Family Literacy Nights: Promoting Child Literacy at Home

by

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Family Literacy Nights: Promoting Literacy at Home

Project by
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Abstract

Purpose of the Study: The purpose of this project is to see how parental support of young children’s literacy learning changes as a result of Family Literacy Nights. Family Literacy Nights include promoting positive relationships between families and teachers, modeling appropriate early literacy activities, and providing families with information to help them work on literacy at home with their child. Each of these aspects helps to foster a child’s emergent literacy.

Procedure: To carry out this study there were a total of three Family Literacy Nights and each included a survey that was filled out by the adults in attendance. There was also a survey after the nights had finished asking why families did or did not attend.

Findings: There was a low attendance at the Family Literacy Nights, which showed that the nights needed to be better advertised. It was also found that families were using the activities they learned about from these nights at home with their children.

Conclusions: Families need to be made more aware of future Family Literacy Nights and there needs to be childcare provided. The availability of activities that families can take home that night and easily replicate is essential.

Chair: ____________________________
Dr. Chiara Bacigalupa

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Chapter 1

Introduction

As a kindergarten teacher I am able to be the first teacher for many children and the first person the parents meet in their child's elementary school. I teach the children, along with their parents, all about school expectations and what California says the children need to learn that year in order to prepare for their academic career. Only about half of my students have attended preschool, and even if they have had preschool experience, kindergarten is set-up very differently than the local preschools. Our kindergarten curriculum is based on the California Common Core Standards (California Department of Education, 2013a) and not based on developmentally appropriate practices as the preschools are. There are also not as many minutes allowed for play in kindergarten as there are in preschool. Due to these differences, many of the parents are unsure of what to expect during the kindergarten year.

During my first set of kindergarten report card conferences, I was astounded by how many families did not know what was expected from their children in kindergarten. I found that, more than anything, they were unsure of the knowledge and skills their children needed in the area of English Language Arts (ELA). I repeatedly heard, “but they can sing the alphabet song at home!” as a reply when I attempted to discuss the test results indicating that their child could recognize few or no letters. After explaining to multiple families during each set of conferences that the alphabet song doesn’t actually mean their child knows the names and sounds of the letters, I realized that I needed a more effective way to work with families. Our conference time was limited, and I found that I was repeating myself to most families who sat down with me. I quickly came to
the conclusion that conferences were not the most efficient way to help educate these families.

The ELA section of the Common Core standards focuses heavily on letter and sound recognition so that students can sound out consonant-vowel-consonant (CVC) words. There is also a focus on concepts of print and reading sight words as well as retelling the main events of a story. In the writing component, the expectation is that students are able to write narrative, informative, and argument pieces (California, 2013a). These are the standards on which our district focuses the curriculum.

According to the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC, 2009), developmentally appropriate practice is based on how children develop and learn in different ways and at different rates (p.10). Developmentally appropriate practice is a framework designed to promote young children’s optimal learning and development by meeting students where they are and helping them meet challenging learning goals (NAEYC, 2009). While meeting the standards, it is also important that teachers create a caring community of learners, use teaching time to enhance development and learning, plan the curriculum to achieve important goals, and assess the child’s learning (NAEYC, 2009, p. 16). Each of these goals needs to be accomplished in the classroom in order to make the content as accessible as possible to the students.

The more that I met with families in both formal and informal situations, I realized that the majority of them were unaware of what the kindergarten ELA standards were and which developmentally appropriate activities they could use at home to help their child meet these standards. As I began trying to figure out why parents were confused about why their child was falling behind, it was obvious that as much as they
wished to help, most did not know of any activities they could engage in at home. I started having families come into my classroom individually, to go over simple activities, and I saw how instantly relieved and excited they seemed to be to finally have the information they needed to help their child. I also found out that some families did not have any pencils, crayons, paper, or other supplies I had previously assumed that every home had. As I gave families these tools, more homework started being returned, and the students began showing improvement in their language assessments. The families began asking questions about furthering their knowledge of working with their child at home, and they became aware of the academic areas in which their child needed the most help.

When I first participated in one of the themed Family Nights for all students in our school, I realized these nights were a great opportunity to bring parents together. The nights that were being held were focused on games and crafts for a given holiday or theme. I saw how these families were happy to be spending time together. I thought maybe we could have a separate night to give them information on how to help their child at home and to give examples of activities they could do. I spoke with my administrator and we agreed that the families would benefit from learning about literacy activities. We decided that Family Literacy Nights would be something I could begin planning in order to help create a time to educate families on kindergarten ELA standards and activities. The following action research addresses the question: "How does parent support of young children’s literacy learning change as a result of Family Literacy Nights?"

**Purpose and Context**

This project involves a combination of getting parents involved with the school, forming a relationship with them, and giving them information in a productive manner to
help them work on literacy at home with their child. Throughout this paper, I use the word parent(s) to mean the adults with whom the child lives. There are many children in this school who live with adults other than their biological parents. The school in which I work and where this project was completed has about 210 students in grades kindergarten through eighth grade. Ninety-two percent of students receive free or reduced-cost lunch. Twenty one percent of the parents are not high school graduates, 43% only have their high school diploma and 9% graduated college. The majority of students are white (62%) with the next largest majority being Hispanic (14%), followed by Native American (9%). About 3% of the students are English Language Learners (California Department of Education, 2013b).

Given this demographic information and the low parent participation our school has, it makes sense that the observation that “low-income parents also experience psychological barriers to involvement, and among these is parent confidence” (Van Velsor & Orozco, 2007, p. 19) applies to our school. It is possible that one of the reasons there is low involvement in school activities and educational activities at home is due to this lack of family confidence surrounding the school. Many families tell me that they did not have a positive school experience and they do not feel comfortable at the school.

As I started to look into the theoretical and research basis for family involvement, I found that, “when teachers take clear, deliberate action to involve parents, the socioeconomic status and education level of parents disappear as a factor in the willingness of parents to be involved” (Benson & Martin, 2003, p. 187). I was hopeful that by reaching out to families and finding a way for them to become involved in school, they would begin attending school functions and become more informed about their
children’s education. To attain high family engagement in this program, the families’ own knowledge about their children and their thoughts on how to help them were welcomed and recognized. The hope was that this two-way communication would help families to know that their capabilities were recognized and considered to be an important part of facilitating their child’s learning (Doyle & Zhang, 2011). When planning the agendas for the Family Literacy Nights, I kept the idea of welcoming each family's knowledge in mind, and I made a time for the families to have input into which activities were discussed and for families to brainstorm ideas to help each other.

While the families were attending these nights, it was vital that I showed them why helping their child with literacy at home is necessary. A child’s code-related skills at the preschool level relate to kindergarten literacy skills, reading in first and second grade, and reading comprehension in third and fourth grade (Storch & Whitehurst, 2002). The code-related skills include conventions of print, beginning stages of writing, and letter names and sounds. This information was provided to families so that they could see that early literacy education helps to ensure success later in their academic career. In relation to mothers’ conversations with their child, it has been found that “elaborative comments during talk about good behavior produced the most robust set of relationships and was the only context with links to not only literacy but to child language as well” (Sparks & Reese, 2012, p. 103). Families needed to know that conversations with their child could greatly impact that child’s learning. Because recognition of letter names and sounds, blending, sight words, reading, and writing complete sentences is a focus of the school curriculum, the parents needed to be aware of these skills as well.
The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) provides extensive information regarding what is developmentally appropriate for children in preschool and Kindergarten (NAEYC, 1998). These developmentally appropriate practices are important for parents to understand when working with their child, because these practices will provide the best opportunities for the child to make progress. NAEYC advises that reading aloud is the single most important activity for building reading skills, and the most benefits come when the child feels emotionally secure and is an active participant in the reading, (e.g. by discussing the story) (NAEYC, 1998). There are other important skills important for future reading and writing that include concepts about print, alphabetic principle, linguistic awareness, invented spelling, and repeated readings (NAEYC, 1998). All of these skills involve allowing the child to explore words and sounds to make sense of why we use reading and writing and how the practice of reading and writing occurs.

I used research to inform myself on how to encourage families to attend these nights and how to present information in a meaningful way to them. I also provided them with resources to help their child learn. Research showing how important home education is in the early years will help to guide families into feeling confident that they know how to help their child. Our district sees learning to read and write as skills that a child needs to learn early in order to advance in their academic career.

**Description of Family Literacy Nights**

The Family Literacy Nights took place in my general education classroom from 5:30-7:00pm. They were held once a month, beginning in February 2014, and concluding in April 2014, for a total of three Literacy Nights. The participants were
families (adults and their children) who chose to attend these nights. To invite families, I sent home flyers to the thirty-two children in my class and to the sixteen children in the onsite preschool. The flyers indicated that the information and activities presented would be geared towards Kindergarten literacy and beneficial for children entering or attending Preschool, Kindergarten, and 1st grade.

At the beginning of each night I collected the Informed Consent Forms (Appendix A) from the families in attendance. The children attending gave verbal assent when I orally informed them about my research study (see script in Appendix B). If they had previously signed the consent form, a family did not sign again on subsequent nights. I presented information regarding what the students are expected to know for ELA in Kindergarten according to the California State Common Core standards. I then had the families work on different literacy activities for letter recognition and sounds as well as reading and writing skills and explained the ways they are beneficial for their children. One example of the kinds of activities completed by each child and parent was picking a letter of the alphabet and then looking through newspaper advertisements to find words and images with that letter. They cut out the words and made collages. The activities the parents participated in were representative of what skills our district expects the students to have by the end of kindergarten. A more detailed explanation of these nights is in chapter three.

At the end of each family literacy night I handed out an anonymous survey (Appendix C) for the adults to complete. These surveys asked about how many hours a week the family spends working on literacy activities at home, what their main concern is for their children regarding literacy, and if they planned on implementing at least one
activity from the Literacy Night. I reviewed the surveys and made changes to the following nights as suggested by the parents' comments. I used the data from the surveys, as well as field notes I took during the nights, to find out what the families were most interested in learning about and how their engagement in these activities changed their practices at home.

**Significance**

I envisioned that this project would provide a time for the families in my school’s community to attain information about ELA in kindergarten. I wanted families to be able to better understand what is expected of their kindergarten students regarding literacy development and how parents can better help them at home. I hoped that this knowledge would increase the families' confidence in helping their children and promote positive relationships between families and the school. These Family Nights allowed me to use the information on parent involvement and research skills I have learned in my graduate studies to develop a valuable learning opportunity for families. I also wanted it to be a model for other teachers, to help them work with parents.

This project is important because it promotes positive relationships between schools and the families they serve. In addition, I was able to use research to help families recognize activities to engage in with their child. These nights were focused on exchanging information with families, but they also helped me to get to know the families better and to learn more about their needs.

**Limitations**

There were several limitations to this study. The first limitation was the small sample size. The results of this study cannot be generalized to other schools, but what
happened at this school can be used by other teachers to inspire ideas and to inform their own practices. Another limitation is the fact that some families came to the first night but not the later nights and others came to the later nights but not the beginning ones. This made data for the changing literacy practices more difficult to review. The other clear limitation is that data was self reported by the families and may not be entirely accurate. The last limitation is that due to the many other factors in a family’s life, it is not possible to firmly establish the extent to which family nights contributed to change in their literacy practices.
Chapter 2

Review of Literature

Introduction

Learning to read and write is seen as a vital component to a young child’s education by most people in modern, American society. It is one of the best predictors of whether or not a child will function competently in school as well as if they will go on to contribute actively in society (NAEYC, 1998). People are all expected to become literate as they go through the school system, but often parents are unsure of how to help support the child at home. There seem to be an overwhelming number of ideas available through various resources for how parents can help their child. The concern with the large amount of information is that not every idea has research to back it up or is helpful to the child. This project was meant to help parents make sense of literacy instruction for young children by providing focused instructions and activities that can be repeated at home. In addition to explaining the process by which Family Literacy Nights were instituted, this paper also seeks to answer the following research question: "How does parent support of young children’s literacy learning change as a result of Family Literacy Nights?"

This literature review explores the research on how reading and writing are developed as knowledge and skills a child possesses, how their families can help them to develop the knowledge and skills needed at home, and why it is necessary for their families to engage in this learning at home. The exploration of these topics looks mainly at how parents can help their children develop emergent literacy. As stated by Whitehurst and Lonigan (1998), “emergent literacy consists of the skills, knowledge, and
attitudes that are developmental precursors to reading and writing” (p. 848). Emergent literacy skills include phonological awareness and letter identification. These skills are formed in partnership with the conceptual knowledge of language. The contents of emergent literacy are all important aspects for a child to have when entering kindergarten. The family literacy discussed is based on the definition provided from the Head Start Act (2007) that includes interactive literacy activities between parents and their child, training parents on how to be a teacher for their child, and age-appropriate education to help prepare children for success in school.

**Historical Views**

Both research and policy have changed how emergent literacy is viewed by our society. Originally, only certain people in society were taught to be literate, whereas now it is expected of all people. The level of expected literacy a person attains has also risen. As more people began to become literate, families began teaching their children literacy skills. After the industrial revolution, the schools became the responsible party for teaching literacy instead of the families (van Kleeck & Schuele, 2010). In the 1800’s and early 1900’s, families engaged in learning with their young child at home through play activities. By the late 1900’s research began emerging about how parents can educate their children. A key concept for literacy development was suggested by Anderson, Hiebert, Scott, and Wilkinson (as cited in van Kleeck & Schuele, 2010), who said that parents need to not only share books and read aloud to their children, but they also need to engage them in conversations about the story and how it relates to their own life. This concept of conversation surrounding books is still something that is often cited today as a key strategy to use with children. It was also concluded by Dewey as well as Huey in the
early 1900’s that home influences were important for reading development and that the parents needed to spend time at home reading with their children to make them more fluent and natural readers (as cited in Sturtevant & Linek, 1993).

As preschool enrollment has increased, the preschool curriculum has changed as well. During the 1960’s the federal government began opening public Head Start preschools with the passing of the Economic Opportunity Act. This was a first for the government, because until that time preschools were either locally or state controlled (Blank, 2010). By the 1970’s, there was increasing acceptance of the belief that children needed to be exposed to foundational skills for reading before the age of 6 ½ years old (van Kleeck & Schuele, 2010). There has been an overall shift from families educating their children to schools educating the children; however, recently researchers have been acknowledging that the schools and families need to form a partnership in order to both work together to provide the best education for the child. In 1994, the United States government launched the Goals 2000: Educate America Act which aimed to have increased parent involvement in every school to promote social, emotional, and academic growth of the children. Then in 2002, the No Child Left Behind Act required schools to have a written parent involvement policy developed by the school and community (Anfara & Mertens, 2008).

**Reading Development**

Reading is a complex task that takes a great deal of both practice and instruction to master. Ehri (2012) notes that people with the ability to read use many strategies to do so. They may use their knowledge of print concepts, letter sounds, segmenting
phonemes, reading sight words, or a multitude of other strategies that a young child who is new to learning must learn.

Our district takes the phonics approach to reading. In this approach, as children begin listening to conversations and books being read aloud, they begin to understand there are letters in written words and sounds corresponding to letters. The children then gain more phonemic awareness skills and start to apply their knowledge of print concepts to read basic sentences and text. According to Lonigan (2006), children who can both detect and manipulate syllables, rhymes, and phonemes tend to be quicker to read. After children can sound out and recall words in order to read they can begin to comprehend the meaning of the words they are reading (Ehri, 2012).

When reading aloud to young children, it is important that multiple strategies are used to make the largest impact possible. Piasta, Justice, McGinty, and Kaderavek (2012) found that when 4-5 year old preschool students were read to and the instructor drew their attention to reading strategies and print concepts such as tracking with a finger, counting letters in a word, and identifying names of letters they read, they had higher reading and spelling abilities than their counterparts not receiving this type of instruction focused on print. One year after this reading experiment ended, the children maintained their higher abilities, and two years after the study ended, they still had a higher ability of word reading, spelling, and reading comprehension than the students not included in this method of teaching (Puranik, Lonigan, & Kim 2011). This study highlights the importance of emphasizing print concepts when reading with preschool children ages 4-5 years old.
The children who are able to learn these letter sounds and use them in their writing for invented spelling tend to have more positive reading outcomes as they get older when compared to the children who were not read to this way. These methods emphasize learning the sounds and not the letters in terms of the alphabet song. The alphabet song is mentioned by Butler and Clay (1989), who say that this song has very little to do with reading and can actually lead to a child misunderstanding what reading is.

To help teach the letter sounds and awareness to children in preschool and kindergarten, it is often helpful to read nursery rhymes with young children to help increase their phonological awareness (NAEYC, 1998). The ideas mentioned all include explicitly explaining the text that is being read with the children.

In the whole language approach to reading, according to Rehner (2008), students focus more on the meaning of the text than the sounds and parts of it. The children are usually in literature rich environments and work to connect the meaning of the text to their own experiences. They encounter vocabulary through meaningful context in the stories presented to them and through their daily life. Krashen (2002) points out that in the whole language approach students will first learn to read signs and messages, and they learn how to read from reading print on objects or books with which they are familiar. It is also noted that whole language focuses on teaching the idea that reading is meaningful and focuses on the experience of learning vocabulary.

As adults read with children, conversation about what is being read is an important component as well as the actual reading. Discussion of the story helps to bridge the information in the story to events in the children's own lives, which is also a component to the whole language approach. Before reading a story it is helpful to
explain some of the new words the child will be hearing and what they mean, as it can significantly help a child to learn these words (NAEYC, 1998). Discussion of vocabulary before reading is a way to front load the information, so that when the new word is read aloud, the child has some kind of experience with it and a context for it. All of these methods relate to an important component of how children learn to read.

Another way that children learn about reading and begin to understand it is from the use of environmental print such as logos and signs. Neumann, Hood, and Ford (2013) found that children ages three to four years-old in middle socioeconomic class who were taught to read words using this environmental print had higher print motivation and were better able to read the tested words compared to the students taught with standard print. Even two months after the intervention of using environmental print ended, the students were still able to read more words than the group receiving the same lessons using standard print or the group being taught using their regular classroom curriculum. It was also noted that on walks around the school, children referred to and asked questions about letters on signs and posters that they saw whereas this behavior was not observed in the standard print group. These results led these researchers to conclude that environmental print helps to both foster and sustain emergent literacy (Neumann, Hood, & Ford, 2013). Environmental print is also something that is easy to attain and utilize for all people regardless of their socioeconomic status, because it is readily available.

The degree of child engagement when using environmental print is also linked to a child’s ability to learn to read. According to Baroody and Diamond (2012), children who have a higher interest in literacy are likely to be able to correctly identify more letters and perform better on tasks that require this knowledge of letter and word
identification than are children who do not have this interest. In this same research, it was hypothesized that children who have lower literacy skills have a more difficult time engaging in reading-type activities because they are unable to express interest in it (Baroody & Diamond, 2012). The children using environmental print to learn about literacy are able to have a higher level of engagement compared to using standard print, thus giving them a higher chance of success in grasping the skills needed for reading.

**Writing Development**

There are many activities and methods used to help children as they are learning about the process of writing. Research by Puranik and Lonigan (2011) demonstrates that early scribbles from children show that they have an understanding that writing is symbolic. It was found by Genishi and Dyson (as cited in Mackenzie, 2011, p. 323) that as children learn how to write, their writing often develops in a linear way beginning with scribbles. The scribbles turn into strands of the letters that they know how to form, then they begin using invented spelling getting the first and/or last letter of the word. After continued practice, these marks go on to become readable text, including vowels. Early in a child’s life, when they are beginning to make marks onto paper and other materials, they are experimenting with writing and understanding how it is created.

As children learn to write using the letters in the alphabet, they must be able to retrieve the letter shapes and encode them in order to get them correctly formed on the paper (Puranik, Lonigan, & Kim, 2011). With the large number of skills that must be combined in order for a child to write, it is important to remember that they need time to practice and guidance on which techniques to use. Teachers can encourage letter-sound relations by using each child's own name as a basis for letter and sound recognition (Blair
Using their own name in the beginning is helpful, because it is something that has meaning to them and is familiar. A child's name also provides the first letters that many children can write and understand. When children are able to form the letters and begin practicing phonemic awareness with words, they begin to use invented spelling which helps them to make strong letter-sound relations (NAEYC, 1998).

As children become more skilled writers and begin using invented spelling, they are using a combination of phonological awareness, letter name and sound recognition, and print knowledge to contribute to this spelling (Purnaik, Lonigan, & Kim, 2011). As these skills become better and more refined from their practice, their spelling continues to improve. It was found by Puranik and Lonigan (2011) that when the writing task demands are easier, the children tend to use more advanced writing features and letter sounds for spelling. When the task is more difficult, children tend to use less advanced features and random letters. This example explains why children’s writing can vary so greatly as they are still learning about how to write. In my kindergarten classroom, student writing is assessed on their ability to leave spaces between words, have an end mark, a capital in the beginning, and have the consonant sounds for the words correct as well as correctly spelled sight words.

The concept of children using more advanced features when the demands of the task are lower follow the ideas that Mackenzie (2011) found when looking at the relationship between emergent writing and drawing. Her research concludes that the most effective environment for literacy learning is one where the children are allowed to build on what they already know and can do.
Mackenzie's (2011) study focused on children ages four to six years-old in Australia with a low socioeconomic status. She found that when she approached young children about a lesson, many of them said they could not write, although they all agreed they could draw. When children are allowed to draw as a beginning stage to get their ideas and thoughts onto paper, it is a way for them to complete an external representation of their ideas and thus supports their first attempts at writing (Mackenzie, 2011). These findings of writing development are similar to Clay’s (1975) findings that it is after children realize that a sign carries a message that they begin to string letters. If children are not allowed to draw as a means of communication or completing an assignment, and are forced to wait until their writing skills are proficient enough for them to express themselves, the text construction process may be interrupted. Allowing children to draw, as visual text creation, gives them the opportunity to express themselves while they are still learning written text skills (Mackenzie & Veresov, 2013).

Many studies have looked at the gains made with teaching children to write using their own names. In a study done by Aram and Biron (2004), with students who had a low socioeconomic status, it was found that teaching students to recognize the letters in their own name and friends' names, along with segmenting these letters and practicing letter sounds, helped to improve their phonological awareness, writing, letter knowledge, and orthographical awareness. The improvements made in this group were more than their counterparts in the reading and control group.

Phonological awareness and letter sound recognition are related to successful name writing (Blair & Savage, 2006). Name writing has been found to have the possibility of providing children with an initial motivation to begin writing. With this
name writing the caution is that although students may be able to write their name, they may not be able to correctly name the letters or the sounds in their name (Puranik & Lonigan, 2011). It is therefore important to do plenty of activities to ensure that they are able to correctly name the letters in their names and to begin teaching about the sounds they make.

Along with names, environmental print, such as logos, is something that children see all over and can be used to help them begin writing. When preschool children were taught to write letters using logos for environmental print, Neumann, Hood, and Kaderavek (2012) found that they were able to perform better on letter writing and chose to write more frequently even two months after the intervention ended. The students in the comparison group were taught using standard print. When using the logos, they studied each letter in them and practiced the sounds they made. They were shown the letters as they appeared in context, however, the children’s abilities to use that information to write their own letters and recognize sounds correctly shows the logos were not a distraction (Neumann, Hood, & Kaderavek, 2012). The idea that children can recognize environmental print without the context and use it for their writing goes against the findings from Blair and Savage (2006), who stated that children could gain information from environmental print in context but would not be able to learn the letters decontextualized (p. 1009).

The ideas presented above show that children need to learn about writing through methods that they can relate to and engage with. These studies provide evidence that children need to be exposed to writing in ways that help to provide them knowledge about why we write, such as environmental print (Neumann et al., 2012). The children
also need to be taught through methods that match their ability level and help to engage them, such as drawing (Mackenzie, 2011) and name writing (Aram & Biron, 2004; Blair & Savage, 2006; Puranik & Lonigan, 2011). Familiar activities focused on print and practicing letter recognition and sounds contribute to their engagement in and ability to write and spell.

**Program Design**

When working with parents on strategies to help educate their child, one of the biggest things that needs to happen is for families to be assured that they are both capable and important facilitators in the learning process of their child (Doyle & Zhang, 2011). Doyle and Zhang found that once the parents' knowledge about their child is recognized and they are encouraged to share their ideas about how to help their child, engagement in family literacy programs tend to be high (Doyle & Zhang, 2011). Giving time for parents to share their own ideas is something that needs to be part of the family literacy program as it can help to keep them engaged, just as it helps children to be able to share their ideas.

It has been shown that parent involvement is motivated by the belief systems of role construction for involvement and sense of efficacy for helping children succeed (Hoover-Dempsey, Walker, Sandler, Whetsel, Green, Wilkins, & Closson, 2005). It was important that this project helped to define these roles for parents to get them involved as much as possible. A driving force to encourage parents to attend school functions is having their children invite them, along with the teacher (Green, Walker, Hoover-Dempsey, & Sandler, 2007). For Family Literacy Nights, I had to show parents that I personally wanted them to attend and their children also wanted them to attend.
In order to get parents to return to these Family Literacy Nights, I needed to create a positive environmental experience during the event. According to Hoover-Dempsey et al. (2005) parents’ role construction is created over time and from their personal previous experiences with schools and can change over time. Many parents at this school have had negative experiences during their own time at school, causing them to not want to or not know how to be involved in a positive manner. Creating a time for them to come to the school and feel positive about their time there is critical to help redefine their roles. A large part of this redefining can come from parents having more positive experiences when their input is asked for about their child’s education and there are clear efforts from the principal to meet the needs of everyone at the school (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005). Due to this finding, part of the Family Literacy Nights included time for the parents to ask any questions they had and to share their own thoughts and ideas on their child’s education.

Research has shown that parents are more likely to continue attending a school or community event when the staff formed relationships with the participants and when they found the information useful (Reece, Staudt, & Ogle, 2013). If the families were able to apply what they learned from a Family Literacy Night at home right away, they would have been more likely to return, because it was something useful to them. Building relationships with the individual families helps to build their trust in the school and keeps them coming back more effectively than does a general invitation (Hoover-Dempser et al. 2005).

It is often stated in emergent reading literature that the single most important activity to build understanding and skills for reading appears to be reading aloud with
children (NAEYC, 1998). When designing a program to increase the number of families engaging with literacy activities at home, I knew reading aloud had to be a component, because it is vital for children and an activity for which there are many simple strategies. It is also something that parents can do without spending a lot of money or taking time to prepare an activity.

According to Aram and Biron (2004), beginning to help children develop literacy knowledge is important at a young age. These literacy areas include helping children to understand the functions of print, concepts of print, structure of stories, knowledge of alphabet, and literacy enjoyment. They gave ideas such as matching children’s names with their pictures and finding letters in a child’s own name and their friends’ names (Aram & Biron 2004). These are all activities that I wanted to make sure parents were able to learn and begin to implement at home.

NAEYC (1998) had a similar description of how to teach reading to young children. For children in preschool it was recommended that they engage in responsive conversations. Conversations between parents and children were found to be as important to developing the child’s reading skills as were language and literacy skills (Sparks & Reese, 2013). This same study also found that when a mother talks to her child about his or her good behavior it is tied to their overall reading comprehension abilities. This is information that needs to be shared with parents so they understand the importance of taking the time to have conversations with their child. These conversations can, and should, be modeled for parents. Doyle and Zhang (2011) stated that parents found the time given for parent-to-parent discussions during a literacy event were a useful time for them to share ideas. After giving them this time to share it can be brought
to their attention that having discussions is a useful practice for them and also for their children.

After reviewing the research on how children learn to read, NAEYC (1998) concluded that in preschool children need to be involved in responsive conversations, have daily reading and discussions of what was read, be immersed in a print rich environment, and use songs, games and poems to develop phonemic and phonetic awareness. It was also suggested that families take trips to libraries to keep the child’s collection of books updated and to form a habit of lifelong learning (NAEYC, 1998).

Learning the letters using environmental print (such as logos) is another learning strategy that can be used while at home or out in the community (Neumann, Hood, & Kaderavek, 2012). All of these activities need to be shared with parents to give a child the best chance at becoming literate.

Writing is another area of literacy with which parents need to help their children. As previously mentioned, for a child to begin writing in a legible and productive way, they must have a great amount of practice, and some of this practice should start early and in the home. One method suggested to help children write was letting children use stickers, magazine cutouts, pencils, crayons, and other materials from which they can choose (Aram & Biron, 2004). This choice allows them to be creative in their writing and try different things. Using different writing tools was found to stimulate their interest in the subject (Puranik & Lonigan, 2011).

Parents may need help recognizing that writing can be creative, fun, and does not always have to be on lined paper. NAEYC (1998) recommends that children engage in many different types of writing such as stories, lists, or notes. These types of writing can
be incorporated into a child's play. Parents may also need help recognizing the importance of letting their child draw and that drawing will evolve into writing. These drawings allow children to believe that they can do what has been asked (Mackenzie, 2011), as well as giving them a way to express themselves while they are still becoming proficient in their writing abilities (Mackenzie & Veresov, 2013).

**Relevancy**

Teaching parents about how their child learns, as well as strategies to help promote literacy, will help all parents to better understand their role as their child’s first teacher. It is important that parents recognize their role in their child’s education because children, especially children with low socioeconomic status, who begin school behind their peers in terms of alphabetic skills are likely to stay behind them (Aram & Biron, 2004). By the end of 3rd grade, the effects of the home literacy environment the child experienced can still be traced (de Jong & Leseman, 2001). Children need their parents to help them to begin learning these basic skills and awareness of letters before they enter school.

In the previous section, it was mentioned that parents need to provide plenty of books in the home to read with their child (NAEYC, 1998). Rodriguez and Tamis-LeMonda (2011) found that children with high language scores had at least 5 books in their home at the age of 15 and 25 months, whereas children at 37 months with high language scores had at least 10 books. The parents need to have multiple books in order to engage their child with reading materials. Shared book reading is highly motivating for the child and is usually stress-free for the parents (de Jong & Leseman, 2001). A
combination of joint book reading and joint problem solving at home is related to a child’s reading comprehension abilities (de Jong & Leseman, 2001).

A large part of a child’s literacy development depends on early interactions in their home. According to Rodriguez and Tamis-LeMonda (2011), children who lived in homes that were rich with stimulation had an advantage compared to children with less stimulating homes on language and cognitive tasks that were completed as they grew up. The stimulating experiences need to start in a child’s life early, because by 15 months of age, the experiences that a parent provides develop a pattern for the child that will either support or impede their emerging literacy skills (Rodriguez & Tamis-LeMonda, 2011). An important component of this environment is reminiscing about reading or past events that is done between a child and their parents. This gives a “child the opportunity to articulate thoughts based solely on personal memory; this kind of language is often referred to as decontextualized because it requires the child to formulate conversation about things that are not present in the immediate moment” (Sparks & Reese, 2013). This kind of conversation helps children to recall information as well as make sense of the world around them.

Conclusion

It seems apparent that for optimal literacy development, the overarching activities a parent needs to engage in with their child are shared reading (Piasta, Justice, McGinty, & Kaderavek, 2012; NAEYC, 1998), discussions (Sparks & Reese, 2013; de Jong, & Leseman), and drawing/writing time (Puranik, Lonigan, & Kim 2011; Puranik & Lonigan 2011; NAEYC, 1998; Mackenzie 2011). There are many strategies that go along with the shared reading to make it the most beneficial it can be. These are all
strategies and activities that need to be shared with parents to help them understand how to enhance their child’s literacy development.

Having discussions and conversations with their child is something that seems so simple but needs to be paid attention to in order for the child to gain the most benefits. Just as Mackenzie (2011) found that young children often say they cannot write but agree they can easily draw, parents need to let children draw to express themselves and not force them to write before that skill is fully developed and able to be used as a communication tool. It can be challenging to work with parents and help them learn how to support their children’s learning at home, but it is vital in order to provide the best education for the child.
Chapter 3

Methodology

The main focus of this project was to give parents information about the kindergarten Common Core Standards and to give them examples of literacy activities that can be done in the home to promote their young child’s reading, writing and print awareness. These goals were to be accomplished through Family Literacy Nights hosted in my classroom after school. My goal was to have parents of children in preschool and kindergarten attend these events to get ideas that would increase the amount of time they spent working with their child and the quality of activities that they engaged in to promote literacy. The question being researched was, "How does parent support of young children’s literacy learning change as a result of Family Literacy Nights?"

This chapter explains the methodology of developing and implementing this project. The sections that follow tell how Family Literacy Nights were organized and how the data from them was collected and analyzed to gauge parent involvement in literacy activities at home. The chapter sections include a description of the setting and the families who participated, the research design, data collection, and data analysis methods.

Setting & Participants

This project took place at a public elementary school in a Northern California, rural community. Confidentiality was maintained for this study by using the fictitious school name Valley School. Valley School is located in a town that is small, rural, and geographically spread out. Poverty in this area is high.
About 200 students are enrolled in this school, which serves students in grades transitional kindergarten through eighth grade. There are eight regular education classrooms and one special education classroom on the campus. The enrollment numbers change frequently as families are constantly coming and going. Many families at the school are seasonal workers or live with other family members. The population at Valley School includes 92% of students receiving free or reduced lunch, 21% of students having parents who are not high school graduates, 43% having parents who did graduate high school, and 9% having parents who graduated college. The majority (62%) of the students are white with the next largest population (14%) is Hispanic (California Department of Education, 2013b). A very small number of students are English language learners, about one or two students per class. The student population is very similar each year and a good representation of the surrounding community. Due to the high poverty and geographical spread, many parents do not have a vehicle and/or do not have the financial ability to drive to school to attend events or meet with teachers.

There is a culture of drug use in the town and surrounding county. This culture often results in children receiving minimal adult attention. I have worked with many children whose families have been impossible to meet or contact. A large majority, about 95%, of the students in my class, come from a family where parents are separated, or they live with a family member other than their biological mother or father. There are also an overwhelming number of cases of child neglect and abuse. Child Protective Services (CPS) is called for children at our school a few times a week. Our school gives out food, clothes, and school supplies to many different families in need throughout the year.
When the families do come to school, I often hear about how they struggled with school or how they do not know how to help their child to do well in school. Often parents have told me that they do not like coming to the school, because they did not have good experiences during the time they were in school. I am also often told that they do not want their child to drop out or hate school like they did. Our district has five general education schools and five alternative education schools. Many of the parents who did graduate from high school attended one of the alternative schools.

From hearing the children talk about their weekends and hearing the parents talk about what they do at home, the most frequent activity for my students is watching television or playing in their room alone or with siblings. Most of their stories do not include adults interacting with them. We have many family events at the school, all of which have low attendance, including parent teacher conferences for report cards. The Parent Teacher Community Association (PTCA) group had seven members for the 2013-2014 school year including two teachers. As presented throughout this section, the parents have a variety of reasons for not being involved. My anecdotal experience is that the more parents are invited to the school and to participate, the more they attend events.

**Research Design**

This is an action research project. I used the action research method of *reflection, action, and evaluation* as explained by Hendricks (2009). I *reflected* on my observations and interactions with the parents at Valley School and realized there needed to be a way for me to discuss kindergarten literacy skills and activities with them. Once I realized that most parents needed information about early literacy, I was able to begin thinking about the *action* of Family Literacy Nights and how to make them beneficial for the
parents. I knew that parents needed to learn more about what was expected of their child in kindergarten in terms of literacy development as well as specific activities they could organize at home. Parents needed to have a clearer idea of what we were doing in the classroom and how that could be supported in the home. The evaluation step was collecting surveys from the families to see how they felt about the Family Literacy Nights and whether their practices at home changed as a result of the Family Literacy Nights.

The administrator and many other teachers at the school agreed there was a great need for families to have a time when they could learn about the literacy standards as well as activities that could be done at home. The Family Literacy Nights were set-up with different literacy activities included in each one. I invited the parents to bring all of their children, but it was advertised that the activities were geared towards preschool and kindergarten. What was the same for each night was that as parents walked in they signed consent forms (Appendix B) and were offered snacks for themselves and their child. Before the activities began, I read the children the verbal assent information (Appendix A). Each night began with a look at the kindergarten English Language Arts (ELA) Common Core standards. The first night I went into more detail about the standards whereas the following nights it was more of a review. I also put all of the information from each night onto the website swatosh.weebly.com. This was done so parents could go on the website at a later time and review the activities and so that parents who did not attend could also get ideas and information.

The first night included information about reading (Appendix F) with children and the discussions that can happen during reading. The goal for this night was to model reading, which is one of the most important activities for reading success, and to model
book discussion to allow children to connect the book to their lives (NAEYC, 1998). Then the students were asked about what they just read. Concepts of print standard RF.1.A, discussion, and retelling standard RL.2 were discussed with the parents so they understood why these were important to their child (California Department of Education, 2013a). Then their child was able to draw and write about their favorite place they have been in order to help parents see an extension activity to reading and let their child recall a memory. Reminiscing requires the child to recall a memory about things not present (Sparks & Reese, 2013).

After that I read the poems *Halfway Down* by A. A. Milne and *Drinking Fountain* by Marchette Chute. These poems were selected because they are text exemplars (National Governor's Association, 2010). They also were chosen because they include rhymes that help children to meet kindergarten standard RF.2.A-Recognize and produce rhyming sounds. (California Department of Education, 2013b). The parents and children then had opportunities to create their own rhymes and draw pictures to go with them. Everyone then colored play-doh and rolled it into letters, wrote in it, and created props to encourage storytelling, letter and sound recognition, and conversation. Parents were able to take home the outline of ELA standards, anything they created, poems play-doh, and the play-doh recipe.

The second night I reviewed the kindergarten ELA standards, and then I discussed environmental print and activities that can be done at home using environmental print. The families used grocery advertisements to find products that began with a certain letter or collaged their favorite items onto a page and wrote the names of the items. Finding the items helped the students to find high frequency and CVC words in the print as well as
sounding out the logos and other words. We then looked at the sight words list (Appendix E) for our classroom and practiced them with hands-on activities, such as finding the words on signs or writing them in sand.

Next we talked about word endings such as “–an” and the different letters that could be added in front to make words. The families used paint chips to write word endings and letters in order to make different words. The paint chips with many shades of a color had the letters, while the larger paint chips had the endings. This was to help the parents see an example of blending the words. After that the students made hair gel bags so that they could practice writing letters or words onto the bags. Finally I shared websites that are useful to literacy and applications for iPads that have valuable activities.

The third night I reviewed the ELA standards with everyone. Then the parents and children made a puzzle out of the child’s name to identify the letters in their name and order them correctly. I then read the book *If You Give a Mouse a Cookie* (Numeroff & Bond, 1985) to the attendees as a group, discussed it, and made puppets to help in retelling the main events of the story. I chose to read this book, because there are many other books in the series parents can read at home and there are also a large number of extension activities that can be found online to go with this book. The books in this series also have a sequence that is clear for the reader to see. Being able to retell a story is a kindergarten standard and this book provides a chance to practice that skill. I distributed writing paper with the puppets so the students could add to the story we just read. Next I gave them black scratch art paper so that they could write on it with a toothpick to reveal the colors underneath. We also made art projects using foam letters so the students could practice spelling and had something kinesthetic to work with.
There was a fourth Family Literacy Night scheduled, but due to low attendance during the previous nights, it was canceled. There were also schedule conflicts with other school activities on the night it was supposed to occur. To take the place of this additional night, a survey was sent home to collect information about why parents had or had not attended. The survey was sent home to all Kindergarten and Preschool parents.

Each Family Literacy Night was designed to have activities for reading, writing, and oral conversations. They were each scheduled so that a parent could attend any one night and not feel like they were missing something from the previous one. The website also had all of the information from each night, in case a parent wanted to look for additional ideas. During each event, I encouraged conversation among the parents by asking about activities they like to do at home and listening to how they would use these activities. At the end of each night there was a survey (Appendix C), which served as my evaluation part of the action research. Below is a table to show the activities that took place during each family literacy night.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>February</th>
<th>March</th>
<th>April</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Overview of the Common Core standards covered in kindergarten. (Appendix F)</td>
<td>Explanation of the value of environmental print and how it can be utilized with newspaper and free materials. Create collages together using images and words from newspapers.</td>
<td>Review of the Common Core standards. (Appendix F)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Read story on carpet with children and have them go back to their seats to draw and write with their families about the story.</td>
<td>Review sight words (Appendix E). Look at different ideas to practice sight words.</td>
<td>Have families help their child write their name on a sentence strip and cut it into a puzzle.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Explain to families how poetry can be used for reading, writing, and recognizing sounds.</td>
<td>Demonstrate how to write letters on one paint chip and word endings on another to make word</td>
<td>Read “If You Give a Mouse a Cookie”. Have students make a mouse beg puppet to help retell</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Have families work on their own poem. Sliders. Let families make them. the story and write about it.

Hand out play dough and let families choose color to use. Demonstrate how to form letters and write in the play dough. Show how to trace words in bags filled with hair gel. Make them with families to use. Use foam sticker letters to make crafts.

Have adults share their thoughts/ideas/questions from the nights. Go through online resources that families can access. Show families how to make their own scratch art paper and use it to write on.

Table 1: Summary of events at Family Literacy Nights

Data Collection & Analysis

The data collection began in February 2014, and ended in May 2014. As the facilitator of these nights I had to make sure all of the consent forms were signed as well as leading activities, answering questions, and taking notes. During and after each Family Literacy Night, I wrote field notes about what had transpired. During the events, I wrote quick notes about major happenings and wrote the details in after the families had all left. I was unable to hear all of the different conversations that people were having, but I moved around the room throughout the event to try to hear most of them. I also noted if children came to school and told me about one of the activities they did at home or if they commented on them. These interactions gave me additional opportunities to see if the parents were using any of the activities at home and if the child enjoyed the activities either at family literacy night or at their home.

I focused on writing notes about the engagement, conversation, and comments that people made. I wanted to hear how people were talking with their children, if they were doing the activities for their child or with their child, and if they were using any of
the strategies I talked about. As I walked around, I mainly listened and only interacted to
give positive comments or ask questions about their work. I did not try to correct them or
ask them to do anything differently. I worked to make them feel comfortable in the room
and to encourage them to engage with their child. My role as the facilitator was to
provide them with ideas and information and to let them decide how to implement the
activities with their children.

Once the Family Literacy Nights had all been completed, I reviewed the notes and
coded the interactions. Based on Hendricks (2009), I started with the categories of
events, strategies, relationships, and setting. I looked for trends throughout the nights as
well as between different families. I also looked at which activities had higher
engagement and completion rates. Some activities were more parent-directed and they
worked to keep the children involved, while others had the students excited and working
with their parents. I also looked at the data to see for which activities parents were using
strategies I suggested and for which ones they were just trying to get the work finished.

The data from the surveys at the end of each night were coded as well.
Quantitative data was tallied, and qualitative comments were coded in the same manner
as I coded the field notes. I looked for trends and wanted to see if the surveys and the
field notes had similarities regarding high interest activities. I also used the surveys as a
method of evaluating the nights and for ideas about how to improve the next one. The
information from the surveys gave me a way to see what needed to be changed in order
for the parents to have a more valuable experience and to encourage them to return
another time. I also used the information as a way to figure out how to encourage more
parents to attend these nights.
Chapter 4

Findings

Hoover-Dempsey et al. (2005) found that parents’ involvement in their child’s education predicted later measures of students’ academic success. This finding was alarming when looking at my school and how few of parents attended school functions or were confident in working on academics at home. I wanted to find a way to encourage parents to be more involved in their child’s education. This caused me to ask: how does parent support of young children’s literacy learning change as a result of Family Literacy Nights?

Overall Totals

The focus of the three Family Literacy Nights was to have the 32 Kindergarten students, 16 Preschool students, and their families attend. Over the course of these nights, there were 20 adults along with 24 children who attended. Out of the 24 children who attended, 15 were students enrolled in the school, or preschool, and 9 were siblings or children who were not enrolled in the school. With both grades combined, 31% of the targeted audience (enrolled students) attended these nights.

There were two families (four adults and three children) who attended all three nights. One family (one adult and one child) attended two nights. The rest of the families attended one night each.

The first Family Literacy Night in February, 2014 had the largest attendance of the three events with 16 adults and 18 children. In March, 2014 there were five adults and six children who attended. In April, 2014 there were five adults and seven children who attended. (See Figure 1)
Figure 1: Monthly attendance for Family Literacy Nights

**Literacy at Home**

The data below reflects surveys that were completed at the end of each Family Literacy Night. Some adults did not answer every question; therefore, the data shows percentages based on the number of people who answered the question being discussed.

In the surveys collected, the majority of families (56.5%, or 13 out of 23 people) spent 16-30 minutes a day at home engaging with their child in reading or writing. There were four people (17.4%) who reported spending 31-45 minutes a day, three people (13%) who reported 46-60 minutes a day, and two people (8.7%) who reported 0-15 minutes a day. One person reported spending 61+ minutes per day. Due to the small sample size and lack of returning families, it was not possible to see a trend of growth or decline as a result of participation in the nights.
Families completing these surveys were asked about their biggest concerns for their child’s literacy success. Out of the 22 responses, 13 people (56.2%) marked reading comprehension, nine people (40.9%) marked writing-constructing sentences, eight people (36.4%) chose children reading on their own, five people (22.7%) chose writing-formation of letters, and four people (18.2%) chose letter & sound recognition.

When looking at the field notes, there was a difference in the areas that families identified as areas of concern (Shown in figure 3). Throughout the three Family Literacy Nights, only 10 questions or comments came up from families about reading comprehension. There were 14 questions or comments about writing-constructing of sentences as well as 19 about writing-formation of letters. Letter and sound recognition was mentioned 15 times by parents. The most mentioned topic was students reading on their own, which was mentioned 34 times.
Parents attending these nights were asked to write the activities they engaged in with their child at home (shown in Figure 4). The main response, which 19 out of 21 people (90.5%) wrote, was reading books. Following that was writing sentences and/or stories from 11 people (52.4%) and then writing letters from four people (19%). Three people said they practiced letter sounds, two people said they played games and used an iPad with games. Other activities (each only mentioned one time) included homework, puzzles, workbooks, word games, flashcards, websites, and crafts.
The field notes showed similar activities being engaged in at home. Reading books came up in discussion 37 times over the course of the three Family Literacy Nights. Families talked about writing letters as well as sentences 41 times, and games were mentioned 14 times. The other activities written in the survey were only mentioned in discussion one or two times.

**Attendance**

The survey asked what the family’s motivation was to attend the night. Nine (42.9%) of the responses indicated that they attended to learn how to best help their child at home and how their child developed academically. Seven people (33.3%) wrote that they attended to gain more activities they could do at home, while four people (19.1%) said that their child wanted to attend. Two people (9.5%) attended to meet other families in the class and spend time with their own child. One person (4.8%) attended to see what was happening in the class, and one other person (4.8%) attended to check how their student was doing in class.
The field notes did not indicate much variance in a family’s motivation to attend. There were 15 mentions of attending the night because the family wanted to learn about more activities they could do at home. There were 11 times that an adult mentioned their child wanted to come, and six times someone said they came just to support the teacher.

**Future Planning**

The survey asked parents what they would like to gain from the next Family Literacy Night. Out of the 22 responses 16 people (82.6%) said they would like more activities to do at home and 14 people (63.6%) said they wanted more information on how children learn to read and write. There were also 12 people (54.6%) who wanted information on what was happening in the classroom and 10 people (45.5%) who said they wanted resources from the Internet.

The field notes showed 17 comments from families about wanting to have more examples of activities they could do at home with their child, nine comments about wanting more Internet resources, 6 comments and requests for information on how their child was learning to read and write, followed by 5 comments about information pertaining to what was happening in the classroom.

There were 23 responses to the question: “How likely are you to complete at least one activity presented tonight at home?” Out of those responses, 19 people (82.6%) said very likely, while 4 people (17.4%) said probably. There were no recorded field notes to show negativity or comments that they would not try an activity at home.

To build upon the above question, parents were then asked which activity they would like to complete at home. The answers varied each night due to the different activities being presented. There were only a few activities that were written by more
than one person. The first night four people each wrote that they would like to work on rhyming words and making play-doh to form letters. Two people each wrote they wanted to do all the activities at home and wanted to work on writing. The second night two people wrote that they wanted to make paint chip sliders to make words at home. The third night two people wanted to make scratch art at home to practice writing.

On the second and third night the survey asked families if they were able to implement an activity from the previous Family Literacy Night. The question did not get valid answers as seven people said they did implement an activity and one person said they did not. Since only five adults attended more than one night, the results do not correctly add up. It appears that families either did not read the question correctly or answered to say what they would have implemented had they attended a previous night.

The large majority of the students who attended the nights came back to school in the following days and talked about activities that they repeated at home. After the February night three students told me about using play-doh at home and five students talked about writing a story at home with their family. In the days following the March night two students told me about using gel bags at home and after the April night two students told me they played with scratch art at home.

The families were asked on the survey how the nights changed their practices at home. Four people (57%) wrote that they spent more time working with their child and reading. Two people (28.6%) wrote that they had a larger variety of activities that they were engaging in and one person (14.3%) wrote that they had a better idea of how to work with their child. Looking at the data provided about the number of minutes the
family was engaging in activities at home, there was not an increase in the number of minutes reported.

At the bottom of the survey, there was a comments area where respondents could write in their own answers. Twelve out of the 13 responses said that the nights went well and one person wrote that they wanted the nights to begin earlier in the evening. When talking to the families after the nights and around the school it was equally divided on who wanted the nights to begin earlier and who thought the times were fine.

In lieu of a fourth Family Literacy Night, due to the low attendance of the previous nights, I sent home a survey to parents of Kindergarten and Preschool asking why they did or did not attend. I received 23 of the surveys back out of the 48 that were sent home. To encourage a higher response rate, I sent a copy of the survey home two to three times a week for three weeks to parents who did not return them. The majority of the responses I received back were short and/or incomplete.

Of the returned surveys six people answered the question of which topics would be helpful at a future family night. The answers were: anything, not sure, grammar & vocabulary, reading, knowing how to help at home, and games and web based activities.

There were 20 responses to answer the question of why the family did not attend a night. Six people answered saying they had to work, five people listed having other obligations, three said they did not know about the event, two people said their student was not enrolled at the time of the event, two others said they had other kids at home to take care of, one person said they were not able to attend because the bathrooms were not available, and one person said it was because they had no ride.
Parents were also asked to say why they would attend a night. There were 17 answers with the majority of seven people simply saying they would attend if they could. Four people said they would attend if they did not have to work. Each of the following were written once: idk (interpreted as I don’t know), if I was aware, at a later time, if there were bathrooms, I need a reminder call, and if I didn’t have to watch kids. Nobody marked that they wanted a translator. There were five people who checked the box saying they would come if childcare was provided.

There were seven surveys returned stating that the family had attended. Six people said they attended to be more involved in their child’s education. One person said their child wanted to attend.

The final question on the survey was how the Family Literacy Nights could be improved. Five people wrote compliments saying the nights went well and they did not have a recommendation. One person wrote that parents needed to be more aware of the nights, another person wrote the nights should be held on two different days of the week.
so parents could choose which one to attend, and one person wrote that more parents should attend.

During May 2014, the last month of the school year, I had eight different parents ask if the nights would occur again over the summer or in the Fall. Three were parents who had attended and five were parents who said they had been unable to attend. The general comments that I received from parents were positive and no negative comments about the activities presented during the nights were made.
Chapter 5

Discussion

This study looked at how parent support of young children’s literacy learning changed as a result of Family Literacy Nights. I initially expected to see a growth in the number of minutes spent on literacy activities reported by families on the survey, and I was curious to know what else might change in families' home literacy habits. Due to the low number of families who participated, there were no significant trends in this data. However, some findings point to areas worthy of further consideration and study.

This chapter discusses the findings of the study of Family Literacy Nights. Home practices are discussed and includes information about what parents are doing at home with their children. Positive aspects of the nights are mentioned next to demonstrate activities and approaches that worked well for these nights. Suggested changes are then recommended to help those who would like to attempt similar events. Future research is suggested as a way to provide more information about the best way to attain high parent involvement.

Home Practices

Looking at the surveys, there were seven responses to the question of how these nights changed practices at home. Four parents wrote that they spent more time at home working together as well as engaging in reading. Two people said that the events gave them a variety of activities to do at home. One parent said the nights gave them a better way to work with their child. These responses all allude to families spending more time together as a result of these nights and that they could see a change had occurred.
In the days after each Family Literacy Night, each student who attended reminded me about something we had made during the night and what he or she did with it when they got home. After the February night, I had three students tell me about using play dough at home. I also had five students bring me a story that they had written at home with their family. After the March night, I had two students come into the classroom to tell me about using gel bags at home, and in April I had two students tell me about playing with scratch art at home. This is significant because normally when I hear about what the students did at home, they tell me about video games or television.

It is important that parents take the time to work on literacy activities with their child. Research by de Jong and Leseman (2001) showed that by the end of 3rd grade, the effects of the home literacy environment the child experienced can still be traced. This evidence can be shown to parents to help them understand why their role as their child’s first teacher is so important. Other research by Rodriguez and Tamis-LeMonda (2011) found that children with high language scores had at least 5 books in their home at the age of 15 and 25 months, whereas children at 37 months with high language scores had at least 10 books. This shows the importance of introducing books to children at an early age.

A second change I noticed was that parents seemed to have more confidence in communicating with me about what they were doing at home. Once these nights began, I noticed that the parents who had attended, and even a few who had not, began to talk to me more. Nearly all of the parents who attended told me about an activity they did at home or asked for another activity. After the first night I had seven parents, who did not attend, ask when the next Family Literacy Night would be. Three of them asked about
what we did at the previous night and for the handouts. The preschool parents acknowledged me more after the February night than they ever had since I had been at the school. It was the first time the preschool families had been invited to a Kindergarten event and it seemed to open the communication instantly.

According to Wildenger and McIntyre (2012) the families transitioning their children from preschool to kindergarten often feel anxiety about the change. The researchers state that the most common practice to get children comfortable with attending kindergarten is to let them see their new room and meet their teacher. This idea helps to explain why the families of preschool students were talking to me more often; they felt more comfortable. This increased communication between the preschool families and myself should lead to a smoother transition for their children.

Families did not comment on doing activities involving environmental print with their children. However, when I demonstrated using a newspaper to find letters or reading logos many parents were surprised that this would be considered a literacy practice. It was found by Neumann, Hood, and Ford (2013) that children ages three to four years-old in middle socioeconomic class who were taught to read words using environmental print had higher print motivation and were better able to read the tested words compared to the students taught with standard print. This finding shows that using environmental print is something that is beneficial to children. My own experience suggests that parents may benefit from learning more about the educational aspects of environmental print and ways to engage their children in activities that use it.
Positive Aspects

There were several parts of the Family Literacy Nights that went well and should be repeated in similar undertakings. Families coming into the classroom enjoyed having food and beverages available to them. Every family that attended had at least one plate with snacks on it. It also provided people with a way to begin doing something as soon as they walked into the room.

Another part of the nights that went well was when parents and children were able to work together to engage in activities. The projects that parents had the most comments about and wrote about on the surveys were ones that had minimal setup and included a large amount of student participation. A few examples of this is making play dough together and then using it to make letters, writing letters on a paint chip and writing word endings on another to match and make words, and scratch art, where the student scratches off a black layer and writes words to reveal color underneath. These three activities received the most positive comments on the surveys.

At the end of each night the families were able to take home anything that they had made together as well as a few handouts. All of the instructions to the projects were listed on the website I had made for the night. The students who attended all came to school the next day talking about the activities they did and telling me where they placed their projects in their house. When carrying out future nights, it is important to have tangible products that can be taken home with the families. It would be great to have books coupled with an activity guide that could go home with the families at this time.

The time given to the families to share their expertise and what they each do at home with their child was invaluable. Many families shared ways in which they worked
on literacy activities at home. This sharing gave families time to be the expert on their child and share their expertise, which helped to engage everyone (Doyle & Zhang, 2011). The families tended to share more as the night progressed and they were able to feel more comfortable. In future events, it would be better to allow more time for this parent communication and to research different ways to encourage participation.

**Suggested Changes**

There are a few things I would change for future Family Literacy Nights. First, advertisement is key. Several families mentioned that they did not know these nights were happening. Sending flyers home and posting them around the school is how I had advertised. Our school district launched a mobile app as well as a Facebook and Twitter page that is heavily followed by families. These networking apps would provide a great avenue to spread the word about these nights. There is also the phone system that automatically calls all of the families with a recorded message. Paired with the advertisements, there should be a note about what families would be able to take home, as this was one of the pieces of the nights which I heard the most about.

There were comments from parents about the time of day the event was scheduled. Some parents said it was fine and others wanted it later or earlier. It did not seem that there was an ideal time for everyone. In the future there are a couple of options to address the differing opinions. The events could be offered on two different days of the week as well as different times. A potential disadvantage to this solution is that there may be lower attendance at each one, and the power of peoples' collaborative ideas and community building may be lost. The other idea is to send out a survey ahead of time asking what time would work the best.
I had some parents bring younger children to the nights with them, which was completely welcomed. Yes, there were parents who said they did not attend because they had to watch their younger children at home. It would be ideal to advertise and provide childcare or at least to make it clearer that bringing all children in the household is welcomed. However, the Family Literacy Night in February was a little loud with so many people and children. The activities were able to engage everyone, but the time I wanted to spend talking to the adults about the activities, standards, and research about child development was difficult given the children wanting to play. It would be helpful to have another teacher who could take the students to a room next door to play for a few minutes while I spoke to the parents. Then the teacher could bring the children back to work on the activities and stay to help families with younger children.

As previously mentioned, the families really enjoyed taking what they made home, and I was able to hear about what they did to further many activities at home. In the future, I would like to have books to send home with families. One parent wrote on the survey that they enjoyed reading the small printed books that I sent home for homework. It would be helpful to have these available for families to take, as well as to have them consistently available in the classroom and free for them to take home. Having prizes that could be won would be another way to lure families to attend as well as provide them with materials they need. In order to have enough books for families to take home, local businesses could be asked to help donate books or host a book drive. Often there are local thrift stores that will help to donate books as well.

In future events it would also be helpful to have different local services and community members come in. Agencies such as Healthy Start and county Social
Services have many resources to offer that people do not know about. Featuring one agency per night could provide information to families as well as possibly some materials such as books or paper. Along with agencies, there are many community members who want to give back and could provide outdoor activity ideas or crafts. If there were enough volunteers there could be Family Literacy Nights held in the cafeteria or Library with different stations of literacy activities. Each teacher or community agency could open the night with information on child development, parenting, or another child related topic.

**Further Research**

In order to improve Family Literacy Nights, more research should be done on how to draw in families from similar communities. It is challenging to get families to attend any school function. More time needs to be spent on gathering information about how to advertise the events as well as what activities are attractive to families. Many families have poor memories from their own education and do not feel comfortable in a school. Living in a small community, these families often send their children to a school that has staff members with whom they went to school or who knew the family growing up. Finding out how to get the families comfortable with attending school functions is key to success.

There also needs to be more research on which activities are most beneficial to children to participate in at home as well as how to best present these activities to the families. Families will complete activities that they feel comfortable with. The families did not write very much on the surveys to tell what they mainly engaged in at home or
which activities they wanted to implement. Finding a way to get more detailed answers on the surveys would help better inform planning decisions.

Limitations

There are several limitations to this study. First, the small sample size makes it difficult to see trends or provide conclusive results. The sample size also narrowed the possible responses to the open ended questions, such as how could the nights be improved and which activities were implemented at home. It wasn’t possible to get a strong idea of which activities were enjoyed the most from the small number of responses.

Another limitation is that the surveys were based on self-reported data and not consistently answered in the manner intended. Not every person who answered the survey completed the entire paper; people skipped many questions. There were also questions that asked for only one answer, such as what is your biggest concern for your child’s literacy success, and people chose more than one answer. There were also people who answered as though they had attended a previous night and had not.

To address this concern, electronic surveys might be helpful. They can be set so that people have to give an answer. I also think that it would have been helpful to explain the questions to the parents to help them understand what information I was looking for. An example is the question of what activities are currently engaged in at home. None of the parents mentioned going to the library or reading signs at a store. They seemed to think this question only meant reading books or writing for homework.
Conclusion

This study made it possible to see how important advertising a school event is. Using networking apps would make it easier to send reminders about the upcoming event and attract more people. Letting parents know these nights are occurring as well as what they entail will draw more people in. Providing something that the families get to take home with them will also help to increase attendance. Sending home flyers is not enough because they can get lost and many parents do not read all of the papers that are sent home.

Another finding from this study is that parents need to be educated on what literacy activities can include. When I showed activities about environmental print and using free materials they had such as newspapers, many people were surprised and commented that they had not thought about using simple items. From the lack of parents commenting about using environmental print I believe there is a common misconception that literacy activities need to contain a book or piece of writing paper. Future nights to help educate parents on using items common around the house and in stores would be beneficial.

Overall this study showed me how much more involved parents could be in their child’s school when they felt comfortable. I was amazed how the parents would talk to me once they attended a Family Literacy Night. It seemed like they just needed to know that I wanted to help them and showed them that they are an important factor in their child’s education. During each night it took a few minutes for the parents to feel comfortable enough to share a story or thought with the group. Once they grew more comfortable they would share more. The most valuable part is knowing that parents want
to be involved in their child’s education and that they just need to be provided the opportunity to do so.
Appendix A

Verbal Consent From Children to Participate in Study

Below is the script that I will use to describe the study to the children involved. Their family will be with them while I read this and will hear it as well. I will read it before beginning each of the family literacy nights.

“Thank you for coming here with your family tonight! I am working on a study, which is like a project, and I want to learn about what alphabet activities you and your family will find fun to do at home. These alphabet projects are about the ABC’s and include activities about reading and writing. I also want to tell you and your family what I will teach about for language arts when you are in kindergarten. When I am done with my study I will write a paper about what I learned from these nights and what activities families found helpful. This paper will not include your name and nobody will be able to tell who I am talking about.

If you agree to be in this study you and your family work on a couple alphabet activities in this classroom tonight. You will also sit with your family and listen to what kinds of things you will be taught about in kindergarten.

You may ask questions now or at any time during the activities. You do not have to be part of this study. If you do not want to be part of this study that is okay, just tell your family or me at any time.

Does anyone have a question about what this study is about or what you will be doing tonight?

Would you like to be in my study and do some activities with your family tonight?”
My name is Carly Swatosh and I am a graduate student at Sonoma State University. Currently I am working on a study involving literacy activities at home as part of earning my Master’s Degree. I will be hosting family nights where I will share literacy activities that can be done at home with children. I want to determine what kinds of activities families find engaging at home and how the information is best conveyed.

**Confidentiality:**
If you and your child decide to participate you will engage in literacy activities that are commonly used in my general education classroom and will learn how to use them at home. I will take notes on how the night goes and there will be a survey at the end of each family night for you to complete. The notes and surveys will be anonymous and there will be no information that is obtained in connection with this study that can be identified with you. There will be no costs to you as a result of taking part in this study.

Your decision whether or not to participate will not prejudice your future relations with Sonoma State University or Unified School District. If you decide to participate, you are free to withdraw your consent and to discontinue participation at any time without prejudice.

If you have any further questions about the study you may contact Carly Swatosh at (707) # or carly.swatosh@usd.org. You may also contact my faculty advisor Chiara Bacigalupa at (707) 664-2104 or chiara.bacigalupa@sonoma.edu.

YOU ARE MAKING A DECISION WHETHER OR NOT YOU AND YOUR CHILD WILL PARTICIPATE IN THIS STUDY. YOUR SIGNATURE INDICATES THAT YOU ARE AGREEING TO PARTICIPATE AND TO ALLOW YOUR CHILD TO PARTICIPATE HAVING READ THE INFORMATION PROVIDED ABOVE.

My signature below indicates that I agree to participate in this study and I agree to allow my child to participate as well.

---

Printed Name of Subject

___________________________  _______________________

Signature of Subject  Date

___________________________  _______________________

Child’s Name  Relationship to Child

___________________________  _______________________

Signature Of Child’s Parent/Guardian  Date
Appendix C

Family Literacy Night Survey—February

My name is Carly Swatosh and I am a graduate student at Sonoma State University. Currently I am working on a study involving literacy activities at home as part of earning my Master’s Degree. I will be hosting family nights where I will share literacy activities that can be done at home with children. I want to determine what kinds of activities families find engaging at home and how the information is best conveyed.

Confidentiality:
If you and your child decide to participate you will engage in literacy activities that are commonly used in my general education classroom and will learn how to use them at home. I will take notes on how the night goes and there will be a survey at the end of each family night for you to complete. The notes and surveys will be anonymous and there will be no information that is obtained in connection with this study that can be identified with you. There will be no costs to you as a result of taking part in this study.

Your decision whether or not to participate will not prejudice your future relations with Sonoma State University or Unified School District. If you decide to participate, you are free to withdraw your consent and to discontinue participation at any time without prejudice.

If you have any further questions about the study you may contact Carly Swatosh at (707) # or carly.swatosh@. You may also contact my faculty advisor Chiara Bacigalupa at (707) 664-2104 or chiara.bacigalupa@sonoma.edu.

YOU ARE MAKING A DECISION WHETHER OR NOT YOU AND YOUR CHILD WILL PARTICIPATE IN THIS STUDY. COMPLETING THIS SURVEY INDICATES THAT YOU ARE AGREEING TO PARTICIPATE AND TO ALLOW YOUR CHILD TO PARTICIPATE HAVING READ THE INFORMATION PROVIDED ABOVE.
February

What is your biggest concern for your child’s literacy success?  (Choose 1)
[ ] Reading on their own  [ ] Reading Comprehension  [ ] Writing-Forming Letters  [ ] Writing-Constructing Sentences  [ ] Letter & Sound Recognition

On average each day my child and I engage in writing, reading, or letter activities:
[ ] 0-15 minutes  [ ] 16-30 minutes  [ ] 31-45 minutes  [ ] 45-60 minutes  [ ] 61 + minutes

Please describe the literacy activities that you and your child do at home.

__________________________________________________________________

What was your motivation to attend tonight?

__________________________________________________________________

What would you like to gain from the next literacy night?  (Check all that apply)
[ ] More activities and games to do at home
[ ] Information on what is being done in my child's classroom
[ ] Information about how children learn to read and write (stages and development)
[ ] How to work with resources from the Internet.
Other:______________________________________________________________

How likely are you to complete at least 1 activity presented tonight at home?
[ ] Not Likely  [ ] Somewhat Likely  [ ] Probably  [ ] Very Likely

If you are likely to complete an activity at home, which will it be?  If you are not likely to complete an activity at home, why will you not be?

__________________________________________________________________

Do you have any suggestions or comments on how I can improve the next family night?

__________________________________________________________________

__________________________________________________________________
March-April
Did you implement any activities or access any resources presented at the previous family night?
[ ] Yes  [ ] No
If yes, please tell which specifically you used:

What is your biggest concern for your child’s literacy success? Choose 1
[ ] Reading on their own  [ ] Reading Comprehension  [ ] Writing-Forming Letters  [ ]
Writing-Constructing Sentences  [ ] Letter & Sound Recognition

On average each day my child and I engage in writing, reading, or letter activities:
[ ] 0-15 minutes  [ ] 16-30 minutes  [ ] 31-45 minutes  [ ] 45-60 minutes  [ ] 61 + minutes
Please describe the literacy activities that you and your child do at home.

What was your motivation to attend tonight?

What would you like to gain from the next literacy night?  (Check all that apply)
[ ] More activities and games to do at home
[ ] Information on what is being done in my child's classroom
[ ] Information about how children learn to read and write (stages and development)
[ ] How to work with resources from the Internet.
Other:

How likely are you to complete at least 1 activity presented tonight at home?
[ ] Not Likely  [ ] Somewhat Likely  [ ] Probably  [ ] Very Likely

If you are likely to complete an activity at home, which will it be?  If you are not likely to complete an activity at home, why will you not be?

How have these nights changed your practices at home?

Do you have any suggestions or comments on how I can improve the next family night?
Appendix D

**Family Literacy Night Survey-May**

My name is Carly Swatosh and I am a graduate student at Sonoma State University. Currently I am working on a study involving literacy activities at home as part of earning my Master’s Degree. I hosted family nights where I shared literacy activities that could be done at home with children. I wanted to determine what kinds of activities families find engaging at home and how the information is best conveyed.

**Confidentiality:**
The surveys will be anonymous and there will be no information that is obtained in connection with this study that can be identified with you.

Your decision whether or not to participate will not prejudice your future relations with Sonoma State University or Unified School District. If you decide to participate, you are free to withdraw your consent and to discontinue participation at any time without prejudice.

If you have any further questions about the study you may contact Carly Swatosh at

You may also contact my faculty advisor Chiara Bacigalupa at

YOU ARE MAKING A DECISION WHETHER OR NOT YOU WISH TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS STUDY. COMPLETING THIS SURVEY INDICATES THAT YOU ARE AGREEING TO PARTICIPATE HAVING READ THE INFORMATION PROVIDED ABOVE.

In order to plan for future Family Literacy Nights I need your input about the nights held in February, March, and April. Please complete this survey on the back to let me know either why you did or did not attend. I appreciate as much detail as you can provide. Your answers are completely anonymous.

Thank you for your input!
Which topics and/or activities would be the most helpful at a future family literacy night?

____________________________________________________________________________

**I did not** attend family literacy nights because

____________________________________________________________________________

____________________________________________________________________________

In the future I would attend if_______________________________________________

____________________________________________________________________________

[] If there was a translator I would attend. If yes, what language is needed?____

[] If there was childcare for my younger child I would attend.

**I attended** the Family Literacy Night(s) because

____________________________________________________________________________

____________________________________________________________________________

How many nights were you able to attend? ______

How can these nights be improved in the future?

____________________________________________________________________________

____________________________________________________________________________
## Appendix E-Sight Word List

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<th>Sight words:</th>
<th>Suggested words:</th>
<th>Word Endings:</th>
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</tr>
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Appendix F-Standards Handout

California Common Core State Standards Overview
Kindergarten-English Language Arts

**Reading**
- With prompting and support:
  - Ask and answer questions about reading.
  - Identify characters, setting, & main events.
  - Retell Stories.

**Print**
- Understand that print is read:
  - Left to right
  - Top to bottom
  - Page by page

**Letter & Words**
- Recognize all 26 upper & lowercase letters.
- Recognize all 26 sounds the letters make.
- Say rhyming words.
- Blend 2-3 sounds to make word: C-a-t
- Read common high frequency words such as:
  - I, see, my, like, the, have, here, for, he, she, go, to

**Writing**
- Use upper & lower case letters appropriately.
- Use punctuation, such as period, or question mark.
- Use phonetic spelling such as skol (school).
- Write opinion (My favorite book is...)
- Write informative (Tell about frog).
- Write a narrative (first this and then that).
- More than one sentence on same topic.

To look at the complete set of standards please visit:
http://www.cde.ca.gov/re/cc/
References


Ehri, L. C. (2012). Why is it important for children to begin learning to read in kindergarten?. In S. Suggate & E. Reese (Eds.), *Contemporary Debates in*...


