees, eight teachers used the TDHS program in their 9<sup>th</sup> grade English classes during the first term of the 1999-2000 school year (Balfanz et al. 2004).

The four components of the Talent Development High School (TDHS) Ninth-Grade Instructional Program include:

- Ninth-grade students receive a double dose of math and English instruction in the context of a 4 x 4 block schedule. This means they take math and English 90 minutes a day for the entire year.
- During the first semester, students take three research-based courses designed to enable them to overcome poor prior preparations and succeed in standards-based high school courses. These courses are Strategic Reading, Transition to Advanced Mathematics, and Freshman Seminar. During the second semester students take Algebra 1, English 1, and U.S. History along with either science or an elective.

- Teachers receive intensive and sustained professional development and implementation support. This includes 25 to 30 hours of course specific professional developments and weekly non-evaluatory in-classroom curriculum coaching from school district teachers on special assignment and Johns Hopkins University (JHU) instructional facilitators.
- The instruction takes place in the context of a Ninth-Grade Success Academy. Ninth-grade students are located in a separate part of the school building with their own academy principal. Students are then taught by a team of teachers who have a common planning period to coordinate students outreach and recovery efforts. (Balfanz et al. 2004, p. 7)

Different methods of instruction used to develop reading fluency and comprehension skills in the English classrooms included: the read aloud/think aloud strategy, mini-lessons to increase comprehension for different genres of fiction, nonfiction, poetry, and plays, small cooperative learning student groups, and self-selected reading time and writing activities. After the first term, the school's second term curriculum is used coupled with TD-developed Partner Discussion Guides for reading assignments and TD Writing supplements for writing assignments (Balfanz et al. 2004).

Results from data analysis of test scores revealed that the students in the experimental schools significantly outperformed students in the schools that did not use the TDHS Program. Students that participated in the TDHS program had, on average, gains of a half a year more compared to students in the control group. The TDHS students had six national percentile point gains, as well as 12 scale score point gains in reading, as well. Results showed that students at each data collection level had significantly higher gains in achievement from one level to the next compared to the control group. Balfanz et al. (2004) concludes that results of this study



support the infusion of accelerated learning opportunities for students behind grade level academic achievement standards as a viable, and perhaps, more beneficial intervention compared to remedial style courses.

Teachers that were surveyed believed that students learned more from the TDHS reading course compared to if the class would have been taught using the teacher's traditional methods. Teachers also reported that the TDHS program's built in support and professional development and training enable them to teach more effectively. Students surveyed felt they learned new skills and strategies to read better, compared to students in the control schools, and there was a decrease in student absenteeism over time in the schools employing the TDHS program. Balfanz et al.(2004) feel that more research needs to be conducted in this area to determine the long term effects of accelerated learning programs and educational leaders must carefully research and consider the current achievement levels of all students to determine the best environment and curriculum for student learning.

### **Impacts of Strong School-Family Partnerships**

Because parents and caregivers are a child's first teachers, it is very important for educational leaders to focus on maintaining effective parent relationships as a means of student success. Constantino, the founder and president of Family Friendly Schools, implemented a three year survey that was distributed to almost 150,000 families that had school-aged children in the United States.

The Family Friendly Survey measured four different domains of family engagement practice, including: school support for home learning, communication between the school and home, parent involvement concerning specific academic realms, and the welcoming environment of the school. The results of the survey found that as children progress through school, family

involvement becomes less and less. All four domains of family engagement practice were shown to continually decrease over time, with the school's support for the home suffering the largest loss. Overall, the survey revealed that at the middle school level, family involvement was much lower than at the elementary level, and that the high school level of family involvement was much lower than the middle school level. This can have drastic effects on student achievement, especially for students that have fallen behind academically; for the already struggling reader the results can be disastrous.

Constantino believes that the key to cultivating family engagement to enhance student learning and educational experiences begins with the educational leadership of the school. A strong belief and practice of solid parental school relationships needs to be embraced by every staff member and promoted by the entire school district so as not to leave any families out. According to Constantino there are many challenges to overcome, including: a lack of a connection due to the size and proximity of secondary schools, secondary schools being more intimidating than elementary schools, ineffective two-way communication between parents and secondary school teachers, less parental involvement in volunteer and parent organizations at the secondary school level, and the more complex curriculum at the high school level that many parents are not knowledgeable of and perhaps unable to help their child with. Because "Research shows that student attendance in school improves when parents and families understand the relevance of daily learning" (Constantino, 2007, p. 61) there is a responsibility of the school district to build, support, and strengthen relationships between the school and home. For the students that struggle and fall behind, a positive and nurturing home and school connection could greatly impact student success.

The PISA Assessment is given every three years to 15 year old students around the world. The OECD began this international study in 1997 to assess the reading, math, and science skills of students in 70 different countries; ultimately gathering data to determine student capabilities of life skills and abilities to function as productive members of society. What is unique about the PISA Assessment is that it does not test students on specific curriculum expectations like state standardized tests. Another unique and significant factor concerning the PISA Assessment is that it includes student, parent, and principal questionnaires that reveal family background and school culture which provides a way to further analyze interpretations and synthesize results. The 2009 PISA assessment provided valuable insight into literacy education and the outcomes of parental involvement before and throughout the school years (Borgonovi, 2011).

When comparing the 2009 PISA assessment scores to responses on parent questionnaires, the data showed that students scored markedly higher if their parents read books to them often during their first year of primary school compared to students who were read to infrequently or not at all, regardless of socio-economic background. According to responses from questionnaires, different parent-child activities affected reading performance significantly more than others: “the score point difference in reading that is associated with parental involvement is largest when parents read a book with their child, when they talk about things they have done during the day, and when they tell stories to their children” (Borgonovi, 2011, p.1). The data from questionnaires and PISA assessment scores also showed a correlation between current parental involvement and higher test scores for students whose parents discussed social and political issues with them on a weekly basis, discussed books, movies, or television, inquired about school, ate meals together, or spent time together in casual conversation.

Evidence from the PISA 2009 Assessment strongly suggests that when parents make a point to be involved in their child's life, they provide a very important component for their child's educational success. With more and more demands placed on two-income households and parents perhaps feeling inadequate to assist with school activities and homework, parents need to be informed of activities to participate in with their child at a very young age that involve very little time and knowledge. Educational leaders must find a way to reach out to parents and the community to provide insight and direction to parents of very young children. "Teachers, schools, and education systems should explore how they can help busy parents play a more active role in their children's education, both in and out of school" (Borgonovi, 2011, p.3).

With a lot of research focused on parental involvement and the infusion of early literacy in the pre-schooling years, there is strong evidence of the need for parental involvement throughout a child's entire education. Jeynes (2011) explains the findings of a series of meta-analyses, along with an examination of nationwide data sets, provide implications that research in the field of education in relation to parental involvement and student success is much more complex than initially acknowledged by previous theorists. Of the most significant complexity is the conception of what parental involvement is and how it is viewed and understood. Previous literature in education promoted parental involvement as providing help with homework, attending school functions, and implementing household rules for completing school work; measuring the overt, deliberate actions of the parent. Jeynes (2011) research suggests that the most powerful means of parental involvement are the more subtle actions of parents, including parental style, having high expectations for the child, and having a good line of communication with one's child.

From his research, Jeynes (2011) found that more subtle understanding of the importance of a college education or the value of a good work ethic was a more powerful parental expectation than checking to make sure the child completed homework assignments and followed household rules. Open communication about school between a parent and child was also found to be an important subtle component of parental involvement. Parental style, specifically parenting with love and support coupled with good discipline and structure was found to be another subtle action suggesting strong parental involvement.

The subtle ways that the school itself operates has more effect on parental involvement compared to the overt, with research suggesting a loving, caring, and supportive staff of teachers, principals, and school employees is more likely to build strong parent-school relationships compared to providing pamphlets or student handbooks. This is very important data for educational leaders and teachers to consider when planning parent outreach programs, in the vision they have for their school district, and ensuring the highest amount of student success possible. “Generally, if educators reach out in love consistently; possess high expectations of students; communicate clearly, sensitively, and frequently; and show respect to students and parents, then even if these educators do not expressly practice certain techniques to enhance parental involvement, their efforts will yield significant results” (Jeynes, 2011).

As high stakes standardized test scores become more and more prominent in education, and the structure of the family becomes more and more complex, research in this area is of utmost importance to educational leaders. The home is the first place of education for the child, and the continue efforts of research in the area of parental involvement will lead to further understanding of this multi-faceted and sophisticated part of the development of the child. As the socially dynamic structure of school and family life continue to change, research must also be

conducted in consideration of these changes and how the school can best promote healthy, strong parental involvement in the interest of student success.

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

Early literacy development has long lasting effects on the academic preparedness of a child as they enter the formal educational setting. The integration of home literacy practices provides essential learning experiences specifically pertaining to literacy development. Because having a strong foundation of basic literacy skills, including reading, verbal communication, and print concepts, are so fundamental to a child's ability to learn, educational leaders and teachers are greatly affected when early literacy development has or has not occurred. The student's home life and the relationship between parents and the school play an integral role in academic achievement, especially when trying to close achievement gaps. It is vital for teachers and educational leaders to make every effort to reach out to students and their families to create long-lasting, beneficial bonds to help ensure student success in the classroom.

#### **The Role of Early Childhood Education**

Early childhood education philosophies have seen dramatic changes over the course of the century; with massive movement away from the ideals of the late 1800's that there should be limited education in the home prior to formal education as to not create precocious children. Mothers were prompted to avoid providing any type of educational instruction in the home since it was believed that only teachers were capable of carrying out formal educational activities, especially literacy skills. The ideal situation of every child coming into formal school at the same reading level was the justification for requesting that parents not teach their own children. Educational systems have weathered many changes and adapted to unending policy regulations defining early childhood education. Recent research in the field of early childhood education and the impact it has on a child's overall academic achievement have prompted state and federal regulations to be put into place dictating procedure and implementation of rigorous early

childhood education programs in the United States and globally (Schuele & vanKleeck, 2010; Doggett & Wat, 2010; Michigan Department of Education, 2013).

With illiteracy rates on the rise in the late 1980's, emergent literacy research analysis provided substantive evidence that early literacy interactions in the home, prior to formal education, provided meaningful development that prepared a child for later literacy acquisition. By interacting with print, listening as a book is read aloud, and exploring with self-directed writing and drawing activities, influential informal literacy development begins at a very early age in the home. "The ways in which children engage in literate acts in their play and in other meaningful activities guided by adults, long before they possess conventional literacy skills, also highlight that becoming a reader and writer are closely related skills (vanKleeck, 1990,1995)" (Schuele & vanKleeck, 2010, p.345).

When home literacy activities are not part of a young child's life, that child will not be fully prepared for kindergarten, and will more than likely fall behind academically for the duration of their school years (Doggett & Wat, 2010). Research reveals that students that have lower socio-economic status, especially those that are high poverty, are most likely going to have the least amount of early literacy development prior to starting school (Anderson & Cheung, 2003; Roberts, Jurgens & Burchinal, 2005; Lawson, 2012; Doggett & Wat, 2010; Coddling, 2001). Early childhood education programs have been implemented via federal and state funding to provide much needed learning opportunities for children (McGencey, 2011; Michigan Department of Education, 2013; Doggett & Wat, 2010; Edwards, 2005). In the U.S., many states have established and implemented rigorous, high quality pre-kindergarten programs in the effort to reach out to students and their families. Since research shows that once a child falls behind academically they will more than likely never catch up, early childhood education can provide



essential academic development to ensure kindergarten readiness (Lawson, 2012; McGencey, 2011; Doggett & Wat, 2010).

### **Early Literacy Development**

The basic element detrimental to literacy development is dependent on the understanding of the forms and functions of print. Proponents of early childhood education point to much research in the area of early literacy development that the process of learning literacy begins when a child is very young (Arnold & Colburn, 2006; Roberts, Jurgens & Burchinal, 2005; Lawson, 2012; Anderson & Cheung, 2003). Early literacy developmental activities include: a parent reading aloud to the child (shared book reading), parents interacting with their child using dialogue, having numerous children's books and other types of literacy materials in the home, and incorporating fun literacy games, songs, and other types of activities into the child's life (Aram, 2006; Bauserman, 2005; Manning, 1998; Borgonovi, 2011; Roberts, Jurgens & Burchinal, 2005). The use of storybook reading is a dynamic and especially beneficial part of literacy development. It creates an eagerness to read within the child, children become literate before formal schooling begins, and it is the beginning of a successful venture in the learning of reading and writing (Roberts, Jurgens & Burchinal, 2005; Lawson, 2012; Aram, 2006; Manning, 1998). In *The Report of the National Commission on Reading*, Richard C. Anderson conveys, "The single most significant factor influencing a child's early educational success is an introduction to books and being read to at home prior to beginning school" (Arnold & Colburn, 2006, p. 31).

A child's first teachers are their parents. Young children learn from all types of interaction, whether it be singing, reading, playing, or being hugged. If a child does not have a lot of verbal and physical interactions with their parents they will be less prepared to start school,

lack vocabulary, and be developmentally behind their peers (Roberts, Jurgens & Burchinal, 2005; Lawson, 2012; Anderson & Cheung, 2003; Doggett & Wat, 2010).

### **Literacy Development and Implications for Teachers**

Based on research of current trends in early literacy education and the lack of literacy practices in an alarmingly large amount of homes, there are many implications for teachers at both the primary and secondary levels. Teachers at the elementary level play a pivotal role in ensuring grade level achievement of all children in the classroom. With the understanding that many children will not be academically ready upon entering kindergarten, especially students from low-income families; teachers must be prepared to effectively educate students of varying academic abilities (Anderson & Cheung, 2003; McGencey, 2011; Doggett & Wat, 2010).

Research shows that teachers being aware of all of the factors that are involved in successful literacy education programs and knowing students' attitudes towards reading will greatly benefit students' individual literacy gains (Van Hees, 2001; Aram, 2006; Manning, 1998; Cremin, 2011; Coddling, 2001) Many different community programs are tailored for literacy development. The "1,000 Books Project," developed by Carol Axner in New York and funded by the community and grants, is an example of one such program. The program promotes parents and caregivers to read 1,000 books to their children before they turn six (Reading is Incremental, 2005). Many schools already implement different activities for March as "National Reading Month" and the celebration of Dr. Seuss' birthday. In the high school, "Banned Book Week" gets students' attention with the idea of celebrating reading by the reading of a banned book. Being innovative and flexible to new ideas can bring new attitudes and a new interest in even the most reluctant students. Teachers must be well-equipped with a variety of different literacy interventions to have the most beneficial learning experiences for all students (Van Hees, 2011;

Aram, 2006; Bauserman et al, 2005; Manning, 1998; Cremin, 2011; Coddling, 2001; Leal et al, 2004; Balfanz et al, 2004).

Teaching methods used in the classroom, teachers' personal reading preferences, and receiving specialized instruction on the implementation of specific literacy interventions greatly impacts student achievement and success for students. One of the key factors noted in all of the research studies on different types of literacy interventions, was that teacher training and support were an integral part of the success of the literacy intervention used in the classroom (Van Hees, 2011, Aram, 2006; Cremin, 2011; Balfanz et al, 2004). Research also shows that a teacher's knowledge and use of current children's and young adult literature and allowing for self-directed reading in the classroom has an impact on literacy gains in the classroom (Cremin, 2011; Manning, 1998; Coddling, 2001).

Building a community within the classroom, sharing reading in many different ways with students, and setting aside time for students to read in class will cause literacy growth and build positive attitudes towards reading (Manning, 1998; Coddling, 2001; Leal et al, 2004). Giving students freedom to choose reading materials that suits their interests is very helpful in building positive attitudes towards reading. Reading has a lot of competition in our vast technological world. "We have become a culture that is willingly, aggressively, and anxiously "connected." We accept multiple telephone intrusion to any real-people conversation...Teens do read – but at warp speed. They pick up bites of information that fly across a screen, entire pages flowing speedily as a mouse rolls across the pad" (Follos, 2007, p. 499). Research suggests that classroom teachers that acknowledge the dynamic cultural world that children are growing up in and make adjustments in teaching methodology accordingly, have a positive impact on literacy development (Bauserman et al, 2005; Cremin, 2011, Coddling, 2001; Van Hees, 2011).

### **Literacy Development and Implications for Educational Leaders**

Educational leaders must make informed, careful decisions concerning literacy education in the school setting. Research suggests that if a child struggles with reading and developing literacy skills at the onset of education, that child will most likely be behind academically for the rest their schooling (Lawson, 2012; McGencey, 2011; Athanasou, 2011; Michigan Department of Education, 2013). Because research indicates that students with pre-reading promotion in the home have an academic preparedness to learn once they begin elementary school, many studies seek to determine how and why parental involvement directly impacts student literacy. The educational leader of a school district needs to understand the role of home literacy practices and literacy development during the preschool years because it has important implications for children's later literacy success. What happens in those early years will have its effect on everything faced in the educational setting (Borgonovi, 2011; Roberts, Jurgens & Burchinal, 2005; Lawson, 2012; Anderson & Cheung, 2003; McGencey, 2011).

Educational leaders must not only understand that early literacy interventions in the home prepare children for school, but also how to ensure quality home literacy environments for all children to guarantee academic success once they begin school. An administrator needs to be fully aware, knowledgeable, and prepared to inform all the stakeholders of the school and community, especially parents and teachers, about this vital information about early childhood learning (Michigan Department of Education, 2013; Doggett & Wat, 2010; McGencey, 2011; Edwards, 2005). Research suggests that federal and state funded early childhood education programs can successfully provide early literacy acquisition if it is not part of the child's home experiences. Unfortunately, these programs do not serve all students (Doggett & Wat, 2010;

Michigan Department of Education, 2013). Educational leaders must become involved in efforts by reaching out to parents, forming partnerships with the community, and having a voice in educational reform to endorse high quality learning experiences for all children prior to kindergarten.

Because the federally funded Head Start Program only provides services for select children, primarily low-income families, educational leaders must make sound decisions about pre-kindergarten experiences supplied by the school district. At the state level, funding of pre-kindergarten programs varies from state to state, with individual school districts including early educational opportunities as part of their individual budget (Doggett & Wat, 2010; Michigan Department of Education, 2013; Coddling, 2001).

Research into literacy developments, specifically which interventions have the most success in raising the academic achievement of struggling students, suggest a multitude of approaches for educational leaders to consider. Of the schools that were part of intervention implementation to measure success of student achievement and progress, some completely modified school operations while others simply made modifications to already used curricula. Research suggests that implementing literacy interventions, above and beyond literacy curriculum already used in the classroom, will significantly increase student achievement and help to eliminate achievement gaps (Van Hees, 2011; Aram, 2006; Bauserman et al, 2005; Manning, 1998; Cremin, 2011; Coddling, 2001; Leal et al, 2004; Balfanz et al, 2004).

### **The Role of Strong Relationships between Home and School**

A child's education begins in the home with parents being the first teachers building and encouraging a strong foundation that will serve that child well throughout school and essentially

the rest of their life. Because many parents may not be equipped or prepared for this type of role in their child's life, many students continue to begin formal education behind their peers, not only academically, but also lacking executive functioning skills like concentration and attentiveness (Roberts, Jurgens & Burchinal, 2005; Lawson, 2012; Anderson & Cheung, 2003; McGencey, 2011; Edwards, 2005). Research suggests that educational leaders and teachers need to reach out to families and community organizations to educate parents about the importance of early educational activities in the home and teach them how to be successful in integrating early literacy experiences into their children's lives. Research also suggests that creating learning experiences as part of the school system, via pre-kindergarten programs, will help support parents and families in creating an early learning environment for children (Edwards, 2005; McGencey, 2011; Doggett and Wat, 2010; Michigan Department of Education, 2013; Constantino, 2007; Borgonovi, 2011).

With the continuance of a very high number of children, especially from low-income families, entering school unprepared, research suggests that forming excellent relationships with parents can positively impact student achievement and eliminate student achievement gaps (Jeynes, 2011; Borgonovi, 2011; Constantino, 2007; Coddling, 2001; Edwards, 2005). Many students struggle in school due to a lack of parental involvement at home. Since there is a relationship between economic circumstances and student performance, students of disadvantaged households have a much higher likelihood of having little or no parental involvement at home or a connection with the school (Anderson & Cheung, 2003; Edwards, 2005; Constantino, 2007; Borgonovi, 2011; Jeynes, 2011). Parental involvement and engagement in their child's education and a healthy connection and nurturing relationship with teachers and

the school greatly impact student success (Edwards, 2005; Constantino, 2007; Borgonovi, 2011; Jeynes, 2011).

### **Summary**

Parents of young children are encouraged to be their child's first teacher by integrating informal literacy practices within the home. By reading aloud to their child, having books in the home, and verbally and physically interacting with their child, parents build a strong foundation of early literacy skills essential to being prepared to begin formal education. For various reasons many homes lack the proper literacy developmental atmosphere. Low socio-economic households have the most devastating void overall. Students that begin formal education lacking early literacy development fall behind their peers and will most likely continue to fall further and further behind academically as they progress to high school and into adulthood. Teachers must infuse literacy interventions into their curriculum to begin successfully closing achievement gaps of struggling students. Educational leaders must provide support, including teacher training, time, and materials, so that individual classroom interventions will be successful. Educational leaders must also create a culture of connectedness between the home and school, since establishing open lines of communication and a caring and nurturing relationship provides a system of support to increase the likelihood of student success.

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

### **Recommendation**

High stakes standardized testing holds schools accountable for student achievement and school effectiveness, regardless of student readiness upon entering school. A child's initial preparation for learning in the formal school setting is built upon early literacy engagement and activities that begin at birth. The shared book experience between adults and children and reading aloud to a child are extremely important in the development of emergent literacy skills that ultimately prepare a child for later literary success. Educational leaders must promote early literacy practices in the home and make connections with families even before the child begins formal education. Educational leaders also must ensure that successful literacy interventions are implemented into the school curriculum. Depending on the social and demographical data of the individual district, educational leaders and teachers will have to decide which interventions will promote the most student success and achievement in their district and commit to implementation. Providing teacher training and support is a critical factor for literacy intervention implementation to be a success. Creating nurturing relationships between the school and home are also fundamental in increasing parental involvement and support to increase student achievement gains. Educational leaders, teachers, and parents must all work together for the most optimal learning experiences for the student.

### **Areas for Further Research**

To further answer my research question I would want to perform additional research into specific successful literacy interventions, teaching style and methodology. I would focus on performing qualitative research that would examine the different factors of successful



implementation of literacy interventions in the first years of formal education, as this is a critical time for catching-up to grade level expectations. Data that I would examine would include: specifics of intervention used, achievement of student before and after intervention, teaching style, classroom environment, teaching training and support, communication between teacher and parent, communication between student and teacher, and parental support. The study would take place over the extent of a school year with monthly performance data recorded to be used to compare monthly achievement gains. I would then compare the success of intervention programs, including previous mentioned categories to determine their effect on student achievement and success. Data would be used to determine what the most effective literacy interventions are and to determine which factors of the classroom environment, teaching style, and parental and school support have the largest impact on bringing struggling students to meeting grade level expectations.

I would also be interested in conducting research to follow up the findings of Balfanz et al. (2004). With the current state of many high school students unable to meet grade level expectations, especially those that struggle with reading, I would be interested in studying more closely the outcomes of rigorous standards-based, college preparatory sequenced high school courses. Since there is very little research in this area, and because the results of the Talent Development High School reading program revealed significant gains in student achievement, I would conduct a yearlong study on the effects of implementing an accelerated learning program for struggling ninth grade students. I would gather test score data at the beginning of the school year, at the end of each quarter of the school year, and then at the very end of the year to measure student progress. I would include all four components of the Talent Development High School Instructional Program (Balfanz et al. 2004) as well as teacher training and assistance in

implementation of the program. I would also implement a second phase to this study to continue the TDHS Instructional Program at the tenth grade level with the same students from the year before to further monitor student achievement and the effects on student growth.

### **Conclusion**

Early literacy acquisition plays an important role and has lasting long term effects of the academic development of a child. Receiving early literacy developmental activities in the home, prior to kindergarten, provides a child with the proper preparation for learning in the formal educational environment. If early literacy activities are not part of a child's home experiences, they will not be fully ready to begin school and will immediately fall behind their peers who experienced early literacy in the home. For educators and educational leaders, this creates circumstances that warrant much needed attention in the field of education and educational reform concerning the best interest of each child in the educational setting. Educators at every level must be prepared to integrate developmentally appropriate literacy interventions to help struggling students achieve grade level knowledge and content.

“The teacher I’ll always remember was my senior high English teacher, Helen Fitting.  
 she just loved reading and words.  
 When she would read us a new selection,  
 the expression on her face was as though  
 she were tasting double-chocolate cheesecake!  
 Then she’d just smile and look around the room  
 for a few seconds and see if anyone else caught the experience.  
 We very often did and developed a “taste” for literature.  
 She taught us to love words.”

Pat Matuszak

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