

PARENTS' EXPERIENCES AS PARTICIPANTS IN A PARENT
EDUCATION PROGRAM: A QUALITATIVE CASE STUDY

By

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of the requirements for the degree of

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To the Faculty of Washington State University:

The members of the Committee appointed to examine the dissertation of
MARY L. ROSIER find it satisfactory and recommend that it be accepted.

Chair

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Abstract

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This purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore the experiences of parents who participated in a parent education program offered through a school district in one western state. Consistent with the purpose, this study employed qualitative research design and methods. Qualitative interviews with 12 parent participants were the primary means of data collection. Two general research questions guided the study: What were parents' perceptions of the nature of their experiences in parent education programs? What were parents' perceptions of the academic and social impact of the parent education program on their family?

Data analysis utilized a "constant comparative" process that resulted in four themes organized into three major categories related to parent commitment to the program: Establishing the commitment, sustaining the commitment, and realizing the commitment. Additionally, a recursive relationship was discovered; the analysis suggested that parents' commitment to the program was integrally connected to their belief that "I am my child's first and best teacher." In turn, participation in the program supported and enhanced this belief. This recursive relationship is the fourth and final theme.

This study is significant in that it contributes practical and substantive knowledge to districts about designing and conducting early learning parent education programs from the

parents' perspectives. Conclusions and implications resulting from the study may be useful to educators seeking policies and practices to implement effective parent education programs that guide parents to prepare their children academically and socially for kindergarten. The results of this study may also provide useful insights for parents who may lack birth-to-five developmental knowledge and are unsure about exactly what and how to teach their children.

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Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated first to my patient husband,
Paul, for making it all possible; and second, to our
children, Ron, Christina, and Theresa.

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Parenthood. Whether an individual has been waiting years for this experience, or it comes as a surprise, it is undoubtedly a life-changing event. Gazing at the face of their newborn, parents may be overwhelmed with a sense of awe and wonder, mixed in with a certain fear about the huge parental responsibilities looming ahead. For those parents who were fortunate enough to have grown up in a nurturing environment with adults who used positive reinforcement and plenty of rich vocabulary, the chances of raising a child successfully prepared for kindergarten are very good. Sadly, this is not the case for many new parents. The newspapers are full of stories about babies and toddlers who have suffered some level of neglect at the hands of despondent parents/caretakers who simply lack the skills to cope with their situation (Russell, 2008).

Based on over ten years of beginning kindergarten assessment results compiled by the school district in this study students arrive on the first day of kindergarten with a six year range in reading skills and a four year range in math skills (Fielding, Kerr, & Rosier, 2007). What are parents doing differently at home to produce such a gap? How can public school districts best support parents during these crucial early learning years? One mechanism of support increasingly used by school districts is a parent education program that reaches far, wide, and deep into the community. Communities that truly want all their children to “hit the ground running” and know the sweet taste of success from “day one” of school might well think about developing parent education programs that take into consideration the needs of the parents.

This qualitative case study explored the experiences of parents who participated in a school district sponsored parent education program. The parent education program that is the focus of this study was established by a school district in Washington State in 2002 and is intended to teach parents to help their children learn preschool literacy skills. The study extends and expands an earlier limited pilot study (Rosier, 2004) that explored the development and implementation of this parent education program from the perspective of school district personnel. The parent program is typical of programs around the country and provides a single case study opportunity to investigate and examine the “lived experiences” of parents involved in this program (Creswell, 2003).

Background

The importance of parent education as a vital component to early childhood programs has been gaining traction in the past decade. Kamii and Lee (2004; 2002) report that Japanese and Korean parents believe without question that they are the child’s first teacher and these cultures believe fostering community involvement and emphasizing parent relationships is always critical to student success. Governor Gregoire created Washington States’ Department of Early Learning in 2006 and as a result one nonprofit group, Thrive by Five Washington, has become a leading resource for parents and outreach programs. Gloria DeGaetano (2000) has been producing workbooks and videos in both English and Spanish to educate parents in early childhood programs about the detrimental effects of “screen time” (television, computer games, etc.) on the developing brain.

Previous parent education programs were studied by James Comer, who was one of the first researchers espousing parent education programs to foster a sense of belonging and personal connections between parents and schools. Comer (1980) might be called the “father of

shared decision-making” in the schools by advocating that parents can trade free labor and expertise in any forms for access to the school community. Epstein(2001), emphasized comprehensive models of home-school partnerships as three overlapping spheres of influence: Family, School, and Community. Student achievement is directly impacted by the degree to which these spheres merge. Along the same lines Henry (1996), viewed the parent-school connection as an inclusive partnership that incorporates a feminist framework to redefine parent-school collaboration – imbuing an ethic of care, community-building, and a focus on teaching & learning. Henry argues that biological parenting is not the only kind that matters; “parent” here is broadly defined to include grandparents, aunts/uncles and community people who have ideas and perspectives to offer schools. Henry’s study also considers implications of social class for schools, and she maintains that parent education programs must include all types of parents (ie. grandparents, extended family, special needs, etc.) and caregivers.

Increased emphasis on the importance of kindergarten readiness was documented by Adams (1990) who asserts that those students who begin kindergarten with literacy readiness skills such as the ability to hear and distinguish individual sounds and the ability to distinguish individual word segments can begin to read with more success. Findings by Ruby Payne (1998) corroborate with those of other researchers (Allington, 2001; Carlton & Winsler, 1999; Chilman & Kraft, n.d.; Daniel & Hyde, 1975; Saracho, 1999), who stress that children may never overcome an inadequate home environment. Fielding (2007) reported that school readiness is not a rich-poor consequence; it’s an opportunity-to-learn consequence.

Continued research into early childhood parent education programs is needed as evidenced by the fact more districts and states are working to develop parent education programs similar to the program in this study. Both Oklahoma and Nevada have sent educator teams to

investigate how to replicate the parent program and both have now implemented their own versions of the program. At least twenty-one other Washington school districts have now replicated the program. In several of his recent campaign rallies Senator Barack Obama has pointed out he believes America must invest in early childhood education. Parent education programs are an integral part of early childhood education.

The federal Educate America Goals 2000 Act of 1994 established specific goals for school reform (U.S. Department of Education, 1994). Goal one stated that children were to arrive at school ready to learn, putting more responsibility on parents as the child's first teacher. The emphasis from America Goals 2000 on *parents as teacher* gave schools new motivation to provide parents information and training in regard to stages of childhood development and school preparedness (Fox, 2000; C. Green, Lilly, & Barrett, 2002; Kamii et al., 2004; Martens, 1999; Schwartz, 2004; Sonnenschein & Munsterman, 2002; Stadler & McEvoy, 2003).

Washington State used the Goals 2000 grants written by the nine Educational Service Districts as well as individual school districts to provide funding for various early literacy proposals.

Consequently, many states throughout the nation used these grants to develop early learning standards (Scott-Little, Kagan, & Frelow, 2003) and school readiness assessments (Graue, Kroeger, & Brown, 2003; Kim & Suen, 2003; Murphey, 2003; Wesley & Buysse, 2003).

In 2004 President Bush initiated, and Congress approved, the re-authorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA), which became known as the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation. This legislation required that all states receiving federal education funding have strict assessment plans in place to track students' yearly progress and provide instruction to address the needs of all students (Department of Education, 2001). By the time the NCLB legislation was passed, the standards movement had already taken root in

Washington State with the K-12 reform effort that began in 1993. Washington State based its reforms on academic standards termed the Essential Academic Learning Requirements (EALRs); these requirements put pressure on schools to demonstrate improved student achievement as measured by the Washington Assessment of Student Learning (WASL). Much of the early funding for these state reform initiatives came from state Goals 2000 grants. Local school districts in Washington now face many challenges in struggling to meet the student achievement directives of both the state and federal government.

In spite of these various initiatives, many children still arrive at school unprepared to learn. For example, the kindergarten teachers in one Southeastern Washington State school district reported between 2002-2004 approximately 50 to 60 percent of entering students were not ready for the kindergarten curriculum based on child-find screening (Fielding, Kerr, & Rosier, 2004). Many school districts have launched parent education programs, similar to the one that is the focus of this study, to address these issues. However, little research has been done on the effectiveness of these programs or on how parents interpret their experiences in these programs.

Statement of the Problem

The problem addressed by this study is the need for more research on the “lived experiences” of parents who participate in parent education programs that are intended to give them the tools to teach their preschoolers. This problem can be understood as the need to explore these general research questions: What are parents’ perceptions of the nature of their experiences in parent education programs? What are parents’ perceptions of the academic and social impact of the parent education program on their family? The results of this study may be

useful to school districts that are researching better ways to involve parents, meet parents' needs in early childhood programs, and to sustain parents' interest in their child's education.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this case study is to explore the experiences of parents who participated in one school-district sponsored parent education program in Washington State. The study specifically addresses the following questions: Why did parents participate in the program? What were their experiences in this program? What barriers did parents encounter and were they overcome? What issues may have caused some parents to drop out of the program?

What changes did parents notice about themselves as a parent? What changes in their relationship with their preschooler occurred (if any) as a result of the program? To what extent were both parents (and/or other significant adults in the home) involved in using the program materials?

Research Methods

This study employs qualitative, phenomenologically-oriented research methods for data collection and analysis, consistent with the purpose of the study and the research questions. This methodology essentially explores the perceptions of individual participants (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003; Moustakas, 1994). Using open-ended questions and dialogue in a natural setting, qualitative methodology allows the researcher to explore the experiences and attitudes of participants in their own words (Creswell, 2003; Gay & Airasian, 2003; Maxwell, 1996).

According to Moustakas (1994) the main purpose of phenomenology is to investigate, understand, and describe the meaning of the "lived experiences" of an individual or of a specific group who share a common specific phenomenon. The researcher attempts to suspend his/her biases in order to better understand the meaning of the phenomenon from the participant's

perspective (Creswell, 1998). The data is analyzed and systematically categorized to capture the essence of the participants' experiences.

This study examines the experiences of twelve parents who responded to questions in a face-to-face interview. The interview protocol is included in Appendix A. The participants were asked to reflect on their motivations, expectations, and experiences in the parent education program. In addition, parents were asked to explain the impact of this program on their family. A more detailed explanation of the research design and methodology will be discussed in Chapter Three.

Limitations of the Study

The generalizability of this study is delimited by the boundaries of case study design, which focuses on only one program and the experiences of twelve parents in that program out of several thousand who have attended the program. An attempt to overcome this limitation was made by selecting participants who represent various demographics of the school district community. The purposeful sampling of participants was the means to control for key informant bias. Data collection and analysis were conducted following accepted qualitative procedures as a means of providing a fair and accurate portrayal of the participants' responses. The study included the following strategies to enhance trustworthiness, given these concerns: (a) triangulation of data sources using observations and interviews; (b) a diverse sample of participants; (c) member-checking of interview materials; (d) rich, "thick" description of events; and (e) examination of discrepant information (Creswell, 2003).

Significance of the Study

The results of the study adds to the body of knowledge related to current practices for birth-to-five parent education programs as well as to understanding the experiences of parents

working with infants and toddlers using developmental curricula. The study's findings may be compared to similar studies by Epstein (2001), which suggest that parents can be effective first teachers of their children if given appropriate tools and effective modeling. Kindergarten students may arrive better prepared if parents can rely on districts to provide this type of support system.

The study contributes to the substantive knowledge regarding parents' motivations and experiences in parent education programs, as well as the barriers parents face in attending such programs. It establishes the connection parents make in establishing, sustaining, and realizing the commitment in order to successfully complete the program. The study examines the recursive relationship between commitment and parents' acceptance of the core belief of the program.

In practical terms, the findings may help districts improve programs for parents who seek to be given appropriate tools for language and literacy development. The implications of the study may apply to policy decisions that attempt to close the early literacy "preparedness gap."

Report of the Study

The study consists of five chapters published in the standard form of a dissertation. Chapter One introduces the study and includes a discussion of the research problem, purpose of the study with the research questions, limitations of the study, and significance of the study. Chapter Two contains a review of relevant literature on parent education issues and programs. Chapter Three describes the research methodology, design, and procedures. It includes site and participant selection procedures. Chapter Four contains the data analysis and synthesis of emerging themes. Chapter Five explains the conclusions, implications for policy and practice,

and recommendations for further research. In addition to these chapters a list of references cited in the text as well as an appropriate appendix are included.

CHAPTER TWO

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Introduction

To provide a context for the study, four topics serve to frame this selective literature review: (a) issues regarding the importance of student readiness; (b) parent-school collaboration to help address these issues; (c) descriptions of parent education programs as one aspect of parent-school collaboration; and (d) specific research on parent-education programs for preschoolers. This literature provides insights about the kinds of programs that have been offered to strengthen parents' experiences and skills.

Issues Regarding the Importance of Student Readiness

There are many issues involved in kindergarten reading readiness. As educators throughout Washington State have come to understand more about the scope and expectations embedded in the NCLB standards, the significance of kindergarten literacy readiness has become apparent. Adams (1990) asserts that those students who begin kindergarten with the readiness skills of phonemic awareness (ability to hear and distinguish individual sounds) and phonological awareness (ability to distinguish individual word segments) can begin to read with more success. This foundation is important because reading is considered the "gateway" skill for student success in the upper grades and for successful completion of high school. As is often stated by educators, children "learn to read" up through third grade, and "read to learn" after third grade (Fielding, Kerr, & Rosier, 1998; Hancock, 1999; Honig, 1996).

As Ruby Payne (1998) and other researchers note (Allington, 2001; Carlton & Winsler, 1999; Chilman & Kraft, n.d.; Daniel & Hyde, 1975; Saracho, 1999), children may never

overcome an inadequate home environment. In fact, parents of any income level may feel apprehensive about their abilities to teach literacy and worry that they may do something educationally incorrect if they try to teach their child. For these reasons, many school districts, including those in Washington State, are working to develop parent education programs.

Parent-School Collaboration to Help Address These Issues

One of the most prolific researchers on parent involvement in schools is Joyce Epstein (2001), who has described the critical role school-family partnerships play in student achievement in K-12 schools. She developed a new theoretical model called “overlapping spheres of influence” (family, school, community) to guide new research efforts in this area (p.21). She suggests that as these spheres move closer together, student achievement increases. Epstein explores “school-like families, and family-like schools” (p.80) similar to Merz and Furman’s (1997) argument that nurturing family-school connections leads to increased involvement.

Epstein (2001) delineated six types of involvement for studying partnerships and for developing comprehensive programs in schools: Parenting, Communicating, Volunteering, Learning at Home, Decision making, and Collaborating with the Community. She concludes there are five questions that would benefit from more research. Two of those questions relate to this study, “Which practices of partnerships are most needed at important transition points (ie: into Kindergarten)?” and “How can researchers more effectively develop, maintain, and evaluate program partnerships?” A paradigm shift has taken place from the first generation of studies that questioned, *Are families important for student success?* to the second generation of studies, *If families are important, how can schools help all families conduct the activities that will benefit the children?* The term “parent partnership” subsumes “parent involvement.”

Not surprisingly, many researchers concurred that the most powerful predictors of increased student achievement were the family's emotional climate, home literacy and math environment, parents' education, and parents' expectations (Bennett, Weigel, & Martin, 2002; de Boysson-Bardies, 2001; Karr-Morse & Wiley, 1997; Lee, 2002; Musun-Miller & Blevins-Knabe, 1998; Pianta, Kraft-Sayre, & Rimm-Kaufman, 2001; Snow, 1998).

While the literature is limited on parent education programs specifically focused on preparing birth to five year olds for school, there is a rich field of work on parent involvement in schools that is applicable to this study. Families who are living in poverty lack "social capital" (knowing how to access resources) and need support in raising their children (Payne, 1998). Merz and Furman (1997) argue that schools have become more *Gesellschaft* ("society" based on rules, scientific management, marketplace, profit) rather than *Gemeinschaft* ("community" based on affect, shared values, "folkways" of caring). Merz and Furman defend school environments that stress nurturance over control. Federal and state educational and testing policies force schools into "gesellschaftlich" values of economic competitiveness and productivity (Merz & Furman, 1997).

Similarly, Henry (1996) found parent involvement may do little to bridge the readiness gap if teacher professionals make parents feel like lay people. Henry argues that everything that goes on in school is inextricable linked to the home, from patterns of thought and behavior to attitudes toward school. She views the parent-school connection as an inclusive partnership. Biological parenting is not the only kind that matters; "parent" here is broadly defined to include grandparents, aunts/uncles and community people who have ideas and perspectives to offer schools. Henry incorporates a feminist framework to redefine parent-school collaboration imbuing an ethic of care, community-building, and a focus on teaching & learning. Schools have

traditionally developed an elaborate hierarchy and chain of command that prevents decision making at the grassroots level, sort of “competitive bureaucracies.” Henry’s study also considers implications of social class for schools, and she reflects, “Participation must include all types of parents: divorced, teenage, single, working, elderly, alien, widows/widowers, low-income, disabled, gay, bilingual, culturally and ethnically diverse, professional, and so on” (p.22).

An analysis of Merz and Furman’s, Epstein’s, and Henry’s work reveal that all advocate for relationship-building based on a moral ethic of care. Parents’ reluctance to be involved in school is shown to be connected with cultural or language barriers, and with not feeling welcome. Good schools use the energy of the personalized approach, and focus on the student in order to inspire more broad-based and collaborative projects. The bureaucracy of schools (with its explicit hierarchy and fragmentation) is a manifestation of a hierarchical social world where men’s and women’s work is still premised on the notion of dominance and subordination.

Merz and Furman (1997) reiterated that when the assumption is that the school’s program is correct, parent education has a limited effect given the school’s hierarchical structure. When the assumption is that the school’s program is open to negotiation with parents, more authentic connections are possible. Reforms to increase the sense of community can restore the balance of *Gesellschaft* and *Gemeinschaft*. One example is Boyer’s Basic School (based on Sizer’s effective schools research) as a place of purpose, communication, fairness, discipline, caring, and celebration. Another is Meier’s Central Park East Schools, a small school of choice with voluntary student body (parents) and staff. James Comer was one of the first to provide parent education programs to increase a sense of belonging and personal connections. Comer’s School Development Program (1996) focuses on at-risk students in urban elementary schools, emphasizing prevention over remediation. Comer (1980) might be called the “father of shared

decision-making” in the schools by advocating that parents can trade free labor and expertise in any forms for access to the school community. If parents can become advocates, their political and financial support increases.

In contrast, Sergiovanni (1992) warned that although communities might be defined as “family-like” characterized by personalization, authenticity, caring and unconditional acceptance, these may be difficult to generalize to scale in a broader context. It may be that recreating community in American schools depends more on individual initiative in small schools at the local level than on grand reproducible schemes “going to scale” (Merz & Furman, 1997) because needs are very specific to particular locales. Reforms that require a lot of parent involvement are difficult to maintain. Reforms built with strong internal and external relationships (between the school and its parent community) develop a sense of belonging that parents trust. Educators have to develop ways of hearing their local communities and involving them in authentic ways in schools. *Gemeinschaft* “requires constancy, intimacy, time, proximity and commitment” (Merz & Furman, 1997).

Although another study by Furman (2002) parallels the ideas of Epstein and Henry regarding the concept of “school-community connections,” Furman differentiates a second concept of “school as community” and she develops another strand, a third “Ecological model” (p.9) that forms a kind of bridge between the previous two concepts. Furman’s central premise is that there is an almost universal assumption that increasing the sense of community in schools holds promise for school improvements clustered around the three key themes of student *belonging, achievement, and democracy*. Furman’s book is concerned with two ideas; first with creating a sense of community in public schools with diverse populations, and second with the implications for leadership practice. Furman does not imply that leadership practice is the

exclusive domain of individuals in administrative roles, but that in the sense of community, “shared leadership” is a more appropriate concept. “Community is ultimately about how people feel and experience their daily lives in schools (ie: parents in a preschool program) which affords the opportunity to know each other well” (p.279).

More of Furman’s findings related to this study suggest that the bureaucratic perspective of educators as “professionals” providing “services” to “clients” and the perspective of “deficit” thinking about the resources of the community must change. Instead, educators need to acknowledge the *interdependencies* of school/community and view the community as having “assets” to share. “Efforts to ‘package’ community as a replicable set of recommendations for policy and practice or to reduce them to measurable indicators should be viewed with suspicion” (p.285).

Parent Education Programs as One Aspect of Parent-School Collaboration

From the 1930s to the early 1950s, parents were more interested in nursery schools which provided mainly social skills to their children rather than preschools with an academic focus. Small parent study groups (Baruch, 1932; Gruenberg, 1931) focused on home economics, and radio programs encouraged parents to “pull their weight” in socializing children (Richardson & Miller, 1928; Scorup, 1937), while other literature urged parents to become more involved by offering information on how to talk to principals and superintendents (Bevans, 1955; Levy, 1952; Lombard, 1940; Stern, 1950; Taylor, 1944). These early efforts to support parents are similar in child-rearing content with Dr. Dobson’s “Focus on the Family” advice columns currently available on radio and in newspapers today.

In his first State of the Union speech on January 8, 1964, President Lyndon Johnson declared a “War on Poverty” in which he laid out strategies for creating the Head Start program

to give preschool opportunities to children in low income families. Head Start helped four and five-year old children with direct instruction in classroom settings. Early Head Start served children birth to five, pregnant women, and their families with the goal of increasing school readiness. Much research has supported the effectiveness of these programs (Cross, 1966; Early Head Start National Resource Center, n.d.) including positive outcomes for children engaged in early intervention programs in a series of experimental studies conducted with African American and Latino Head Start families (Starkey & Klein, 2000). However, the poverty level guidelines used to determine eligibility are so low that a multitude of other needy families still lack support (U.S. Department of Education, 2006).

The 1970s heralded a sudden increase in parent education research as the courts removed more children from neglectful parents (Karr-Morse & Wiley, 1997). Themes focused on social support such as parent effectiveness training, cognitive development, self-concept, more foster child help, child abuse, adopted children (Bache-Wiig, 1975), grandparent support, behavior modification techniques, day care, and teen pregnancy (Daniel & Hyde, 1975). Additionally, in 1975 PL 94-142, The Education of All Handicapped Children Act (now IDEA), was signed into law (Verstegen, 1994) making child-find programs an integral part of reaching families early to provide parent support. Greater numbers of parents began to call on pediatricians and the schools for more information on how to recognize and provide for the needs as early as possible not only for developmentally delayed children, but gifted children as well (Ledet & Rabinowitz, 1975; Malone, 1975; Prunty, 1973).

It is certainly evident from the Third International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) in 2000 that Asian students consistently outperform the United States students (Stigler & Hiebert, 1999). We can learn much from the Japanese and Korean parents with extended

family who believe without question that they are the child's first teacher (Kamii et al., 2004; Lee, 2002). These cultures believe fostering community involvement and emphasizing parent relationships is always critical to student success (Brown, Amwake, Speth, & Scott-Little, 2002; Diener, Wright, Julian, & Byington, 2003/2004; Dockett & Perry, 2001; Furman, 2004; Marchant & Young, 2001; Pianta et al., 2001). According to Carol Santa, 1998 President of the International Reading Association, and echoed by much of the literature, educators must support parents *early* in the process in an effort to have students better prepared for kindergarten in order to meet higher standards (Santa, 1998; Strickland, 1998).

The research reveals that not all educators agree about parents working on curricular areas. Australian educators believe that the parents' role is to provide the social emotional skills, and then the educators will take it from there to provide the academics (Dockett & Perry, 2001). Many researchers worldwide documented the importance of these social skills or "settling in" studies that showed entering kindergarten students have behaviors that range from three year olds to those of the average eight year olds. The children with behaviors of three-year olds are poorly prepared for kindergarten and for learning to read, which creates a "preparation gap" that many students *never* overcome K-12 (Dockett & Perry, 2001; Graue et al., 2003; Marchant & Young, 2001; Riley, 1998; Stadler & McEvoy, 2003; Wesley & Buysse, 2003).

Most recently, an Associated Press article in the *Tri-City Herald* (December 12, 2005) entitled, "Gregoire Calls for Preschool Rating System," reported that as part of her push for early childhood education, the Washington Governor called for setting up a new Department of Early Learning costing \$1.5 million to oversee programs for pre-K along with a rating system for child care centers and preschools so parents can make informed decisions about where to send their child. Although she called parents, "the first and best teachers," she is setting up a new pre-

kindergarten agency as a practical step. It will include early reading programs and subsidies for poor families. Additional funding from Boeing, The Gates Foundation and other private-sector sources has been secured. The 2008 Washington State Legislature has directed the governor's Department of Early Learning to work with the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction in collaborations with Thrive by Five Washington to recommend a kindergarten entry assessment process for Washington (Huber, 2008). This assessment will help determine what children know and are able to do when they enter kindergarten. A report with department recommendations is due to the governor and Legislature on December 15, 2008.

Coupled with the Governor's recent announcement, Washington State Representative Shirley Hankins wrote an article entitled "Resources for Early Childhood Education Pay Dividends" for a district newsletter (2005) in which she states her belief that the state has put too much focus on trying to play "catch up" with students in later grades and not enough emphasis on children in the early years. She says rather than use the \$42 million now spent for 10th graders to pass the WASL, we should focus on investing in pre-K education programs.

A Google search revealed two additional on-line resources that are significant vehicles to support parent involvement, and both meet Governor Gregoire's call for better information for parents. One is the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction's (OSPI) www.k12.wa.us/SchoolImprovement/success "Nine Characteristics of High-Performing Schools" (2000) which highlights those efforts that best make a school successful. OSPI lists nine common characteristics with number nine being "High Levels of Community and Parent Involvement." One of the eight indicators of this characteristic includes "Parents are assisted with understanding child and adolescent development and child-rearing skills," and the next is a brochure, Getting School Ready, (2000) produced by The Foundation for Early Learning (U.S.

Department of Health and Human Services) www.earlylearning.org. It is designed to address the “preparation gap” (a developmental difference of up to six years in students who enter Kindergarten) by promoting two strategies; supporting parents as child’s first teacher, and improving access to high quality child care and preschool.

Research on Parent Education Programs for Preschoolers

In the last 15 years school districts have been forced to examine community “wrap around” services as families suffer more social and economic related problems. Among the areas that researchers focused on are: children with oppositional-defiance behaviors (Keller, 1992), nutrition and health issues, early intervention strategies (Getz & Gunn, 1998), parent assertiveness training, linking community-school agencies, SIDS, ADHD/drugs/alcohol (Sheridan, 1996), anger management , moral development, and homelessness (Danoff, 1994; Karr-Morse & Wiley, 1997). The beneficial role of fathers attending parent education programs to validate the importance of reading together as a bonding activity between parent and child was noted by (Dienhart, 2001; S. Green, 2003; Schwartz, 2004; Whiteside-Mansell, Leanne, H., & Rakow, 2001). Other studies examined better ways to develop *in home* support (Lesar, Espinosa, & Diaz, 1997; Marchant & Young, 2001). Recent studies using MRI and PET scans are able to allow us to visually observe the effects of T.V. and combined “screen time” on the neural hard-wiring of the developing brain through increased blood flow and electrical impulses. This information is included in the curriculum of the current parent education program under study. Researchers (DeGaetano, 2000) are exploring the possible links of early screen time to later diagnoses of attention deficit disorder.

In general, the selective search has revealed parent education strands in the literature in terms of literacy and behavioral strategies, brain research, community support, and delivery

systems (Allington, 2001; Armstrong, 1994; Arnold & Whitehurst, 1994; Campbell, 1998; Carlton & Winsler, 1999; Dienhart, 2001; Flippo, 2001; Goleman, 1995; Hamaguchi, 2001; Jensen, 1998; Karr-Morse & Wiley, 1997; Saunders & Bingham-Newman, 1984). Since early 2000, new parent education programs such as “Reach Out and Read” and others have been developed (Diener et al., 2003/2004; Fox, 2000; Pelletier & Brent, 2002).

Much of the child development and learning theories for birth to five in parent education curriculum is based on the extensive work of Piaget, Vygotsky, Erikson, and Kohlberg during the 1960’s (Kohlberg, 1987; Saunders & Bingham-Newman, 1984; Vygotsky, 1962). Other researchers outlined the importance of helping low-income parents (Chilman & Kraft, n.d.) learn: effective methods to work with their children, strategies to build school partnerships, ways to find bilingual support, how to handle behavioral issues, basic literacy and math concepts (Abraham, 1956; Marshall, 1964).

The developmental theories of Piaget and Vygotsky were cited as important resources for actually setting early childhood learning standards as some parent programs were developed (Mussen, 1970; Vygotsky, 1978). Even as the ideas of these well-respected theorists still guide program development, the newer technological brain research studies that allow us to learn more on infant cognitive functions have increased (Aslin, 1998; Johnson, 1998; Roberts, Bornstein, Slater, & Barrett, 1999).

Rosier (2004) conducted a pilot study of one parent education program in a Southeastern Washington school district. Three key informants gave interviews describing the development and implementation of the parent curriculum from 2002-2004. The program is free to district parents and \$40 to out of district families. Parents attended 90-minute sessions three times a year where they received quality child growth and development information along with free

books and educational games. Session instructors demonstrated the use of these specific academic materials so parents could teach literacy acquisition skills to their child.

The Washington State League of Education Voters put out a statewide report in January, 2006. This report described several developing promising programs around the state which included this Kindergarten parent education program. The report examined district data collected before the current parent education program; that data revealed that on the first day of kindergarten the range between students in the bottom and top quartile midpoints was six years in reading skills and four years in math skills. Creating widespread awareness of kindergarten and age-level targets among parents and child-care providers significantly increases the number of students entering kindergarten with grade-level skills. The district hosting this parent education program has been collecting the hard data assessments for the past three years to prove that these targets can be achieved when parents read with their child 20 minutes a day from birth and spend five minutes a day on simple age-appropriate activities (see Appendix B for age level targets). After offering the parent education program for three years, the district's data show that providing targets, tools, and training to parents decreases the number of students coming to kindergarten with skills below grade level by 14% in a single year. Most school districts spend \$1800 to \$4000 per child per year on students who need remediation (League of Education Voters Foundation, 2006). Catch-up growth in public schools is very expensive and historically unsuccessful. Fostering "annual" academic growth in emergent reading and math skills is five to ten times less expensive from birth to age five than in grades K-5. Administrators believe funding sources are sustainable now that the initial seed money was secured. The program is reaching a broader cross-section of the community. Neighboring districts are replicating the program and recently a team from Kentucky visited this program to duplicate the format.

Chapter Summary

Despite the emerging evidence that links inadequate parenting from birth to five with the “readiness gap” (causing a difficult transition to formal schooling) there is a missing piece. The literature is lacking in descriptions of the “lived” experiences of parents who attend early childhood programs, including the reasons they either follow through with a program, or drop out of a program (Danoff, 1994). More studies on parents’ experiences are now driving this need because state reform and accountability standards call for a more academic kindergarten curriculum and greater expectations for parental involvement in preparing their children for kindergarten. Much of the previous research targets the components of parent programs and the principles of application. Information in the literature review regarding the need to provide better parent education in order for children to meet state reform standards provides a context for the proposed in-depth study of parent education experiences in a birth-to-five program.

CHAPTER THREE

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODS

Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to describe the research design and methods used in this study of parents' experiences as participants in a parent education program. The chapter includes sections on research methodology, research design and methods, limitations of the study, and research ethics and validity concerns.

Research Methodology

A qualitative case study research approach was selected as the appropriate methodology for this study. In contrast to quantitative research, which identifies variables and tests various hypotheses, qualitative research does not start with assumptions to be tested. Rather, themes and patterns are allowed to emerge from the data as the study unfolds and as participants' perspectives are explored in their natural settings (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003). Qualitative case study research is appropriate for this study because the purpose is to explore the attitudes and perceptions of participants within a "bounded system" of one parent education program (Yin, 1994).

This case study used qualitative interviewing as the primary method of data collection (Creswell, 1998, 2003; Maxwell, 1996). Twelve in-depth, open-ended interviews were conducted with parents who had participated in the parent education program in this study. Phenomenological interview methods as described by Moustakas (1994) were used to solicit the "essence" of parents' experiences in their own words.

The secondary method of data collection was observations of program class sessions. Over sixty parents and three instructors were observed in these sessions in order to collect contextual information about the level of interaction and engagement among class participants.

Methods

Site Selection

For this case study, it was important to identify a parent education program that was well-established, similar to other parent education programs in other districts, and large enough to ensure a diverse sample of parent participants. Thus, selection of the program was based on the following criteria: (a) The parent education program focused on early childhood; (b) the program had been offered for three years or more; (c) the school district offering the program was representative of districts around the country that provide similar parent programs; (d) the program enrollment represented a cross-section of the community's demographics; (e) a population of at least 5,000 parents had been enrolled in order to ensure a diverse sample; and (f) costs and time associated with data collection were appropriate, e.g., the district was within acceptable travel distance for the researcher.

The selected program was first identified for a pilot study conducted in 2004 (Rosier, 2004). The school district hosting the parent program serves a diverse population of about 125,000 people with an economy based on about 25 percent agriculture, 25 percent professional, and 50 percent tertiary services. The district's enrollment includes approximately 15,000 students with 13 elementary schools, four middle schools, and three high schools. Thirty-five percent of the students are ethnic minorities and 48 percent of elementary students are eligible for federal lunch programs (Fielding et al., 2004). The community shows pride in the schools and consistently passes levies and supports student activities. The selected parent education

program is representative of similar parent education programs currently being implemented by local school districts in the United States.

The selected parent education program meets four critical features as listed by the National Research Council (2001) for early childhood projects: (a) participation – over 900 families attended in the first 18 months of the program; (b) curriculum – professionally researched birth- to-five learning targets, packaged and copyrighted by the National Children’s Reading Foundation, updated annually with new information on developing visual, auditory, thinking, and social/emotional readiness; (c) staffing – one program coordinator, a registrar, five certificated classroom teachers, and retired teachers who have formal training in the use of specific curricular manuals and training videos; (d) stable funding – district budget finances 80 percent, National Children’s Reading Foundation funds 20 percent, and free books are mailed monthly to parents by the Dolly Parton Imagination Library.

Parents receive information about the program through promotional efforts and publicity in newspaper articles, local access TV and radio, school flyers, sidewalk sandwich signs, service club presentations, statewide educational seminars, and word of mouth from other attendees. Additionally, the program coordinators make presentations to social service groups, ministerial alliances and community leaders. The presentations add a cultural expectation in the community that responsible parenting includes preparing one’s child for kindergarten.

Registration forms for the program are available at any K-12 school in the district, on-line through the district Web site and at the local reading foundation. Parents may also register by phone. Classes are free for district parents and cost \$40 for out-of-district parents. Licensed child care is provided on-site via contracts with the local Boys & Girls Clubs and YMCA.

Parents who register are asked to complete a quick survey that deals with questions related to the

amount of time the family spends on activities such as reading, playing interactive games, or watching television (see Appendix C on parent survey).

The parent education program schedule of dates and times has been set up to provide optimum flexibility of choice for busy families. The program consists of a series of classes offered each fall, winter, and spring for the parents of children from birth to five years old. The classes are held concurrently in separate classrooms along one wing of a remodeled elementary building, which the district uses for alternative education projects such as this program. The age-appropriate lessons are offered in 90 minute classes each evening (and some Saturday mornings) and are arranged by age of the child: birth to 1-year-olds, 1-to 2-year-olds, 2-to 3-year-olds, 3-to 4-year-olds, and 4-to 5-year-olds. Parents attend three classes a year corresponding to the age of their child, one in the Fall, one in the Winter, and one in the Spring (see Appendix D for a 2005-2006 schedule). For example, if a parent started the program when his/her child was born, the parent could attend three of the birth- to 1-year-old sessions that year. The following year, the parent could attend three of the 1- to 2-year-old sessions; the next year, three of the 2- to 3-year-old sessions, and so on. Parents who attend all five years will have completed a total of 15 sessions and will have been exposed to all of the concepts covered in the district kindergarten assessment tool (see Appendix E on 4-year-old assessment). A parent having more than one child under the age of five may attend class corresponding to one child's age one night and the other child's age class another night. Two-parent families may have the mother attend one age class for one child while down the hall the father attends another age class for the next child. Parents repeat this selection process for the winter and spring sessions. In the fall sessions, the first week classes are offered on Tuesday, Thursday, and Saturday. The second week classes are offered Monday, Wednesday, Thursday, and Saturday. In the winter and spring sessions, classes

start on a Saturday and then follow the regular pattern of dates as in the fall. This allows parents a two-or three-week window during which to attend one or more classes depending on the ages of their children. A “new parent orientation” is available the first night of each week for 30 minutes before the start of the classes. Two of the dates are always offered in Spanish for non-English speaking parents.

Programs such as this afford any parent in the surrounding area the opportunity to better prepare his/her child for kindergarten. The program developers described this early intervention program as one important tool the district used to address equity issues. Tables 1-3 provide an illustration of the schedule of two- and three-week sessions offered during the fall, winter, and spring of the 2005-2006 school year. A new parent orientation is always offered at the start of each week for 30 minutes before the first class of the evening to give newcomers an overview of the curriculum.

Table 1. Fall program schedule 2005 (October). Classes in Spanish are held October 13 and 15.

*Class ages B-1, 1-2, 2-3, 3-4 & 4-5 are held concurrently in separate rooms	Tuesday October 4 6:30-8:00 p.m. *6:00 – 6:30 Orientation		Thursday October 6 6:30-8:00 p.m.	Saturday October 8 10:00-11:30 a.m.
Monday October 10 6:30-8:00 p.m. *6:00 – 6:30 Orientation		Wednesday October 12 6:30-8:00 p.m.	Thursday October 13 6:30-8:00 p.m.	Saturday October 15 10:00-11:30 a.m.

Table 2. Winter program schedule 2006 (January/February). Classes in Spanish held January 28 and February 2.

*Class ages B-1, 1-2, 2-3, 3-4 & 4-5 are held concurrently in separate rooms				Saturday January 21 10:00-11:30 a.m.
	Tuesday January 24 6:30-8:00 p.m. *6:00 – 6:30 Orientation		Thursday January 26 6:30-8:00 p.m.	Saturday January 28 10:00-11:30 a.m.
Monday January 30 6:30-8:00 p.m. *6:00 – 6:30 Orientation		Wednesday February 1 6:30-8:00 p.m.	Thursday February 2 6:30-8:00 p.m.	

Table 3. Spring program schedule 2006 (April). Classes in Spanish held April 15 and 20.

*Class ages B-1, 1-2, 2-3, 3-4 & 4-5 are held concurrently in separate rooms				Saturday April 15 10:00-11:30 a.m.
	Tuesday April 18 6:30-8:00 p.m. *6:00 – 6:30 Orientation		Thursday April 20 6:30-8:00 p.m.	Saturday April 22 10:00-11:30 a.m.
Monday April 24 6:30-8:00 p.m. *6:00 – 6:30 Orientation		Wednesday April 26 6:30-8:00 p.m.	Thursday April 27 6:30-8:00 p.m.	

The parent education curriculum consists of letters and sounds, math, and social goals, referred to as “learning targets” in the program. This program lists a total of 26 learning targets for each year birth to five; 12 language and reading targets, nine math and reasoning targets, and five social skills targets. The targets are based on Snow’s (Snow, 1998) research which demonstrates that knowing alphabet letters and sounds is a strong predictor of reading success. Each class provides books, learning aids, toys, and school readiness information to parents with the purpose of teaching them how to use these tools at home to develop age-appropriate skills

such as counting, identifying primary colors, identifying letters, sorting/classifying objects, and rhyming.

Parents use the materials in five to fifteen minute segments each day depending on the child's interest levels at the time. Parents also read 20 minutes a day with their child to better prepare their child for school. About 30 percent of this school district's parents with children ages birth to five attended each session in 2003-2004, the first year of the program. In four years since the parent program launched its classes, over 10,000 parents have attended one or more classes (see attendance on Appendix F).

As parents build their child's skills they are also strengthening a close relationship with their child; both are lasting gifts of early learning. Fielding (2007) reported how educators sometimes mistakenly think school readiness is a rich-poor consequence. It's not. It's an opportunity-to-learn consequence. Solid research out of the Southwest Educational Development Laboratory (2002) repeatedly finds that the kinds and quality of interactions parents have with their young children transcend income level and other risk factors. From a cost-savings standpoint for this district, the "cradle to kindergarten" years offer the best return on investment. Washington legislators are starting realize there is more payoff K-12 for every dollar invested early in birth to five preparedness and coalitions such as Thrive by Five Washington have been initiated to direct grant funds and curricular support to local school districts for parent education programs. Currently the school district that sponsors this program believes that investing about \$300 per parent per year on this parent education project now will save about ten times that amount in remediation costs when the child enters school (Fielding et al., 2004) School districts might welcome getting out of the expensive remediation business and

narrowing the achievement gap *before* kindergarten using parent education programs as a powerful, positive, and proactive approach.

The goals of the parent education program are that upon reaching kindergarten the child should: (a) enjoy being read to and be able to retell a story; (b) recognize and name at least 10-15 alphabet letters and their sounds; (c) repeat beginning and ending sounds in words; (d) speak in complete sentences; (e) print his/her first name; (f) count in order from 1-20; (g) recognize numbers and quantities to five; (h) name and sort items by colors, shape and size; (i) understand concepts such as more, less, same, above, below, big and small; (j) be able to “settle in” to new groups or situations; (k) be able to concentrate on a task for 5 minutes; (l) follow simple directions; and (m) be able to show kindness and concern for others.

The pilot study I conducted in 2004 (Rosier, 2004) revealed that the development and implementation of the parent education program had been carefully planned and orchestrated to meet the needs of the community. The local school district had allocated funding for three years with the hope that the program would eventually become self-sustaining. Parents appeared eager to receive specific information and strategies to teach their children, and the free materials helped attract a wide range of participants. At present, program developers are exploring ways to attract and keep more of the low socio-economic families involved in preparing their children for kindergarten. These parents often have reservations about sitting in classes with people they don't know; some may not have the most positive memories about schooling in general. The district makes special efforts to find hard-to-reach families and those with language issues by providing the program in the home using the state's Early Childhood Education and Assistance Program (ECEAP) traveling teachers.

Participant Selection

I began the participant selection process by contacting the district administration and seeking permission to expand on an earlier pilot study (Rosier, 2004). I met with the parent education program developers and class instructors to explain the study, answer questions, and ensure that a comfortable relationship existed between the site staff and me. I requested time to review participant enrollment documents and participant questionnaires already on file from previous parent sessions as a means to get a “Gestalt” overview of the total parent population. The directors agreed to allow observations during the class sessions and to support the efforts to find parent volunteers willing to give interviews. The district granted permission to collect data and conduct follow-up interviews if necessary.

During the fall, winter, and spring class sessions of 2005-2006 the directors introduced me to the parents as a university researcher who was seeking volunteers in order to conduct a study of parents’ experiences in this program. I then explained to the classes that the purpose of the study was to document the experiences of families in order to understand their perceptions about using the program, to discover any barriers they may have experienced and to learn how the program affected their families. The interview process was explained and parents were assured that the identities of volunteers would remain confidential. I had originally assumed that from those three classes at least fifteen parents might volunteer, but parents were reluctant to get involved, and several said, “Let me think about it.” In addition, I wanted to select parents who had attended at least three of the 90-minute classes within the last three years and had at least one child under the age of five at the time of their participation. Later that spring, the parent program directors agreed to give me access to parent attendance rosters for the purpose of phoning parents who met the demographic criteria and asking them to volunteer for an interview about their

experiences in the program. That fall I examined the extensive class registration forms and selected over 50 names of parents who met the qualifications. The program directors and ECEAP staff made the initial phone contact with prospective parents to avoid questions about the legitimacy of the study and to assure parents that no harm would come to them if they decided to volunteer. This tactic seemed to help parents feel more comfortable about participating in the study, and, after many calls, a sample of twelve parent participants were ultimately selected for the study. I invited foster parents and Asian parents but was unable to recruit them. The 2003 through 2006 attendance chart in Table 4 depicts the extent of the total population of possible participants from which study participants were selected.

Table 4. Parents' attendance for the school years 2003 – 2006 as listed by the age of child.

Parent Program Class Attendance 2003-2006 Offered in English and Spanish													
	2003			2004			2005			2006		TOTAL	%
	Winter	Spring	Fall	Winter	Spring	Fall	Winter	Spring	Fall	Winter	Spring		
age 0-1	16	43	112	147	153	96	152	133	107	125	131	1215	14
age 1-2	40	46	125	149	196	199	178	141	126	150	142	1492	17
age 2-3	81	101	170	163	168	160	152	139	167	143	140	1584	18
age 3-4	68	86	184	199	215	203	200	134	163	153	139	1744	20
age 4-5	169	170	225	162	175	246	205	171	178	168	156	2025	24
Spanish Only: Age 0-5 data not tracked at first	12	17	33	43	43							148	2
Spanish Only age 1-2						15	20	26	7	27	33	128	2
Spanish Only age 3-4						40	51	43	19	57	53	263	3
Total	386	463	849	863	950	959	958	787	767	823	794	8599	100

Every effort was made to select participants who represented the diversity of the population in terms of ethnicity, marital status, first language, and levels of education and

income. Using class registration information, the program staff estimated that of the approximately 8,600 parents who attended, 65 percent were Caucasian, 25 percent were Hispanic/Latino, and ten percent were African American, Asian, or another ethnic group. Of the seven dates that the sessions were offered each fall, winter, and spring, five were taught in English (71%) and two were taught entirely in Spanish (29%).

Table 5, shown below, displays information about the twelve parent participants in this study. I individually interviewed six mothers and two fathers. Four other interviews were with couples who opted to answer questions together. There were nine Caucasian parents, two Hispanic parents, and one African American parent. The parents ranged in age from 28 to 58 years old. Nine of the 12 participants completed high school, one completed sixth grade, one earned an M.A. and one earned a law degree. Approximate income levels ranged from \$12,000 per year up to \$95,000 per year. Two participants were grandmothers; one was helping her daughter raise a child, and the other was attending classes to help the grandchild while the parents worked. Four parents were married and living with their original spouses; two parents were divorced and remarried. Another parent was a single mother living with a boyfriend; one parent was a disabled single father raising five children from two different mothers who had left him with the children. One couple described their relationship as a common-law marriage of eleven years; they had survived Hurricane Katrina and had moved in with relatives in Washington State. They had five children from previous relationships and a 3-year-old child of their own when they signed up for the classes. One participant was a widowed single mother living with a truck driver who was out of town most of the time. This same participant was an undocumented immigrant who spoke only Spanish, so I hired a translator to facilitate the interview process in her home. I monitored the session and was present to answer any questions

about the interview protocol. A bilingual secretary later transcribed the interview into English. All of the participants had attended at least three classes. Lastly, I included three parents who had dropped out of the program so I could provide alternative perspectives.

Table 5. Participant characteristics.

Sample	Alias	Age	Gender	Race	Marital Status	Level of Education	Level of Family Income	Children B-5 and 6-10	Classes	Dropped Out of Program
1	Ann	55	F	W	D	M.A.	55,000	1 Grand Child	9	
2	Bob	35	M	W	M	Legal M.B.A.	95,000	2 / 1	3	
3	Cathy	40	F	W	D / M	12	40,000	2 / 4	3	
4	Dana	28	F	W	D / M	12	30,000	2 / 1	3	X
5	Eve	58	F	W	M	12	40,000	3 Grand Children	12	
6	Fran	31	F	W	D	G.E.D.	30,000	1/2	3	X
7	Greg & Gina	39	F	W	M	12	45,000	2 / 5	6	X
8	Hal	49	M	W	D	12	25,000	2 / 3	12	
9	Ike & Ida	35	F	S	M	12	45,000	1	3	
10	Jan & Joe	38	F	B	D/C-L	12	25,000	1 / 5	3	
11	Karl & Kate	30	F	W	M	12	35,000	2 / 1	9	
12	Lena	31	F	S	W	6	12,000	2 / 2	9	

All participants willingly provided verbal and written consent to participate in the tape-recorded interviews for this research study. I assigned pseudonyms to each participant to protect his/her identity, and many details about individual participants were not provided to maintain confidentiality. Those parents and teachers who were observed during class sessions were told a university researcher was taking general field notes for a case study and that if any participant was uncomfortable, the researcher would select another class. These individuals gave verbal consent to allow me to observe the class when I assured them that any conversations I might quote for the study would not identify them in any way.

Data Collection

The primary sources of data for this study were individual interviews of parents who participated in the parent education program and observations of class sessions. First, I observed class sessions during the fall, winter, and spring of 2005-2006. These observations provided contextual insights and perspectives that added important details to supplement the interview data (Rudestam & Newton, 2001). Second, open-ended interviews (Seidman, 1991; Weiss, 1994) were conducted with twelve selected participants during the fall of 2006. The interview guide is included in Appendix A. Interviews took approximately one hour and focused on parents' experiences in the program, including their motivations for enrolling, whether they encountered any barriers, and how the program affected them. One interview took place at a participant's worksite and one at the parent program office. Eight interviews took place in the participants' homes, and one participant wasn't comfortable with me visiting her trailer home so she came to the home where I was staying that week. Another participant came to where I was staying as well because she lived nearby and wanted to stop for the interview on her way home. The interviews were tape recorded and later transcribed verbatim as per accepted practices for qualitative interview studies (Seidman, 1991; Weiss, 1994) so that nuances of meaning were captured in the participants' own words.

Data Analysis

Qualitative case study analysis requires the researcher to suspend his/her preconceptions about the topic under investigation in order to fully understand the experience of the participants and not impose "a priori" assumptions on the data (Creswell, 1998). Therefore, an inductive approach to data analysis was used to study the parents, settings, events, and processes involved in the program (Maxwell, 1996; Miles & Huberman, 1994). This inductive approach involved

the “constant comparative” method of working with data to determine categories and themes (Creswell, 2003; Miles & Huberman, 1994). Specifically, significant statements within each interview were identified and “meaning units” were isolated. These units were then sorted into specific categories by applying a defining rule such as parent attitudes, experiences during classes, perceived roles, impact of exceptional children on parents, questions about literacy strategies and procedures, experiences during implementation at home, child’s level of engagement, obstacles/barriers parents encountered, problem solving, parent-child relationships, reasons why some parents drop out, and reflection on what the program meant to them (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003; Gay & Airasian, 2003). The initial categories were then entered onto a chart. This process was continued and new categories were added as needed (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Data from field notes and memos recorded during observations yielded additional categories.

Refining of categories continued until data sources were exhausted and categories reached saturation to the point no new categories were evident. Ultimately, 26 categories were identified and are listed in Table 6. Finally, a separate printout of each of the twenty-six categories was made which included all the comments from each interview that matched that particular category. This made it easier to keep track of all the comments of each participant for further analysis. The number of transcribed pages with the number of participant responses per category is detailed in Appendix G, as well as the corresponding percentage of responses per category. For analytical purposes, parents’ responses were divided into a continuum of categories ranging from reasons why their experiences were “valuable” to “not valuable” (convergent and divergent points of view).

Table 6. Initial categories identified through data analysis.

1. New skills
2. Attendance at sessions
3. Implementation at home
4. Registration experiences
5. Logistics issues (time/place)
6. Child care
7. Support (family or otherwise)
8. Kindergarten assessment tools
9. Realizing child's potentials and attitudes about learning
10. Comfort level during classes
11. Sustained attendance level over time
12. Class participation
13. Instructor characteristics
14. Interaction with other participants
15. Concepts that seemed most important
16. Tools and activities used at home
17. Routines and teaching opportunities at home
18. Ideas about pushing kids too much (time spent)
19. Child's readiness and reaction to using materials
20. Confidence working with the child and the materials
21. Research about the brain and developmental levels
22. Relationship changes that may have occurred
23. Ideas about parenting (may or may not have changed)
24. Positive and/or negative consequences using program
25. Any additional reflections (open ended)
26. Dropping out at some level for whatever reasons

Constant comparative analysis of categories led to the development of themes which represented patterns regarding attitudes and perceptions of participants. The next step was to reduce the number of categories and look for linking relationships across categories to discover themes along a continuum (see Appendix H for developing themes). Possible ideas for themes began to emerge which included reasons why parents started the program, issues around their sustained attendance, and whether they were satisfied with the experience (see Appendix I for participant responses and percentages). The final step in the analysis was to identify a core category that seemed to cut across all categories in the study. This emerging thread revealed what is referred to as the core phenomenon (Creswell, 2003). The analysis of data was aided by

comparing single and married parents from diverse ethnic backgrounds, from different age groups, and from a wide range of levels of income and education.

Trustworthiness

Although every effort was made to ensure accuracy in data collection and analysis, I acknowledge that sources of bias, including my personal background and experiences, may have impacted the study. For example, I know the parent program developers, am the wife of the school district's former superintendent and I recently served as an administrator in a neighboring district. I was mindful to follow the "bracketing" process, which calls for the researcher to set aside personal values and expectations that could bias the findings (Moustakas, 1994).

Trustworthiness of the study's findings might also be affected by other parameters of the study. For example, some of the participants had completed the program two years before the study was conducted. Memories of these parents might have been highly selective and even inaccurate. The motivation and abilities of the children of these parents may have also affected parents' perceptions. Parents' personal beliefs could have influenced their reflections as they described class experiences and implementation of the program activities at home.

The study included the following strategies to enhance trustworthiness, given these concerns: (a) triangulation of data sources using observations and interviews; (b) a diverse sample of participants; (c) member-checking of interview materials; (d) rich, "thick" description of events; and (e) examination of discrepant information (Creswell, 2003). The purposeful sampling of participants was the means to control for key informant bias.

Research Ethics

Each participant had the right to: (a) participate voluntarily; (b) withdraw at any time; (c) understand the nature of the research and any impact on them; (d) ask questions about the

conclusions; (e) have privacy protected; (f) understand any benefits that may accrue from the study; and (g) be provided a verbal or written consent form (Creswell, 2003). Each participant read and signed a human subject's consent form with assurances of confidentiality. I assigned the participants pseudonyms to ensure confidentiality and stored all participant information in locked files. Based on my approach to this study and the fact that the results cannot be traced to individuals, it is anticipated that no harm will come to the participants.

Chapter Summary

The purpose of this chapter was to describe the research methodology and design used in this qualitative case study of parents' experiences in one parent education program. The process of how a site was selected and how participants were chosen was clarified. A description of the data collection methods and the constant comparative strategies for analysis were discussed. Finally, trustworthiness and ethical concerns were addressed.

CHAPTER FOUR

ANALYSIS

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of parents who had recently participated in a school-district-sponsored parent education program. This program began in the fall of 2003. Forty-two percent of this study's participants joined the parent education program during that first year; 58 percent of the participants joined the second year.

The central theme, or core category, emerging from the data analysis was the idea of commitment to the program. As the data were analyzed it became evident that parents recalled their program experiences through three lenses, which pertained to aspects of their commitment to the program: *establishing their commitment* to the program, *sustaining their commitment*, and *realizing the results of their commitment* for themselves and their families. The analysis suggested that parents' commitment to the program was integrally connected to their belief that "I am my child's first and best teacher." In turn, participation in the program supported and enhanced this belief. Therefore, interpretation of the data is presented here in the form of four themes. In addition, the perceptions of three participants who apparently did not experience the same level of satisfaction in the program were included. The priorities for these parents shifted, and they did not strongly buy into the core belief "I am my child's first and best teacher."

For the first theme, *establishing the commitment* to the program, three sub-themes were identified: *program access, scheduling and motivation, and support*. Practical considerations are explored concerning how, when, and where the parents got started in the program. For the second theme, *sustaining the commitment*, the sub-themes were *skills and motivation*,

empowerment, determination, and confidence. Two practical considerations about what contributed to, or what got in the way of, participants' sustaining the commitment are explored.

In regard to the third theme, *realizing the results of their commitment*, parents spoke of their *expectations* for kindergarten (and beyond), family *relationships* including their child's readiness, and their attitudes toward learning and education. Taken as a whole, the analysis suggests the ways in which forming a commitment, sustaining it, and realizing the results of the commitment ultimately resulted in the conviction by participants that they are their child's first and best teacher. This core belief is the fourth and final theme to be explored.

Preface to the Analysis: Gaining Access and Participants

The school district board members and program administrators who granted permission for this case study were cooperative and willing to share program data and curriculum information. Program developers continually sought to improve program experiences for the community, and they agreed that the information gleaned in this study might provide district policy makers with additional planning and implementation support. Parents were assured that their responses would be kept in strict confidence, so that they could be honest in relating both positive and negative experiences. They were informed that their feedback was an important part of this research aimed at understanding their perceptions.

Although parents were initially reluctant to grant interviews when I asked for volunteers during the spring 2006 class sessions, more respondents agreed to interviews after program teachers helped with personal phone contacts during the fall of 2006. Teachers explained to parents that it would be beneficial for both the district and the parent program to have research that would allow better understanding of how parents interpreted their experiences. The 12 participants finally selected subsequently became quite engaged during the interview process;

several became animated in interviews and gestured frequently as they shared their reflections about learning new strategies to teach their children. For some parents, using curriculum materials was a re-affirmation of activities that they had used with older toddlers or were already starting with their babies. For other parents the class information was new, having had little previous access to these kinds of high quality educational materials. Several parents noted that the program's learning targets offered a richer potential for kindergarten success than they had imagined.

I probed extensively during the interviews to capture the full range of the participants' experiences. When I interviewed in the fall of 2006, I asked if the passage of 3 years could have had a tendency to soften their perceptions of any unpleasant experiences they might have had, or whether it might enhance their recollections of any pleasant experiences. All 12 felt confident in recalling both their positive and negative experiences. Fifty-eight percent of the participants reported that they were definitely apprehensive about attending the program, but that Early Childhood Education and Assistance Program (ECEAP) had helped them overcome any barriers by providing personnel either at the class site to assist them, or by providing an ECEAP teacher who could bring lessons to their homes when necessary. All 12 participants took the program sessions seriously right from the start.

As mentioned in Chapter Three, Research Design and Methods, I felt confident that an authentic cross-section of the population of program participants had been included in this qualitative case study. Care was taken in presenting details of their stories to protect participants' confidentiality. The interview protocol was designed to elicit three basic elements from participants: (a) motivations - what were parents' expectations in attending the program? (b) experiences - were parents' expectations met? (c) impact - how did this program affect the

families in this study? What did they want to learn and did they learn it? Readers of this study are invited to use their own frame of reference to generate their own conclusions as they reflect on the attitudes and perspectives of these parents.

Participants

The 12 participants were selected because they represented the range of demographics of the school district. As detailed in Table 5 in Chapter Three, Research Methods and Design, there were two Hispanic, one black, and nine white participants. Two were grandmothers: Ann, a divorced grandmother of two in her mid fifties who worked as a counselor, and Eve, a married grandmother of three in her late fifties who worked as a paraeducator. Three married couples were among the participants. Greg and Gina were in their early forties with seven children, he a blue-collar worker and she a stay-at-home mother. Karl and Kate were in their early thirties with three children. Karl was a blue-collar worker and Kate a stay-at-home mother. Ike and Ida were in their mid thirties with one son. He worked in construction and she was also a stay-at-home mother.

Of the remaining seven participants, two—Cathy, a stay-at-home mother of six in her mid forties, and Dana, a stay-at-home mother of three in her late twenties—had been married twice. Three others were divorced single parents: Fran was a divorced single mother of three in her early thirties who worked in a supermarket and had a live-in boyfriend; Hal was a single divorced father of five in his late forties who suffered from a spinal disability which prevented him from working; and Jan was a divorced stay-at-home mother of six in her late thirties who lived with her common-law husband, Joe, a blue-collar worker.

Finally there was Bob, a lawyer and married father of three in his mid-thirties, and Lena, an undocumented migrant widow in her early thirties who stayed home with three children and lived with her boyfriend, a long-haul trucker.

Establishing the Commitment

As participants described their experiences in regard to entering this program it became evident that *establishing a commitment* was a major theme. This theme referred to parents' degree of effort and success in developing and then exercising skills in the subcategories of *program access* in attending the classes, *scheduling* involved in attending classes (practical considerations for access and scheduling included transportation, prioritizing time, and restructuring family activities to accommodate the demands of the program), and discovering and using *support* systems.

Program Access

The first practical hurdle for participants was gaining knowledge about the existence of the program. Participants expressed varying personal responses about how they initially learned about the program. One source of information about the program was personal contact with someone parents knew. Program officials were aware of this avenue, and during each class session participants were asked to call other parents they met and offer to bring them along to the next session. This factor was suggested by 50 percent of the participants who registered because a relative, friend, or school liaison encouraged them in the process. Others had found the program in different ways. Bob, an attorney, had noticed signs when he worked a year at the school district, and he registered with his wife. Cathy got a flyer from her church and thought that registering on-line "was a breeze." Ann said she saw the advertisements all over the community about getting children ready for kindergarten, and she phoned in her registration for

the first three sessions, “just to be sure that I was in the class. And then later on I actually went on the internet.”

Another married couple, Karl and Kate, who eventually spent three years in the sessions, had found out about the program when Kate was in the hospital after delivering her first child. Kate giggled, “Actually it was right after I gave birth to E. and my friend was braiding my hair in the hospital room and she’s like, ‘Don’t forget to sign up for the parent program,’ and I was thinking...you’re nuts!” However, the idea stuck, and the couple soon enrolled in the parent program.

By the second year of their participation in the program, the developers had instituted a new policy of closing the classes promptly at 6:30 p.m. to discourage latecomers. Kate did not let that deter her:

Yeah, they will not let you in if you’re not on time, which can be stressful. But we actually like that. You know that’s what they expect out of the kids at school basically, so they gotta put that on the parents, too. The staff just tells you that they’re sorry and they are happy to sign you up for another night in the session. I did think getting turned away was pretty unfair, but we weren’t gonna drop out.

Lena was another who heard about the program from a flyer, sent home by her older daughter’s teacher. Lena did not drive and spoke only Spanish. She needed help enrolling, and said that during the classes, “there weren’t enough people that spoke Spanish.” Later, Lena attended Spanish-language-based classes on Saturdays, which she found to be helpful.

Eighty-three percent of the participants stated they believed the classes were held at a convenient location. All 12 participants reported appreciating having 2 weeks of sessions available from which to select a class (or multiple classes if they had more than one child) to

attend. Comments such as, “You just call and get to the orientation session 30 minutes early. The staff is very helpful in getting you started right away,” were common. Cathy noted, “I always did the Saturdays. I love the fact we had a choice of the evenings or Saturdays.”

Registration was required for every class (three times per year) and was available on-line, by phone, or in person at the program offices. ECEAP program teachers were available to help register parents. Here, too, respondents’ experiences varied. The initial processes of scheduling and orientation proved difficult for some parents. The ECEAP teachers had sent participant Fran a form to use for registration, for example, but she showed up at the Saturday morning class late and without having used the form as directed, and as a result felt very rushed. It took extra time to get her registered, and she had to hurry her other children to the gym area for supervised child care. By the time she arrived at her classroom, she recalled feeling frustrated, “because it wasn’t the appropriate age class I needed to be. I’m still learning to self-advocate.” Several times during the interview Fran expressed frustration with getting started in the program. It became evident that she possessed an external locus of control that made events the result of someone or something else’s actions.

Other participants were better able to navigate program processes. Greg and Gina had seven children, and initially heard about the program through the WIC (women, infant, children) Center office near the health department where milk, formula and supplies were given to low-income pregnant mothers. They registered for the program option of delivery through an ECEAP teacher in their home that first year. For the second year, Gina walked several blocks to the classes because she didn’t drive. Another parent, Hal, attended three years faithfully even though he was disabled and had five children to manage. Before the fourth year of his participation, he enrolled his son in ECEAP and a teacher brought the activities to his home and

they worked together. Hal had to plan ahead and organize on class nights; his internal locus of control was evident when he responded to a question about any problems he had encountered starting the classes:

As far as transportation or anything like that, not really. I mean, I rely on old vehicles, but you know I never had any problem getting to class and there were always a lot of available dates. I remember, I think, the second year you were even able to sign up on the internet, so I did it that way. And they always had my stuff ready there at the front desk, so it was easy to check in.

Fran's frustration in registering was mirrored in her difficulties in getting to classes, for which she blamed her husband's work situation, in part. "Right now he's out of work, but at the time I attended, he was working at a casino and his hours were always crazy. I could never plan ahead 'cause I'd never know when he had to be at work." Karl summed up the general feeling of these participants with, "There's always problems getting there on time with three kids, but you just make sure you leave early enough and everything's settled."

The program developers had recognized that child care was one costly factor that might hinder parents from attending classes. As a result, a large gymnasium onsite had been staffed with experienced members of the local YMCA and the Girls and Boys Club providing supervision. Small and large group games were offered as well as individual activities. Participants who took advantage of the onsite child care reported a range of responses about how it affected their ability to access the program. Ann believed, "The additional child care was wonderful. I was very comfortable leaving him there on those nights when no one was at home to baby sit." Jim was also happy with the situation: "My kids had a ball...I mean they actually

looked forward to sessions.” Other participants—Bob was an example—used the service only on the first night and subsequently found relatives who babysat for all his other sessions.

Frustration with the child-care supervision was a factor suggested by 25 percent of the participants. Cathy’s baby had a messy diaper and nobody informed her, so her child ended up crying most of the evening with a nasty rash. Even though Cathy said it really wasn’t a big deal, she decided not to use the child-care services in the future. Karl and Kate always secured their own babysitter because they said they didn’t like the safety of the gym environment for their kids. They opted not to use the onsite child care “because all of the kids, infants, toddlers, and 12-year-olds, all ages, are in there together.” The additional expense of hiring their own babysitter was hard for these particular participants and they were frequently late to the sessions; however, it did not significantly impair their overall commitment; they attended for three years.

One parent’s experiences with child care issues, however, brought her involvement in the program to a halt. Fran regularly took her 1-year-old into classes with her because the child had never been left with anyone, and she was concerned that the gym full of children would frighten the girl. Fran typically left her two other, older children in the gym. One evening her older son had to be disciplined (he had been admonished verbally) while in child care and he had been crying when she came to pick him up. Fran quit the program afterward, citing her feeling that a supervisor should have come to get her and worked out the issue together rather than disciplining her son.

Scheduling

Continuing in the program called upon many participants to juggle often hectic schedules. Ann, for example, a grandmother, worked full time in the school district. Her daughter and new grandson lived with her. The daughter was often at work in the evenings and

wasn't interested in the program, so Ann paid for a baby-sitter at home and attended the classes herself. "I believe that I attended every session that they had in the fall, winter, and spring for three years," she said. "I was committed—driven is the word." Bob was a lawyer who also worked many nights. However, he and his wife made it a priority to attend together on the same night for their two kids. He went to the session for their two-year old and his wife went to the session for the four-year old. Bob was pleasantly surprised to find the classes that year averaged "about 70 percent mothers and 30 percent dads."

Fran struggled to prioritize her time to make attendance possible, and she justified her decision to later drop out by saying the material presented was redundant. "It was fall, and with my schedule, with my husband's schedule, I was having a difficult time trying to... There are tons of people out there that need that information; I didn't find that it was giving me anything that I didn't already have." Later she contradicted herself and spoke about wanting to learn more, but with three kids being so much work and recalled that there had been many times when, "I sit there and go, I don't know what I'm doing, flying by the seat of my pants."

A single father, Hal mentioned the scheduling difficulty of getting to class by 6:30 because he had to supervise five kids with homework right after school, along with preparing the evening meal. He also persevered, however, saying,

Being a single dad, I'm involved in a lot of things. I always tried to find a date to attend class where I didn't have a doctor's appointment or another event going on for the kids so we could squeeze a meal in. But we were always excited to go in the fall, especially my very first class. By the end of the year I began to wonder, when's this ever going to end?

One barrier Bob and his wife experienced with their hectic schedule was finding the time to read 20 minutes a day and also incorporate the games. They frequently had to break activities into smaller chunks of time to make it all work.

Support

Participants' need for support fell into the categories of practical support, motivational help, or support in achieving program results. Not all needed help: one grandmother who worked in counseling was quite comfortable accessing the district program independently, and she attended three years on her own. In fact, both grandmothers in this study went to a total of 21 classes themselves when the mothers were unable to attend. Not surprisingly, however, support in the form of encouragement or child care from extended family members played an important role in many instances. To further illustrate this point, 9 parents, 75 percent of the participants, accessed such help in order to attend classes. Two participants didn't drive, and this handicapped their efforts, although they did overcome that challenge with family support or an in-home ECEAP teacher. Additionally, all 12 participants acknowledged that the explanations of the usefulness and high quality of the educational materials (such as the tape recorder for read-aloud practice)—and the fact that they were free—were important examples of needed support. The materials included many items the parents might not have been able to afford on their own, or might otherwise not have considered purchasing.

For some participants, the necessity for support was apparent and acute. Hal, for example, exhibited remarkable resilience in the face of many adversities. He had survived a plane crash that left him disabled and he was forced thereafter to declare bankruptcy. His wife struggled with drugs and they later divorced. Then his 19-year-old son from a previous marriage came to live with him. Hal had had to borrow money from his sister to pay for an old car and his

father helped him out after the bankruptcy, although, he noted, “with eight kids my folks are stretched trying to help.” Hal frowned as he continued, “I don’t have good credit now and with a borderline income I don’t get assistance with food stamps.” A big source of support for Hal came from qualifying for a Habitat for Humanity home. He reported that owning his own new home gave him a great feeling and freed up more time for him to help his children, even though it was “cramped for six people.”

Jan, too, needed special support. She had survived Hurricane Katrina, and later she, her common-law husband, and their 4-year-old son had moved in with her mother, who lived in the school district in this study. She had previously been enrolled in ECEAP in Mississippi, and signed up immediately upon moving to her new area. The ECEAP teachers told her about the parent program. Jan recalled being amazed that it was a free program with so many materials.

With her responsibilities in raising six children, Cathy felt somewhat homebound and isolated. She mentioned her need to get out and observed the importance of others for support: “You know it’s always good to talk to other people outside your four walls, ‘cause there’s different ideas and support for what you’re trying to do.” It wasn’t easy for Cathy to get out of the house to attend, but it had been worth it. She said at her first class she had felt like a kid in a toy store.

When I first walked in, the greeting was great...everybody was smiling and there was no...everything was organized and they put me into the room matching my son’s age. I got my notebook and the letters to my son’s name; then I got the alphabet strips and the numbers. And yeah, it was great. I mean, I just felt, this is cool, this is really exciting.

A mother with six children ranging from college age to a toddler, Cathy recognizes the need for ECEAP support. She sighed and said, “You know, I didn’t have children to have *me*

time. I don't think I'll ever get *me time* and that was an eye opener for me. It's about my kids and it's about having them ready for school." Having the extra help of the ECEAP teachers coming to her home and modeling the use of the different materials gave Cathy some much needed help.

Fran was a participant with little available support in her low-income neighborhood and with no extended family members nearby. Additionally, she had little chance of support from her husband.

I had no neighbors to leave my children with since everybody works crazy shifts. My husband will take the kids outside to play but he leaves the reading to me, he doesn't see the benefit of it, you know. It would take wild horses to drag him out to a parent education class. He doesn't do school, he hates school with a passion; he had a miserable time in school.

When asked if the children picked up on her husband's attitudes toward school, Fran said her husband didn't talk about it much. This participant's stress in dealing with three children with very little, if any, family support left her vulnerable to a sense of helplessness and anger. Not surprisingly, participants who received some degree of emotional support from either relatives or peers could draw on this support as a resource in their decision to continue to attend classes. Fran was one of the parents who dropped out; the only real support system she could count on was ECEAP.

Fifty-eight percent of the participants depended on varying levels of ECEAP support. For those parents relying on ECEAP support, establishing their commitment presented additional challenges. Each of these seven parents with ECEAP support worked out their own system of accessing classes. Five of the seven participants had a teacher come to their home for classes

like the ones Greg and Gina described: “the teacher would make the appointment for the next visit and then verify that you’ve got it on your calendar and got it all cleared.” All seven ECEAP parents also attended some classes independently at the program site. The ECEAP teachers’ visiting at-home, bringing class information and games made it easier for those parents. The only downside to relying on home instruction was the fact that by staying home, the parents missed the interactions with other participants, as well as any ideas that were shared in the classroom setting. For several participants, however, the home visits were invaluable. After they had brought their new baby into the house, Greg and Gina relied on an ECEAP home teacher who often brought them the program activities. Gina said,

The home teacher was usually here for about an hour two or three times a month on a set schedule. Without the parent program pointing out what to work on with our son (developmentally), we wouldn’t have known what to work on with his little sister. His sister already knows many colors and letters from watching him. My older children didn’t have all this.

Lisa, an undocumented immigrant mother, is representative of the parents who were fearful and hesitant about attending district programs. Such parents frequently kept to themselves and required personal outreach from someone they trusted in order to participate. The district’s decision to link the ECEAP program teachers with the parent education program provided a crucial safety net for this marginalized population.

Sustaining the Commitment

A second integral aspect of the concept identified as *commitment* is following through. At the time they were interviewed, 75 percent of the participants of this study were still attending classes, or had completed the classes corresponding to their child’s age level. One identified

element to sustaining their commitment was participants' development and subsequent exercise of *skills* in working with their children. All 12 study participants could articulate at least two new skills they had learned; most of the participants generated more than two examples. A second variable within parent motivation and sustainability in the program was their degree of *empowerment*, an increase in which, their responses illustrated, led to greater parent satisfaction as they understood more about the learning process.

The number of classes attended was one measure of the variable of *determination*. Of the 12 participants interviewed, 2 attended 12 classes, 3 attended nine classes, 1 attended six classes, and 6 attended three classes. Finally, the participants' discussions yielded the constituent theme of the extent of *confidence* in being directly involved with their children's learning.

Knowledge and Skills

Regardless of the age of their child, 100 percent of the participants cited as their strongest reason for attending classes the desire to learn new skills to promote their children's early literacy. This desire was evident whether the parents had only one child or several. When Cathy, a 40-year-old mother of six, heard about the new parent program, she attended classes to better support her last child. Her other children had all attended some preschool or ECEAP sessions, or both, but this program promised that *she* would actually be the first teacher. She gave reasons for her interest in acquiring new skills:

I registered because it was a free program and my baby was three at the time that I started. I thought it would be a good opportunity for me to learn to...I mean, I'm a mother of six, but I've never had anything like this before that is a free program that helps you get your child ready for kindergarten yourself. So that's what my interest was. They showed us how to read a book to a toddler in more detail. You know, colors,

pictures, it's not just about the words on the page. I found out there's so much more to reading a book to them--more interaction.

Fran also said she knew she needed better skills to support her daughter. Fran was a 31-year-old mother of three who realized that her 18-month-old girl was able to speak fewer words than the number her two older siblings had spoken at her age. Fran said, "I was concerned. I thought maybe this program would be able to give me some help so I could get her back on the right track."

Hal, a disabled single father of five whose own parents had struggled to raise eight kids, leaving no time for reading together, had signed up because he felt ill-equipped for the task of parenting five children. He said, "I knew my responsibility would be to raise these kids. I didn't know what help was available and I didn't have parents nearby or people to look over me."

Karl and Kate were low income parents in their 30s who lived with three children under the age of seven in a mobile-home park. Karl allowed that he had "followed Kate" to the classes for their youngest two because he "...thought it was a kind of interesting idea to get kids ready for kindergarten when they were born...so I thought we'd go down and scope it out." Kate said, "It's a different idea that really hit home...I didn't want my kids behind when they started school. A new mom is always a little bit worried about keeping her kids equal with all the other kids I guess."

Lena had smiled nervously when in an interview she indicated that she had enrolled in the program first because of the free materials, and then had found value in the new skills she acquired to help her children:

I heard about all the free gifts, and that they would teach me how to educate my daughters. They (the teachers) taught us how to help our children learn to read and they

showed us how to play learning games with the kids. My daughter learned how to use the magnetic letters to make words and learn to write the letters. I learned how to use the library to find books for us. We need to talk to our kids in complete sentences without talking baby talk. I got mad a lot before the program and they taught us we need to relax before we yell at our children.

Upon registering in the program for the first time, parents received a three-ring binder containing relevant early childhood development information as well as pages to assist parents in achieving goals with their child. At each session they received a new eight-to-ten page packet of information matching their children's age level to add to their binders. All participants said they were aware of the consistent message of the program about reading to your child "20 minutes a day," so they were prepared to see that concept reiterated in the binder materials. Their "homework" was to use the suggested age-appropriate activities during playtime, to keep track of their read-aloud time, and to incorporate letters and numbers into everyday routines. This same type of homework set the stage for the district's K-3 elementary expectations. Parents were asked to bring their progress checklist pages to subsequent classes, so as to share in small groups how implementation at home was going. Bob explained, "There were certain targets you wanted to meet and there was a progression; that's why it was important for us to kind of track it."

When asked how they implemented the strategies at home, Cathy explained that with her first five children she had always put off reading aloud until they were around 3 years of age because she admitted she "didn't have the patience." She acknowledged later learning not only how much earlier she could have started, but also how much more than just reading the print she could have been doing; each page offered many opportunities to ask questions, point out colors

and shapes, and interact more about the story. Over time, she became much less frustrated and learned that “the earlier the better.”

Dana reported that the classes almost felt like teachers’ college in that the instructor modeled how to take simple words from stories and change first or last letters to make new words. No need to buy workbooks for ideas; it was just a matter of using their child’s favorite books. Dana also said she became more comfortable adapting her voice during read-aloud to match the different characters in the story. Several parents agreed that this technique of using a character’s expression added to the child’s comprehension of the story and helped the child get in touch with the emotions a character was experiencing.

An ECEAP teacher brought the binder and activities to Greg and Gina’s home. The teacher modeled how to use the materials, ask questions, and interact patiently with their 2-year-old and 4-year-old. Gina said at first she thought, “Oh no, another thing to have to do with my child. We have seven, you know. I’m busy. But then our 4-year-old son enjoyed them so much and it wasn’t any big deal after all.” But she saw the results of the new skills she was acquiring. The boy’s younger sister participated in activities and played with him, too. Gina kept some packets separate from her son’s other toys and brought them out for about 30 minutes a couple of times a week to keep them as a special treat. She used other activities in their daily routines, such as teaching the directional words, “over...under...around...beside” along with “how many” and “what color.” Gina was also able to practice giving her son a sequence of directions to follow that had two steps (or more, depending on the child’s ability).

Other stories emerged about the expanding skills and confidence that participants gained as they helped their children. Ike and Ida were Hispanic, and as second-language speakers struggled with the read-aloud expectations of the program. Ike took on more of this

responsibility because Ida spoke English very haltingly. He was also much more comfortable playing the learning games with his son. The family enjoyed chess, separate from the program curriculum, and Ike felt proud that his son was interested in learning: “He’s strong-willed, and that is why chess is good for him.” Ike inferred how the ECEAP home instructor’s modeling was important to the family’s success.

Jan and her common-law husband Joe’s son was 4 years old. He had been enrolled previously in Head Start. “I used to go buy the phonics and alphabet books and he had a basic idea of letters,” said Jan, but she admitted she didn’t know how to use those books effectively with her son. When she demanded that he work on the workbooks, he began resisting. After watching the program teachers demonstrate techniques, however, Jan approached her son in a more supportive way. With the new interactive materials she spent short 15-minute intervals sitting next to him talking and working together on different concepts such as patterns. The ECEAP teacher came every other week to show Jan and her son new projects to work on together. Jan laughed, “All the other kids that were around (in the apartment complex) would wanna come in and do things, ‘cause they saw my son having fun. But we couldn’t do that because it was *his* learning time.” Jan found the system much more supportive than the one in Mississippi had been especially when it came to the high quality games and books for free and the in-home demonstrations.

Sometimes new skills called for revisiting priorities. Karl and Kate, for example, found it difficult to reach the targets for each developmental stage until they started breaking activities into smaller chunks of time and incorporating chanting, counting, rhyming, and reading into daily life. They discovered that routines of reading together for five minutes several times a day

worked better than 20 minutes all at one time in order to accommodate the naturally short attention spans of their two toddlers.

One grandmother summed up the general feeling of participants' comfort and confidence with their new skills when she mentioned she found it easy to implement the activities and that it wasn't as heavy a time commitment as home-schooling, for example. "Many of the activities only take a few minutes while you're doing other things together. You realize there's so much good stuff you can be doing with your children."

The participants reported finding a variety of tools and activities useful at home. Four participants, 33 percent, mentioned an alphabet train puzzle, which fit together both the upper and lower case letters. Over 10 feet long, the train took a lot of floor space. It proved in many cases to be an enjoyable hands-on tool that guided the child through the alphabet sequence.

Bob identified another favorite, rhyming cassette tapes, which he said he used when his family took trips. "Our kids loved the tapes and CDs; they always wanted to listen to the ones that sounded out letters to music. The kids memorized that." Cathy said she appreciated the wide range of books that covered different concepts of counting, colors, and spelling beginning words, and noted her family would never have had the resources to purchase all the books. Kate said that in addition to the parent programmers handing out the free educational toys during classes, the program was expanding access to additional materials by providing a small "store" in the registration hallway. Parents who wanted a second set of the program toys or who wanted to replace any lost or broken sets could purchase them at cost.

Eve and her husband didn't get to see their grandchildren very frequently, so Eve tape-recorded the books she received at the classes. She used the interactive questioning techniques to expand on the ideas in the story and then mailed both the books and the tape to her

granddaughter. That way Eve and her husband were able to participate in the family's read aloud time "long distance." This turned into an important way for the children to become acquainted with their grandparents' voices. The family also used the list of recommended book titles as a gift guide so that relatives could purchase books appropriate to the child's next developmental stage. Eve's family also used the large three-sided folding Velcro board for years, because it was so versatile with the letters, numbers, colors, and shapes.

Twenty-five percent of the participants described a large "project book" filled with age-appropriate activities, handed out as part of class orientation, as being particularly helpful in helping them build new skills. Fran, however, who struggled financially and claimed to need all the materials she could get, stated, "I flipped through the book and it was...I didn't find anything in the book that I hadn't already seen or heard. I mean, there may have been one new project." Rather, her daughter loved getting a new Dolly Parton Imagination Library book in the mail every month; Fran would read that aloud to her daughter rather than work on project book ideas.

Single-father Hal had never spent much time before reading with his three older children. At bedtime, "I was like, 'read a book now, alright?' That's it, good night, see ya." Since his participation in the program classes, he took time to explain the parts of a book with his younger children. "Now the kids respect and treat the books better." Hal also encouraged his kids to tell their own stories with the pictures as a fun variation. Although Hal had previously tired of reading the same books with the children, he came to understand the importance of repetition as a step in learning to read. He was uncomfortable using the tapes and CDs, however, shrugging as he related his discomfort:

Maybe upper class people that are more regimented in their day...career people maybe, but to me it just wasn't appropriate. I think art supplies and stuff like that are important,

especially to a family like me. I mean...I'm on a limited income. I need stuff like a 500-page pad of paper, a bunch of crayons, scissors, colored paper, glue sticks, and simple things like that for projects.

Jan, who had lost everything in Hurricane Katrina and felt she was “blessed” that she didn't have to pay for any of the children's books recalled that the teachers “gave us about 1001 ideas” on how to interact using books. Having the teacher model read-aloud strategies, “...made a big difference because I never thought about doing it that way.” Karl felt participants were fortunate to have the direction the program provided. He said he knew of other parents who used Baby Einstein videos, for example, which he didn't feel compared well to the parent curriculum materials offered by the program. “Those videos aren't interactive and they aren't question/answer.”

When asked about the skills that proved most successful during home instruction, one of the “big ideas” the parents identified in the curriculum was the concept of encouraging vocabulary and language development by teaching parents to take everyday opportunities to point out signs and ask questions. For example, Ann would tell her grandson, “There's the school bus...what color is the bus? What shape is the red sign? What are the letters? I did a lot of talking as we went along. I speak Spanish, so we counted the stairs to his childcare center together in Spanish. I would also count the 13 steps to him in Italian.” Additionally, Ann stressed using “positive talk” with her grandson, and she reminded her daughter also to use it often with the boy to establish a long-term habit.

Eve had a total of three granddaughters, so she purchased a large, very expensive Disney book that she kept at her home and called her “Grandma Book.” It had princess stories the girls loved for her to read, and she took the book back and forth with her when she visited. The book

made a big impact on the girls, and it became a special bond between them and their grandmother.

Some participants faced considerable difficulties even with the presentation of new and more effective skills. Before Fran dropped the program her husband had been working; however, later he was not, and she said, “I am the sole income and I leave at 3:00 p.m. and return around 10:00 p.m. just under the hours to qualify for health insurance.” Fran felt frustrated, describing her husband as “hard headed and obstinate” and as not working with the kids. Fran took walks with her children and practiced counting activities using the natural environment with them. But she reiterated that she dropped the classes because she “didn’t hear anything new” or anything that she hadn’t already read about. “We already do a lot of reading, and we talk about what we’ve watched on TV.”

But other participants used the program to develop what they felt were a crucial set of new skills. Greg and Gina’s son had been a premature baby with a lot of problems the first 3 years with sitting, following directions, and concentrating. The boy gave up easily, said everything was “too hard,” and tried to get out of tasks. As the ECEAP teacher worked with Greg and Gina and modeled the activities, their son began to see the time as his special time, and gradually his resistance faded. He didn’t cooperate as well when his parents worked with him alone without the ECEAP teacher as when the teacher was present, but the boy’s older sister spent time working with him, and he reacted well to her. Greg and Gina kept reminding him that “this is how Kindergarten works; you have to sit still, listen, and pay attention, not skipping out when it becomes too difficult.” His parents were teaching him to follow through in projects, and if he didn’t get something right, it was all right; they urged him to try again.

Hal found creative ways to use his new skills. He remembered labeling everything in the house with printed signs so the children could help each other to recognize letters and sounds. When one of the kids drew a picture Hal helped the child print out his or her name on the picture. He encouraged the children to make their own small books and read these to each other. Hal took one of the curriculum targets—to have a child memorize at least three chants or rhymes for literacy development—and he adapted it, incorporating the songs the family learned in church choir to meet that target.

Ike and Ida were recent Hispanic immigrants who enrolled with the support of ECEAP. Ike said, “You get in all this information about starting school [referring to the district’s expectations] and you wanna be the best for your son, but then at the same time you don’t know how to apply it; when can I do this, how much information can I give him?” These parents decided to divide the teaching responsibility, with Ike teaching the numbers and Ida teaching the letters. Ike said he remember the teacher telling him and his wife “to avoid watching TV or computer screens for a long time,” and to play games, use music, or get their son actively involved in puzzles. He tried hard to fulfill this direction, but their son loved TV. Ike reported that his son had stuttered when he first started talking but with all the time and attention his parents had given him, the boy’s confidence had improved.

Jan’s use of the techniques and skills taught by the program was idiosyncratic. She explained, for instance, that she deviated from the program’s suggestion to keep the materials out of reach until it could be a special time for parent and child. Instead, Jan kept all the learning activities and games in a bottom drawer in her son’s bedroom where he was free to choose whatever he wanted at any time for play. She decided not to use the materials just as special learning activities and it worked out fine for them: “Our son uses the games about 20 minutes a

day.” From the time her son was two, Jan also allowed him to use a computer game called “Cubix” to learn his shapes and patterns, because she wasn’t willing to limit his “screen time.”

Although her son played the CDs and learned a lot from listening to them, Jan said he would rather have his parents sit and read to him. Jan also appreciated learning alphabet matching games. “I was already helping my son do his letters on a tablet but I never thought about printing a lower case ‘a’ and matching it to an upper case ‘A’ and then switching it up to make games out of matching them up.” Jan’s husband Joe, however, cited his own difficulties with written material. He remarked, “I cannot learn from a book. I can catch on to something the first time you tell me or show me; but tell me to sit down and read it...I’m asleep before I get through three sentences.”

Karl was concerned he wouldn’t have the skills to help his children. His older sister was highly organized and followed a schedule so Karl worried. “I’ve watched her raise her kids,” he said, “and it works out well for her kids...I was terrified that I’d never be able to measure up to that.” It was a relief for Karl and Kate to learn that they could use small chunks of time more often to teach their kids:

Learning doesn’t have to be a particular time, it doesn’t have to be at a desk with a teacher and pencil and piece of paper. That’s kind of opened it up for us. We could be driving down the road, in the store, all different times when we teach our kids. We point out letters in signs and count grocery items. Two of the children are only 21 months apart and sometimes it feels like I’m stretched in eleven million directions trying to teach them both. My son’s focus right now is counting to three and my daughter’s focus is counting to 20. At least I don’t feel like I have to sit down for an hour on a particular schedule!

Determination

Overall, participant continuation did not seem to be impeded by negative experiences within the program, and most parents exhibited determination to continue in and complete the program. For example, the first time they attended, Kate and Karl were late and were turned away for that evening, but they selected another evening that same week. Kate mentioned the fact that one negative thing about the program was that there was never enough time in the 90-minute classes: “The instructors frequently got frustrated because they had to rush to cover some information; we felt like maybe there was more in-depth stuff we needed to hear.” Twenty-five participants who had taken time off from the program for a year or two stated that they intended to begin classes again at a different level, to match the age of another child. Bob agreed, saying, “You know, I think we will start up again because we will soon have a 3-year-old and I think it will be really helpful for him.” Bob mentioned he didn’t have any negative feelings before, during, or after the classes, except that he moved his family to a neighboring city and at that time the program had not been opened up for other districts. For that reason, they couldn’t continue for the time being; however he was considering registering for his youngest child now that the program was available to other school districts for a fee of \$40 per family.

Even Fran, who dropped out of the program over the discipline her son received in the child care, considered trying classes again, “when he [her son] is advanced to the point I can leave him with anybody and he won’t get as easily upset.”

Cathy said she was a “little bummed” because she got into the wrong age four group class by mistake, but she didn’t go back and take it over since her boy was turning five.

Eve thought the way the instructors modeled how to read aloud more interactively with your child was most beneficial to her and helped her persistence in the program.

Greg and Gina recalled only a single negative consequence of the program: their boy played with his train alphabet puzzle all night, “I had to take it away a few times.” The program advises parents to use the activities for short sessions only as long as the child is engaged and to put the materials out of reach between sessions, to keep the games as special activities the child can enjoy with a parent. But Gina remarked that “I think they get so enthralled with some of this new stuff that they wanna do it all the time.” Gina was so motivated by the program that she talked with immigrant families in her neighborhood about signing up for the program, saying she felt that “some of the English as a second language parents would have been totally lost without some kind of guidance about what to teach their kids and what to do for the next step.”

A whole new world opened up for Lena as she discovered the power of spending time with her daughters because “we don’t know too many games.” Lena incorporated new routines for the family using the activities like puzzles with numbers and letters. They all sang together to the rhymes, chants, and poems on the CDs. She no longer relied upon television.

Confidence

The success of participants with the recommendations of the program was related to developing and expressing self-confidence, both generally and in their capacities as parents and as teachers of their own children. Twenty-five percent of the participants expressed that one of their apprehensions about attending the classes lay in not being confident in speaking up in front of people they didn’t know. Parents soon found out the classes were very informal and they could either just listen to the presentations or they could share experiences about their toddlers if they wished. Both grandmothers worried they might be a little out of place around the younger parents but they soon were relieved to notice a wide range in the ages of the attendees.

Hal admitted that he felt “inadequate” when he entered the first class and feared that he would find out “maybe there was something I wasn’t doing right, or wasn’t doing enough of, or something I should have know but didn’t.” Bob worried about the gender mix of the sessions but discovered that he enjoyed going to classes with his wife. He estimated that the ratio was about 70% female to 30% male, so he was able to blend in.

Ike and Ida said they felt at ease right away when they entered the classroom because people were chatting with each other and with the teacher. “There was a lot of freedom to ask and communicate with teachers.”

Karl and Kate felt “overwhelmed with information” the first night with the orientation and the subsequent 90-minute class and were relieved to have the security of one another. “We were definitely shocked (at the early brain development) and so we were really alert.” The more classes they attended, however, the more comfortable they became.

Participants’ relations with others in the program were important, too. Eighty-three percent of the participants reported various levels of interaction with other participants during class. Two participants recalled positive interactions with parents sharing helpful strategies. Six participants were neutral, saying most parents just exchanged greetings and then listened during class. Two participants recalled no interaction with the other parents. Both grandmothers (Ann and Eve), as well as Jan and Joe, described similar experiences; they remembered the teachers being intent on delivering the information to keep the class moving. Ann said that after the beginning class introductions:

There wasn’t much time for actual socialization because there were a couple of classes for the same age levels offered at the same time. If you went to one (and another parent you had met went to another room) then you didn’t always see the same people.

Jan added that the personalities in a particular classroom might have made a difference: “The last class I attended had more people who interacted than the first class I attended. So it’s the luck of the draw as to who happened to be in your class.”

Bob remembered a few times when the instructors split the class into two groups, and Bob and his wife had met several other married couples. Bob said all these couples enjoyed practicing the games and read-aloud books together: “It might be my personality; I like to get to know new people and so I liked that. It was also fun to see some other people in the community that I grew up with who now have young children.” At the time Bob registered, he had no idea that some friends he hadn’t seen since high school had also enrolled. Cathy spotted a few other parents who attended her church but she didn’t really converse much with them because people “came in...then you’d get going, so it wasn’t really a tea time.”

Hal’s recollections corroborated Cathy’s. He had recently moved to the area when he signed up for classes; consequently, he didn’t know many people outside of his neighborhood or church group. Hal added that “maybe we worked as partners on a skill once in a while, but people didn’t usually stick around to get to know each other.”

Dana was a somewhat reserved individual and reported, “I didn’t get to know very many people last year, I kind of feel like I missed out on that.” Fran’s responses echoed this sense of isolation:

I didn’t get to know anyone in class...not that I’d make a lasting friendship with.

Everyone was well-behaved. I never felt “put-down” in any way, except that I went home thinking about my son getting in trouble in the gym.

Ike and Ida didn’t get to know other parents even though both agreed that “we did have time to share with others and to express our feelings.” Ike remembered that the instructor had

the group play some games as a model. Neither Ike nor Ida recalled ever feeling “put down,” and they both said they appreciated classes with a Spanish/English translator.

Karl and Kate related that most of their friends had children either older or younger than their own two children. It helped their motivation in the program to meet with parents in class where everyone’s children were the same age:

Parents were going through the exact same thing that you were. It’s neat to sit there and have that give and take with other parents. You share about what works and what doesn’t. You do see a lot of the same parents. These will be the same parents that are...you know...our kids will be associating with their kids all through school. I don’t know if those parents are looking that far into the future. We don’t see the class as a room full of strangers, we try to lighten the mood, help break the ice. The parents are there because they volunteered...they *want* to, not because they are obligated to go. People are accepting of one another.

Empowerment

Increased knowledge gave participants reason to feel more empowered to be directly involved in their child’s learning, and to be their child’s first and best teachers. Ann, for example, was familiar with high school-aged students but, “I honestly wasn’t confident I had the skills to work with a young child. I was grateful for the class information and it gave my confidence a boost when I saw the results of working with my grandson.”

As a legal professional, Bob recalled that when he saw the verifiable research on child development in the class binder, and heard about the rate of illiteracy in the United States prisons, “it automatically gave you more confidence. You already knew it was good to read to your child, but we hadn’t ever seen research on the effect it had on society as a whole.” When he

came home tired at the end of the day and heard his youngest child repeating over and over what her older siblings were saying he was more patient now because he understood that it was part of the toddlers' language development.

Eve (a grandmother) lived several states away from her daughter's family. Eve said that the program and curriculum gave her more to talk about with her daughter and the three grandchildren, "It made us feel closer, you know. The oldest grandchild is teaching her younger siblings everything she picks up."

Fran said she did not believe the program empowered her further. "I found that if this is what the program teaches people, then I've already got this information," she said. "I found my daughter was always just a little ahead of what the class provided." However, when probed further about whether she used the targets in the binder to guide her as the child grew, Fran admitted, "Uh...I don't think I have that book anymore. I think I gave it to somebody else who needed it."

As he worked more with his children, Hal's confidence level "really soared." He had noticed his children had a hard time concentrating and they needed social skills, which because of the program he felt he was more able to help supply.

I'm kinda the guy who has all the kids in the neighborhood over at my house. I'd use the other kids...you know...talk to them about how they were acting so that my own kids would see that it's not just for them that I expect good behavior.

Ike and Ida noted they were able to help their child, too. The year that they worked with their son they noticed the child's shyness gradually diminished along with his stuttering; the parents' confidence in their abilities to help grew as they watched their son emerge as a leader in the neighborhood group of children.

Jan observed that after she worked with their son on patterns and sequences the boy began applying it to other situations such as, “If we were playing solitaire, he learned the pattern that a black five goes on the red six, and so on. He learned that after we worked on the program activities.” Jan’s husband (Joe) added:

I’ll admit to anybody I lost a lot at school, I didn’t learn what I should have learned. I played football and the coaches got me through my classes. When this boy came along we didn’t want that for him. We made sure he was gonna keep at or above the pace.

With that, Joe glanced over sheepishly at his wife, “I didn’t have much participation in the program, I watched the results, but in all honesty, I mean...I was expecting the results we got.” Both parents smiled about their son’s social growth, saying, “He’s a favorite around here, and we would have ten or twelve kids flocking to our house looking for him.”

Karl said it gave him a sense of pride to know that because of the shared reading time their daughter is “farther along in her letters and the sounds they make. The program really brought a focus to what we did with her, rather than just reading...you know, you remember to ask the child questions all the time.” Both Karl and his wife Kate were glad the program had age-appropriate social targets which helped parents to “guide and instruct our two children.”

Lena admitted to having had little interaction with her two younger daughters before the program. “Before, we just ate and then I told them to go play by themselves and that wasn’t right; even though they are little I needed to teach them to sit with me and read a book together. “

Questioned about the changes in her ideas on parenting, Ann recalled that as a young mother she was always too busy; she wished she could go back and re-do those times.

The advice I’d give new parents is that these years go by so quickly and before you know it your kids will be in school. I know parents have even more stress and less time but if

they could just realize how important it is to give that time to your children. My gosh, at least 20 minutes a day and emphasize positive talk.

Bob cited an article he had recently read in the newspaper talking about how some kids watch up to six hours of screen time between television and computer games—even DVD systems in the family van. The article explained how these hours were having a negative effect on children, and in addition, causing them to miss positive communication activities. Bob opined, “I see a lot of people in my criminal defense practice and I hear how they talk to their kids and I just want to say, ‘Hey, try to have more positive conversations with your kids.’”

Cathy confessed she had read to her kids before bedtime, but it hadn’t been until they were in Kindergarten that she started reading to them more.

Oh, I tell you, the guilt—the guilt that I felt when I registered for the parent program and had to fill out how long my kids were sitting in front of the television. That was an eye-opener because it was way too many hours. I turn it off more now. I do have kids that are ‘Nintendo heads’ but we limit that now, but it’s hard because they get glued to it. I told them, ‘You’ve got to broaden your horizons.’

Dana had stayed home for 5 years but had recently started part-time work; she wished she had more time but was doing what she could. Dana said her mother home-schooled the kids, and, although she didn’t care to repeat that with her own family, she would like to be able to help her children more with their homework. Dana thought that teachers didn’t have enough time to teach the kids everything and that “parents have to spend some time at home actually helping them out.”

Eve, a grandmother, admitted that even though she read to her own children before they had entered school “usually to settle them down” they never made a conscious effort to teach them the alphabet, letter sounds, or numbers. She said,

I think so much more is expected now of parents to get their children ready for school. I know my daughter is trying to find the balance because she called once worrying, “sometimes I wonder how much to push the academics and how much to just let them be a 4-year-old.”

Eve had learned from the program that an infant’s eyes focus at about the distance a mother cradles them in her arms, and Eve felt validated because she had experienced that natural impulse to hold and talk “baby talk” to her own kids.

Not everyone was able to take full family advantage of the lessons and information from the program to become more directly involved in their children’s learning. Fran’s husband, for instance, reflected the attitude of many parents when he said, “Let the kids be kids; let the school take care of their education.” Fran emphasized that her husband had had a miserable time in school and was “held back.” So it was hard for him to “wrap his head around the idea of reading a book instead of being outside or playing a video game.” She received limited support from him and admitted there was no chance of his attendance at any of the parent program classes.

Greg and Gina recognized how far they had come in being directly involved with their children’s learning. Gina said:

If you look at our parenting skills with our first four children, the expectations were so much less than with our next three. We used to feel fine if we kept them alive, fed, and clothed. Plopping my oldest down in front of the television all day was acceptable. Now if somebody knows you do that you’re considered a “bad parent.”

Hal's experience with the classes had made him consider the difference between his relationship with his kids and the relationship he had with his own parents. "I feel guilty because I'm not the person in my family who did better than my dad. I made some choices along the way that were bad and wrong." Hal elaborated, saying that after his plane crash, not only were all the disks in his spine compressed, he had also had to have his leg amputated at the knee. He suffered from continual sciatica pain but felt he had to keep going to provide for the three stepchildren he adopted before their drug addicted mother divorced him. Hal said, "I have this underlying fear that my kids someday are gonna realize that I'm not their real father even though I've been with the youngest since birth." Hal described an incident one day when his son got sent home from school. Hal pulled out the *Bad News Bears* series, and selected the book called *Trouble at School* along with another in the series about picking good friends. "That incident reminded me of just how important it is to keep working with my kids; the parent program got us off to a good start," he said. Overall, Hal is very proud of how the children are turning out but he worries he can't keep up his energy level because he'll be 65 when his youngest graduates high school.

Ida happily recounted that since they attended the parent program, her husband Ike was buying books about parenting. Ike said his latest book was about the growth process and the changes kids go through in their thinking processes.

Jan had felt strongly enough about the benefits of the program that she encouraged parents in her apartment complex to get involved. She urged her Hispanic neighbor, who was pregnant with her fifth child, to go down and register. Jan noticed that her neighbor's 3-year-old son didn't "get the parental attention he needs because he's always over here at our house." She continued, "I told my neighbor, 'You need to get him involved, you need to get him ready for

Kindergarten; you need to do this for him.’” Her neighbor eventually did sign up, although she had too many small kids to get out to the classes so she relied on the ECEAP teachers, as Jan had.

Karl reminisced about the changes in how he and his wife were parenting their children from the way he was raised, changes partly the result of their participation in the program:

Well it’s kinda weird from my perspective because I came from a big family and I came from a very motherly mom. And, you know, the religion background that emphasis roles in the family, and an interactive family. And yet, I kinda almost have a subconscious default, of being like my father, who didn’t know how to be a father. He was much closer to us as we were older teenagers and becoming adults than he was when we were little. And he’s talked to us about this....but still I don’t know where it comes from, that’s kind of my...and I’ve always loved kids. I’ve always loved being around them, I’ve loved babysitting, which my friends thought was weird, growing up. But being a father, I kind of have that subconscious default to, step back, ‘and let the mom take care of it.’ I go to work. I bring in the money, and I come home at night...you know, almost like an old-school father idea. And consciously that’s not what I want to do. I love playing with my kids...I love being interactive with them.

Karl said two different forces were pulling him to be more of an interactive father. One force was the desire to keep his wife from getting completely worn out with the kids, and the other force was the idea of preparing his kids for Kindergarten. He felt that “this program is more of an enhancement than a change for us because we already had those desires (to work with their children). This program gave us specialized tools.”

Realizing the Commitment

Hand in hand with the other parts of the program were the efforts of the district's educators in fundamentally changing the *local* culture of education. The aim was for parents, as a result of the parents' own increased expectations and the pride they took in their children's accomplishing those expectations, to ultimately assume the responsibility as their children's first and best teacher. Achieving program results would include changes in parent *expectations* of children, changes in *relationships* (both within families and between families and schools), and changes in the overall *culture* of education in the district. Participants' reactions were analyzed to show how thoroughly these aims were met by the program. Parents observed and shared instances of their child's readiness. Furthermore, because at least three of the participants came to view the program's effect as "commoditizing" education, that topic is examined along with a closer look at the three participants who dropped out of the program.

Expectations

As parents established and then continued their commitment to the program, their increased knowledge, skills and confidence led in turn to a heightened sense of what their children could, and should, achieve. Not surprisingly, the participants were proud of themselves for making the effort of assuming a more involved role in their children's early academic learning. For instance, like most grandmothers, Ann had always felt that her grandson was sharp: "I think a child can be bright, but if you don't work with that child, then he or she is not going to reach the potential that he or she can reach." As a highly educated lawyer, Bob understood the importance of working with children very early, "not letting the school system start teaching when they hit five." Dana admitted her son had "behavior problems," and she was hoping the extra educational boost she gave him would pay off.

Fran explained that her youngest child felt “left out” when the child’s older siblings left for school, but although Fran dropped out of the program, it had altered her expectations of her children’s educational progress. She continued to refer to the parent binder of targets in order to “play school” with her daughter, and was happy with the child’s progress.

Ike was a busy construction worker and found the early learning targets gave him more ideas about better ways to communicate about numbers, letters and colors with his son when they built things together. Jan’s husband, Joe, conceded that reading was not his “strong suit,” but he was impressed by how his son was already starting to identify a few words as Jan read books with the boy. The brain development information parents received on the first night orientation made a big impression on Karl and Kate, who were a very religious couple. They were the only parents who mentioned hearing about how yelling in the family could affect how a child processes information. The couple understood that a child who is fearful goes into the “fight or flight mode.” The material had pointed out that if either a child or parent became frustrated when working with the activities, then it was better to put the materials up for another time. They had internalized this information and put it in to practice. Karl said all the developmental information was presented very professionally, and it made him feel like this was really a program he wanted to attend because it was congruent with his family’s spiritual beliefs

Bob and his wife attended the program the year before their son entered Kindergarten. When the boy had entered Kindergarten, he had struggled at first with his letters and sounds, but he was now very successful. Bob winced, “I think he wasn’t prepared in some areas, and if we had gone through the program earlier we would have realized the types of things we could have done to prepare him...maybe he would have been better prepared.” Right after the birth of their next two children Bob and his wife began using the strategies they learned with their first son to

support the literacy of their next two children. Since the parents were practicing much earlier with these next two children, Bob commented, “They’re a lot further along than our oldest was. We can see how our next two kids have advanced more, compared to our oldest.”

Cathy described developing a pattern of cuddling and reading to an infant even if it was just chatting and turning the pages, and reported “by six months it’s going through the motion so the child gets that habit, and the more you do it, they start to catch on. OK, I’m gonna sit still.” Now if our three-year-old wants to watch a video, our rule is to look at books first. He points out signs and letters continually in his everyday activities.

Dana concluded that the program helped her recognize that her four-year-old son had problems articulating sounds and was exhibiting a lot of negative self-talk because of it. She called it “a lazy tongue. That’s basically what it comes down to.” However, she had received no formal medical diagnosis about this condition. This particular participant went on to say she relied heavily on *Sesame Street* every morning to give her son support and mentioned that his counting skills were still very weak: “He’s just counting out loud and not looking at paper or a book with numbers.” Dana said that just before I came for the interview she had had her four-year-old son sit down and try to identify the numbers 1 through 20. “We hadn’t gone over that for a while and he could identify ‘most of them,’ but he wasn’t in the mood.” During the interview Dana was passive with the children. When asked if she tried to meet one of the early numeracy targets by encouraging her son’s counting with objects, such as “one block, two blocks, three,” she replied, “We haven’t done that yet.”

By contrast, even though Fran dropped the class after one year, she was still working with the general concepts it had introduced to her. “We were at the DMV getting a license and my three-year-old noticed a series of numbers over a sign and named them off to seven.”

Hal had been in the program four years and proudly bragged about his six-year-old son: “You know, he just tested in the 85th percentile!” Hal’s confidence “soared” when he used the parent program’s development targets along with a repertoire of strategies to support his kids.

I went to the public library on ‘sale days’ and came home with boxes of books for the kids. To be honest, I try to read nightly with my children, but there are just some nights you know...it’s just not gonna happen. But otherwise, I’m pretty religious about it. The kids are always eager to sit down. My oldest talks to his younger sister like a teacher.

As they learned and practiced more, Ike and Ida increasingly made it a point to spend more time talking with their son. The parents were impressed by how he remembered trips they had taken and how he could sequence “before and after.” Ike expressed a concern (as he glanced at his wife) that their son was just starting Kindergarten and “he’s going through a stage where he’s not, not being disciplined. We need to kinda—well; *I* need to start getting more serious with him.” Ida asserted somewhat defensively that their son was still attentive when she read to him and that he could “tell me the story again with a lot of details.”

Sometimes, the children exceeded the expectations that parents had formed. Jan and her husband had older children in their 20s from previous marriages, so she was able to note her perceptions of how education has changed. “Kids are so much smarter nowadays and you have to keep their minds active so they are prepared (for school). Kindergarten’s not about playing and napping; kindergarten’s about learning.” At the age of four and one-half, Jan’s son learned how to print and say the letters in his first and last name. In Kindergarten he began bringing books home in Spanish as part of his bilingual classroom, surprising his parents. As the parents worked with their son, they observed how irritated he became if they helped him. “Anything he does he’s just, really don’t want you to help him, he’s gonna stick to it till he gets it.” Jan

admitted that when she first worked with her son she was “too harsh.” But after attending the parent program, “it taught me a different way; helped me to teach him the correct way.” Jan gave him more “space,” and he began to come to her when he was ready to read. Jan used the materials for a year. She commented on her son’s development: “he was already doing some of the targets for his age; not all of them, but some, and a few of the targets halfway up to the next level.”

Karl and Kate used driving time to teach the kids directional words such as “under the bridge, and past the McDonald’s,” and Karl recalled, “That was something I can’t remember growing up, my parents taking driving time to teach something.” One day when Karl and Kate were visiting the local Reading Foundation office, they were surprised to see that their shy four-year-old daughter had picked up a new book none of them had seen before and was reading several words with several total strangers present. The parents were shocked because, “She won’t do that for us. But she was just sitting there reading along, and she had a lot of the words. Making some up, but she knew what the story was talking about.”

Relationships

Ann implied one good thing about the program was that the more quality time one spends with a child, the more the child benefits. Too, the relationship between child and adult is inevitably deepened. Because her grandson lived with her for several years, they developed a close bond that “I hope will be there forever.” By the third year in the program, Ann and her daughter had begun attending classes together. Ann smiled:

As my daughter learned how to implement some of the information, she has told me, ‘Mom, I’m so grateful to you for everything.’ My daughter’s life is easier now because she sees living proof of her son’s school success because of all the preparation; now all

she has to do is continue along with that. Right now my unmarried son has a new grandson and I keep advising the mother to attend the classes. Unfortunately, I have a different relationship with my son and his girl friend and I don't get to see them as much.

Bob explained that when he brought the binder home from class, "The kids were automatically excited to play together with us. The biggest change was we had to develop a set routine every night to read, and talk. That allowed us to develop stronger family communication."

Fran remarked she had recently bought some new books hoping to sit together with all of her three children, "but that's not the way my life is currently working out." With her odd hours, the children were pretty much on their own to read. The older son read to his dad as part of his homework nightly and occasionally read to his younger siblings. As Fran stated, "They know that I'm not there to do it. I really do think it's a good program and it would make breathtaking changes in society if parents get involved in their kids' education." It may be that Fran truly believed the core phenomenon that she is her child's first and best teacher, but her bank of physical, mental, and spiritual resources may have been too limited at this time to take full advantage of the parent program.

Greg and Gina related how their two older girls have learned to be "teachers" themselves by watching how their parents worked with the younger siblings. Gina felt it was a good lesson for them "when they become mothers and kinda know how to teach their own children." Both parents conceded the program games were a lot of fun...not just for the child, but for the whole family.

Hal said that helping his kids had given his 19-year-old son a strong message about being a good adult and parent. The teenager helped his dad attend community events with the family and Hal reported being “proud that my son is a good Christian.”

Ike acknowledged the change that program participation had prompted in his family, noting that it was not common in Hispanic culture for parents to sit and participate in their kids’ learning. Ike’s and Ida’s parents never worked with their children before entering school.

Jan had taken some college classes when she and Joe had lived in the South; as a result, Joe said he felt their son was getting a “well-rounded” view of learning, “When it comes to books and stuff, that’s his mother (because of her education)...hands-on learning, that’s me. Our son loves to sit there and watch me.” Jan was relieved by a change the program had brought: it taught them how to work with their son without nagging.

Kate spoke about the difference she saw between her efforts with her children and those of her sister, who had a 16-year-old daughter, home-schooled from the third grade. Kate described this teenager as “academically superior” to most of her peers, but the girl had a hard time developing friendships. Kate was glad her own kids got time with their dad teaching them, but also that the program targeted both academic and social growth.

Lena reiterated that she had developed better control of herself and her patience. She didn’t resort to yelling like she used to and she realized that she was breaking old abusive family patterns.

Readiness. Queried about their child’s readiness and use of the curriculum materials, all 12 of the participants reported a deeper sense of satisfaction and a greater awareness of their children’s strengths and weaknesses. Ann had started reading to her grandson as an infant, and she had watched his attention span grow incrementally. At first, he would just sit on her lap and

listen to her voice as part of their cuddling. Gradually she added more inactive questions as he began to respond more. After a couple years she could read longer books during their bedtime ritual by reading just a few pages at a time, then picking it up the next night, “like chapters, in a sense.” Ann proudly observed his increasing readiness and attention span and used the program targets as a guide. This participant thought the program helped her recognize her grandson’s strengths as they played three years with the activities. She said, “I think it gave him a great start; he’s doing very well and his teacher says she wishes she had 20 more like him.”

Bob had three children and was determined to have them ready for Kindergarten. Bob said, “I assume it’s only natural that if a kid enters Kindergarten and then sees all his classmates further ahead it might make him self-conscious right from the get-go.” Bob’s son was doing well; the family read nightly and used the activities with their other two children.

There was a five year spread between two of Dana’s three children. She hadn’t spent time preparing her first child for Kindergarten, so she realized she really needed to “do what she could” to prepare her younger son and daughter. When Dana registered her second child for Kindergarten she received a book outlining the school’s expectations. Dana was amazed at what was expected for beginning Kindergarteners.

Fran noted that the program gave her information about the importance of addressing vision, hearing, and speech health issues much earlier than she might otherwise have done. Her three-year-old daughter had been delayed in communicating and forming words, so Fran had used the developmental targets and appropriate strategies she had learned from the program to help her child. The parent program also helped Fran access the appropriate district special education center where she could take her daughter for speech therapy two days a week.

The biggest relief for Greg and Gina, after participating in the program for two years, was hearing from the Kindergarten teacher that their son knew almost all his letters, his social skills were well developed, and that he could sit at his desk, listen, and follow a set of directions.

On the beginning assessment, Ike and Ida's son had only missed one letter; Jan's son did so well that he was placed in the Kindergarten dual language program to keep him challenged. After working with their daughter three years, Karl and Kate were pleased to notice how much improvement she had made in learning to share and in following three- and four-step directions.

Hal said he was aware that the parent binder had a page of learning targets for each year but the overwhelming pressure of family life had prevented him from taking full advantage of it to prepare his children for school. "That's one of my regrets...one of my failures...not posting that up and constantly referring back to it, letting something slip by."

Parents were asked whether they felt they were pushing kids too much. Ann responded that she was convinced spending quality time with her grandson was a twofold gift: "The child realizes that he's special because you are giving him time and the second bonus is that he's actually learning what you're teaching. No, I don't think it's pushing or anything like that, it's a whole leap forward for children to be prepared for school." Ann's daughter was only 25 and Ann stated, "She's still young in a lot of ways and I think that, hopefully, from my efforts that if she has another child she will have learned from what we did with 'M' that she can continue on her own next time." Hal said that far from pushing, the classes had taught him to be patient and not to overwhelm the children; the learning targets helped him not to expect too much too soon.

Cathy mentioned that a district research chart she saw during the parent orientation session had really made an impression on her. The data showed how kids who started Kindergarten behind might spend up to three years catching up and some would not have caught

up by middle school or even beyond. Cathy said, “I mean, if there’s something that I can do...It’s not like you’re pressured to do blocks or counting 20 minutes a day, but you *want* to.” Incidentally, though Cathy agreed the program did not push children too hard, she did bring up her feelings about the Washington Assessment of Student Learning (WASL). “I hate the WASL,” she said, “the pressure it puts on the kids and the teachers.” Her 12-year-old son had passed the WASL, but she was determined her toddler was going to start school better prepared than her 12-year-old had been.

Fran, on the other hand, shrugged the idea of accountability off: “They (kids) will get there when they get there. For the most part, my kids are ahead of the curve.” Fran made this comment despite having earlier described in some detail how her daughter had suffered speech problems and had needed to be enrolled in a special developmental language preschool. Her son also had discipline problems during the classes and she cited this as one of the reason she quit attending the parent program.

Culture

Participants noted a number of ways and instances in which their conceptions about the processes of schooling were altered or, in some cases, contradicted. The class format was mostly teacher lecture with video clips about health and development. There was still plenty of teacher modeling and hands-on time to practice using the activities, and time to ask questions during class. These procedures were familiar to the parents. Given the fact she was a school counselor, Ann knew how important it was for people to feel accepted and valued in a classroom setting. She herself, for example, was not certain how the difference in her age and that of the other participants might play out. She described sitting in a classroom with 15-18 people and reported she always felt that, even as a grandmother, she “fit in” with the group. Attendees offered ideas

during the class sessions and Ann said folks appeared to feel accepting of each other; “We were all equal in the class.”

Bob noted that teacher modeling was a big factor in his being able to employ the lessons they presented. The teachers were animated, for instance, when they modeled ways to read aloud. “I really got to see the importance of *how* she read; she captivated my attention with a child’s book, so I thought...well if I can read the same way to my kids it will keep their attention, too.”

When her toddlers were driving her crazy with questions and Cathy just wanted to quiet them, she recalled hearing the voice of one of the teachers, “like a little angel on my shoulder reminding me not to ‘shush’ my kids all the time because they need to verbalize what they’re thinking and feeling for strong language development.”

The parent education program asked for class evaluations with a goal to use feedback in improving the program, but Fran was surprised to see that anyone actually read these forms and that this process of schooling (course evaluation) really worked. This particular participant went on to say that one Saturday when she attended class she recalled feeling very uncomfortable because the classroom was very crowded. There were many Spanish language parents attending, and the teacher was trying to give the presentation in both English and Spanish, which delayed the presentation a bit for everyone. Fran mentioned her frustration with this on the class evaluation form she turned in at the end of the class. The developers used class feedback, saw the increasing need to offer Spanish classes, and later that year two classes were set up in Spanish to accommodate the growing numbers of Hispanic parents. It was interesting to note that after these Spanish classes were instituted, Ida, who speaks little English, was still too shy to speak up even in these classes. Considering she had admitted to being shy about attending

classes, Ida had no unpleasant memories. She was certainly happier having the ECEAP teacher visit her at home to demonstrate how to use the parent program materials; she and her son enjoyed having that special time together. Ike said it was such a cultural shift; his father never sat with him and talked about anything academic. Ida said that there was no question she would attend classes again...if or when they have a second child.

Jan understands that the children in the apartment complex aren't used to seeing mixed race couples, and those children ask her son, "Why is your dad Black and your mom White?" Having survived the hurricane and having lost everything, Jan said one negative issue she had with the program was the fact they provided free books only through age five. Her son received only one year's set, and Jan feels that the free books should be extended through age six. Her son is one of those children with a late birthday who just missed the Kindergarten registration cut-off date. Jan had made up her mind to continue working with her son and using the program targets until he could enroll.

Karl and Kate found that one valuable source of new information about how children learn was the shared experiences of other parents whose kids were going through similar stages "as we were with our kids." Participants talked about what worked and what didn't work: "How do you get your kid to count when he or she doesn't want to? How do you incorporate counting or the alphabet in your days so that the kids have fun?"

Lena lived in a tiny rundown duplex in a neglected area, so she valued the role classes could play in providing her a chance to get out and meet and hear ideas from other parents who wanted better opportunities for their children. "The teachers allow us to give our opinions and I got to meet a new lady there and now we are such good friends!"

Some classes confirmed participants' own experiences with school. One parent reported, for example, that a couple of the teachers in the birth-to-1 and 1-to-2-year-old classes were "a little on the dry side." However, this participant quickly went on to explain that, since the class information was so important and relevant to the parents, most of them just chalked it up to a difference in teaching styles. Fran had difficulty taking one of her instructors seriously. The teacher didn't really model much for the class and was, "...really young, in my book...and seemed like she was talking from a teacher's guide, you know?"

Ann, on the other hand, noted that because the four-to five-year-old age classes were frequently taught by actual Kindergarten teachers from districts in the area, it gave participants a glimpse of the recent Kindergarten accountability standards and how students therefore needed to be better prepared than ever before: "We knew what was coming."

Bob, a highly educated professional, noted that parents who attended these classes came from a wide range of backgrounds, mimicking the composition of the schools the children would attend, and requiring the kinds of challenges teachers and children might face. He said he never observed the instructors "talk down to anyone." He found all the teachers to be enthusiastic and eager to share the vision of how parents could be their child's first and best teacher. That served to "level the playing field," to a situation in which everyone had a common goal and their shared experiences could be valuable to the rest of the group.

Although the participant experiences were not universally positive, parents felt that classes were generally well organized, welcoming, friendly, engaging, and instructive. Hal looked forward to the classes because they were "full, but not too big." Materials were set out ahead of time, there were no interruptions, the information was well organized, and use of games and activities were explained clearly. Ida, though hesitant and shy, was relieved to find the

instructors and staff very friendly. Ida said she felt “very good, like you’re in the place that you need to be.” Although Jan was bored with the 30-minute orientation overview of early childhood development, she found the teachers in the 90-minute classes, “actually come in and really make the impact.” Karl and Kate attended 13 classes, and reported only one weak instructor who “didn’t have that motherly warmth.” The couple regarded their best teacher as, “just a regular mom who’s really enthusiastic about the program so she makes a very strong teacher, just because of the experience she puts into it.” Karl and Kate decided that a good instructor helped parents realize and develop skills and talents of which they might otherwise have been unaware. The good instructor was not just somebody who “had the credentials, it’s gotta be somebody who understands what it’s like to be a parent, and it takes a parent who wants better things for their kids.” The program provided a class evaluation form for parents to complete at the end of each session so Karl and Kate “tried to give honest, candid feedback. Parents love to brag about their kids and it’s really easy to start doing it, especially in a room with other parents who also admire their kids. It can get off track really fast, so the teachers really have to be on top of it I think.”

Some of the challenges presented by the microcosm of the classes were artifacts of the larger culture. Eve, as a grandmother, for instance, said it was reinforcing for her to learn how the nursery rhymes and chants were some of the best foundations for early literacy development. She had used rhymes and chants in raising her own children simply as a playful activity together, but she had learned how many toddlers today no longer heard those rhymes as a result of the television blaring all day, or because busy parents entertained the children with computer games. Eve reflected on what she had learned:

I think that’s another difference from when I raised my daughter; the amount of interaction you can have with a story, more than I was ever aware of. I never thought of

stopping and asking what my child thought the character would do next, you know, relating more to the story.

One of the main purposes of the parent orientation on the first night was to give parents some background information about the most recent information on infant brain research and to stress how important it is for parents to assume an active role in the child's early literacy and numeracy development. Parents found this to be important information. Asked about brain and developmental research, Ann remembered how instructors in subsequent classes continued to refer to this research as a means to enhance parents' understanding about age-appropriate learning practices. For Bob, one statistic from the brain research made a big impression:

The instructor showed how the educational level of a child's parents, the kids who come from families with higher education—these parents may give a lot more positive feedback to their children. Although there are exceptions both ways, the kids who came from families with less education tended to receive a lot more negative feedback.

As a result of the program Bob made more time to be involved with his kids. He followed a routine of reading and talking every night with his children and he also remembered, "The research showed parents who communicate more with their kids—then the kids are a lot more advanced when they hit Kindergarten."

Cathy described her experience of reading with her child and always thinking, "You *want* to read with them...you see that graph of the kids that are behind a little bit and they may never catch up." Fran agreed: "Well, I've seen the data. Kids whose parents are active participants in the kids' learning experiences, their kids do better in school. They may go on to college." When Fran was asked about screen time in their home she responded, "As far as I'm concerned there's a little too much TV. I think more than an hour or two is too much. My daughter watches

Sesame Street in the mornings. After supper my husband puts in a movie for them and they all sit and watch a movie together.” But acquaintance with research that suggested best parenting practice did not completely change things at Fran’s home. She allowed the children to select computer games she felt have some educational benefit “maybe once every two weeks, so it’s not a big issue.” Although she had learned about limiting screen time for children under five, Fran was not willing to change her family’s routine.

Others participants were able to put the research into effective practice. Since Greg and Gina’s son had experienced problems with his motor skills, the physical developmental targets in the program were helpful in knowing how to work with him: “The targets... “*Can he hop, can he jump, and can he skip?* kind of warned us ahead of time.” Hal had thought some of the research might be boring, “but, you know, not when you’re talking about your own children.” Ida couldn’t recall much about the research other than the importance of positive feedback. She said, “The child can only be focused for so long, or something like that, and if the child gets distracted, be patient.”

Jan recalled some of the research vividly: “The overview class teacher showed that children whose parents don’t read to them can end up being in the percentage that begins to fail.” One evening when she had been sitting with other parents waiting for a class to start, Jan overheard a couple participants looking over the guidelines about reading 20 minutes a day with your child, and they had said, “Well, we don’t have time to do this.” Jan found it irritating that the parents would take the time to attend the class but not want to follow through with the class expectations to help their children. However, Jan had some contradictions in the way she herself used the program materials. She kept the game materials in her son’s room, for instance, against

program recommendations, and didn't set limits on screen time. Jan also admitted allowing her son bedtime television. She said, "He goes to sleep watching TV."

One hundred percent of participants mentioned that the strongest message from the program was the importance of reading with their child 20 minutes a day. Some, like Ann, were glad to hear that those 20 minutes could be broken into five to ten minute segments to match the interest of the child. She reported that her family had got into a rhythm of reading at bedtime as part of the evening ritual. Another key idea Ann learned was teaching both the upper and lower case alphabet letters and helping her grandson write them. With her own daughter, Ann had waited until the girl started school before practicing letters together.

Bob noted that in addition to the importance of reading, he recalled being amazed at the research about

the difference...between kids who receive a lot more positive feedback than negative feedback, and how that affects their learning. Kids who come from homes with positive feedback excel a lot more. The instructors stressed that we always needed to use positive feedback when we played the games, activities, and read to our child.

Four parents recalled at least several of the following major points of the curriculum and were able to express these targets in terms of how parents really needed to: (a) let their children talk and share to build vocabulary; (b) point out signs and talk about the letters and what they mean when driving places together; (c) make activities more fun or the child won't want to learn; (d) get down to the child's level and simplify the games if necessary; and (e) take advantage of everyday life situations like going to the grocery store to talk about words, colors, shapes, and numbers.

Karl and Kate noted that it was reassuring for them to learn that the developmental targets were goals that could be adjusted according to a child's interest and abilities. "You know there is a standard. It's loose, not something strict, but it's something we can follow; it's not guesswork." The parents could see how each skill provided a foundation for the next new skill. For example, they could see which new colors and shapes to introduce after their child had mastered four or five of the basic colors and shapes. At least three participants stated that they often recalled the warning of the program instructors that parents must watch what they say and do because the toddlers are like sponges, picking up on everything. Karl said, "We try very hard not to even have a simple argument or disagreement in front of the kids."

Overall, parents' reactions to their participation in the program were positive. Ann grew misty-eyed when she described the "huge joy" she had felt over all the hours spent working with her grandson. The boy's Kindergarten teacher once told Ann "she wished she had 20 more students like him." Ann knew that it was every Kindergarten teacher's dream to have the kind of kids who are ready for Kindergarten. Ann reported, "My grandson's self-esteem was great from the get-go."

Bob often worked with the Hispanic community, and he thought one of the most positive steps the program initiated was the district's offering two classes in Spanish. That constituted a critical opportunity which enabled those parents who might otherwise be hesitant to register for the classes to do so.

In spite of the fact that she dropped out, Fran reflected that she would have gotten more out of the program if she would have gone "when my first child was little" instead of waiting a couple years. Fran said she had recommended the program to other young mothers: "I guess it makes me sound egotistical to say those learning games are 'old hat' to me at this point."

As parents of seven children Greg and Gina had gained a lot of confidence in accessing the system; they had become very familiar with community resources for families. They not only advocated successfully for themselves, they urged needy families in their neighborhood to register for the parent program. For example, Greg discussed the couple's involvement as local representatives to the state ECEAP association, saying,

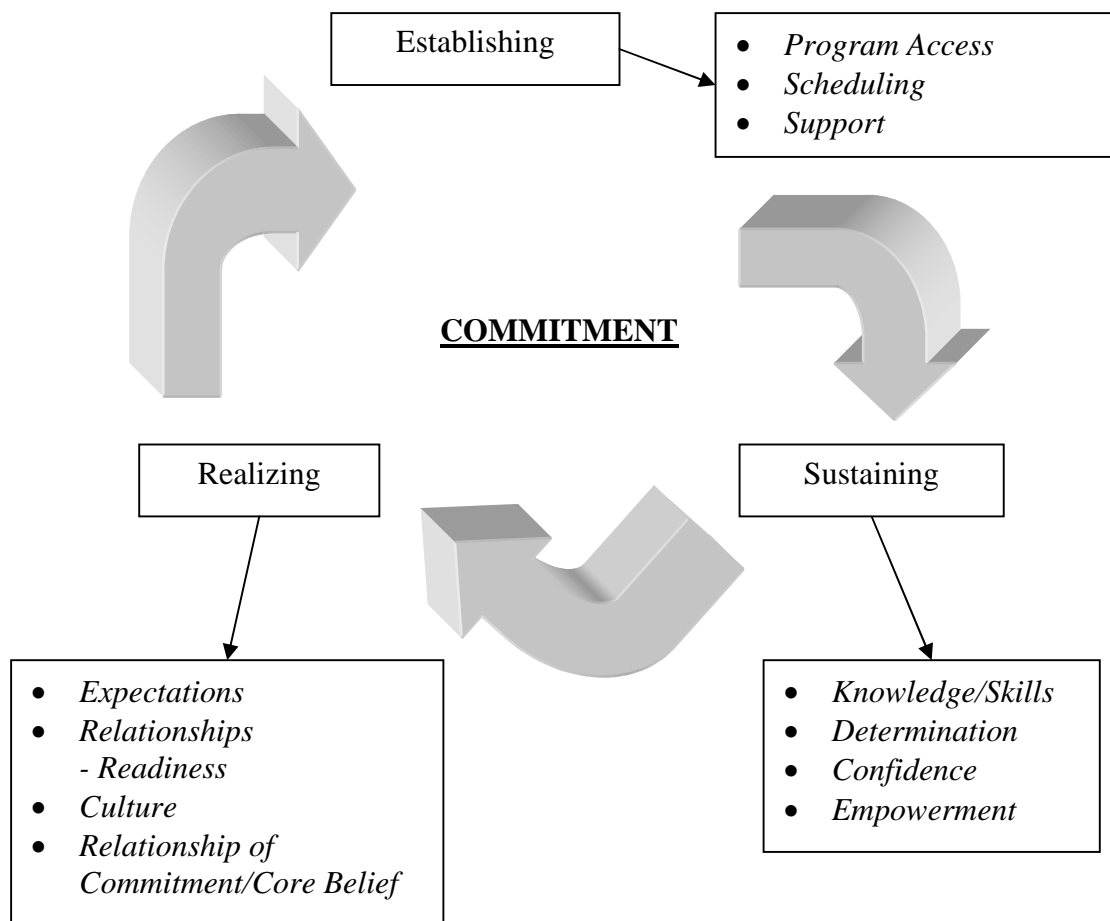
A lot of the parents in the program are English as a second language parents. I know this program was a big boost for their children because a lot of these parents never went to school themselves, so they have no clue about preparing their children for school.

Hal said he had struggled with the guilt of living off of social security benefits. The parent program offered Hal a chance to get out and meet other parents, to develop community connections, and assume more leadership positions. It made him feel good to give back to the community by serving two years on the Washington State Association of Head Start policy council. After three years and a total of 12 classes Hal felt he had learned the skills he needed and that his children "no longer needed the support of the parent program."

Relationship of Commitment and Core Belief

The three themes related to commitment can be represented diagrammatically (see Figure 1 below). Using the lenses of the participants' considerations around *establishing*, *sustaining*, and *realizing* their commitment to the program, the core theme of *commitment* is manifested within the context of the experiences parents described in the sub-themes for each theme. The schematic in Figure 1 illustrates the relationship of the three lenses and their components.

Figure 1. Establishing, sustaining, and realizing the commitment.



I Am My Child's First and Best Teacher

The extent to which parents came to internalize the core belief, “I am my child’s first and best teacher,” was distilled from the parents’ experiences, filtered through physical, cognitive, and affective (emotional) lenses. The individual resources from which participants could become motivated to enroll and to draw support were explored as important components in the degree to which the participants adopted the core belief. All 12 participants enjoyed talking about their children and learning how many “everyday opportunities” offered a quick chance to teach them.

In contrast, at least three parents regarded this early education as a sort of “commodity” or “insurance” that meant they had done their part and the rest was up to the schools. Clearly, two participants did not acquire a firm enough conviction in this belief to continue the classes, and a third participant decided she and her husband were too pressed for time and had enough information from a few classes to continue on their own.

Having seven children, Greg and Gina were familiar with early childhood programs the district had provided in the past. The program examined in this study became available in time for the couple to use its curriculum with their two youngest children. Interestingly, although Greg and Gina dropped after six sessions, Greg hoped others would use the program to become directly engaged in their children’s education. He believed the program would be especially good for English as a second language parents, and predicted the program’s successes would generate interest among Hispanic parents, based on conversations he had overheard:

It was a big boost to their children. We’re involved with the Washington State association of ECEAP and we have talked to a lot of parents throughout the state. They have heard about this parent program and tell us that it would be sorely missed by a lot of immigrant families if it were not available. A lot of these parents never went to much school themselves, so they have no clue...absolutely no clue (how to prepare their children for Kindergarten).

Karl and Kate’s reflections manifest how they internalized the core belief of the program. Kate explained how the couple had started babysitting for a little girl whose family recently moved to town. Kate had noted a striking difference between her daughter and this new girl, even though the two were only a couple months apart.

The little girl's parents don't have a feel of understanding on how to be parents. And, the difference between this little girl who's very smart, I mean she's a brilliant little girl, really smart, right on top of her game, and the difference between my daughter academically was shocking to me. You know, she didn't know more than eight colors, you know, she didn't know all of her alphabet letters, and you know my daughter's already learning how to read. The difference is like night and day between the two of them. Like I said, the other little girl is really smart; I mean she's not dumb in any way, shape or form. She's never been taught; never been given the opportunities to learn. We tried to stress the idea of registering for the program to these parents, but it is just over their heads...they're like, 'Oh Kindergarten is two years away, you know, who cares.'

Karl said, "I know we're gonna be okay, but I really felt the urgency with this other little girl because she's not on track with where she needs to be. And it really shocked me, cause I think that's probably exactly where our daughter would have been if it wasn't for the program." Karl shook his head and reflected ruefully that those parents didn't know what happened; they lost out on the opportunity to be the child's first and best teacher. He pointed out that he understood why other parents who didn't work with their children told him the birth to five years "just flew by." Kate and Karl didn't want that to happen to them and Karl said that the time he spent with his children meant "so much more to me now. Every age class is different and every time we go it just gets better and better."

Hal said it really concerned him when he once talked about the program to some other neighborhood parents who weren't very involved raising their children. The children, said Hal, were always "over at my house." These parents responded negatively when Hal suggested they register. "It was kinda hard for me to listen to them, I felt like they were cheating their children.

You know, the parents were just too lazy to go, that kind of thing. What's the worst thing that can happen? You can learn something new. That was my feeling."

Hal mused,

Those parents, if they were reading to their children at all, a lot of them were probably saying to their children, 'OK, I'll read you your book and then get to bed.' Then the parents probably would read the words real quick and that wouldn't be helpful.

Hal wished he could help other parents in his neighborhood work with their kids, becoming quite animated as he spoke about his convictions.

I think parents are the first line of teachers for their children, I really do. And I think, with the No Child Left Behind Act, you know it's going to place heavier demands on our children, which I don't think is wrong. I mean in today's society, we need a bright generation to keep this country strong. You know, we can't fail, and education is such a key to that. So I believe that early childhood learning is...as much as were doing right now, we're not doing enough. So, it's in the home, you know you can't be sending two- and three-year-olds on busses to schools. And the ECEAP program, I'm so big on that, and preschool. You know, I'd really like to see some universal kind of thing done with that even if it's optional, cause it's really sad this parent program...we only service 120 to a 140 kids a year. And it's a fraction of the kids that could be in that. You know, I'm so lucky to have all three of my kids go through that, and I know it's because I've been involved. I mean if they looked at kids each year and just selected on the merits on paper, my kids probably would have all enjoyed that. Although I probably qualify, I mean, there's just so many kids that do qualify that still aren't getting picked for it. I wish I could go back and finish my degree and teach first or second grade.

As stated earlier, the data analysis identified commitment as a central theme. Efforts at establishing, sustaining, and realizing their commitment formed the three recursive dimensions through which of the participants described their program experiences and perceptions. In *establishing a commitment*, participants needed to commit time and effort, and sometimes required it of other persons or entities (such as ECEAP). The decision to attend classes called on parents to work out transportation logistics, to prioritize their time, and to rearrange schedules. Most families were already overscheduled, and finding the time to attend classes meant sacrificing other activities. Some families required the support of special program adjustments and had to request teachers to come directly into their homes for individual instruction and modeling, a request program personnel tried to accommodate.

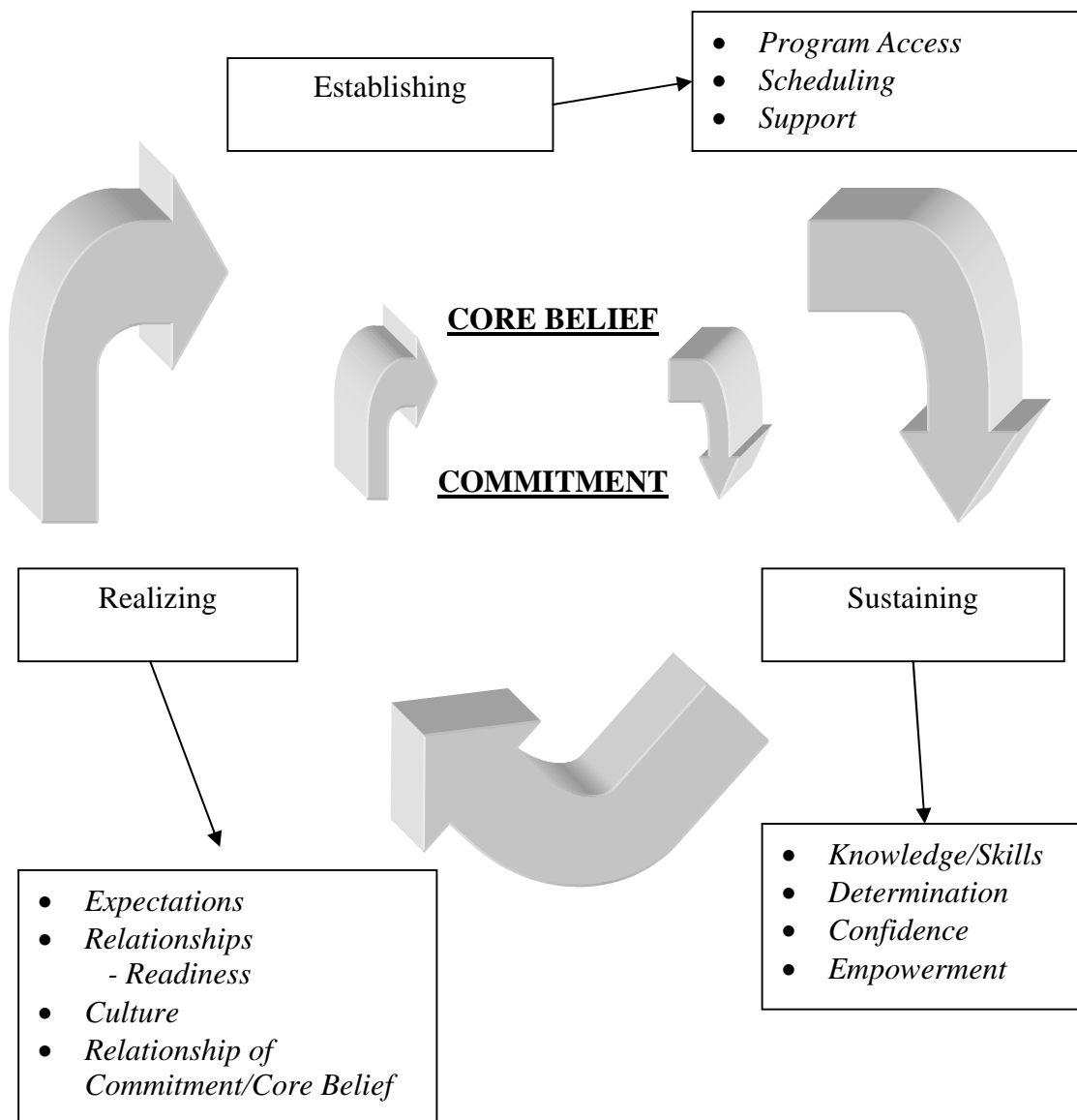
In *sustaining their commitment*, participants were aided by an already-developed sense of responsibility in preparing their children for kindergarten, as schools in the district had been pushing the idea of parent involvement with children from birth to five years. Participants also developed and exercised a growing sense of empowerment in assisting their child's progress and in the learning process's unfolding. The curriculum sought to give participants additional insights into how their children learned academic material and confidence in being able to assist. In general, the participants eagerly anticipated learning how to use educational materials to teach their children. Participant responses also illustrated the perceived importance of a bank of individual resources from which to draw support, including a personal spirit of determination and perseverance in assuming the role of their child's first teacher. The responses also highlighted obstacles that parents who lack adequate support might face. Supportive resources were seen by participant parents as necessary for consistency in working with their children. Furthermore,

parent responses pointed out the need for self-confidence in undertaking the challenge of preparing their children for kindergarten.

Upon evaluating the program's impact, *realizing the commitment*, parents reported changed family interactions as one of the results of their child's progress with the program. Siblings often joined in the curriculum activities, for example, and 67 percent of parents also reported a grandparent or spouse's involvement. Ten out of 12 participants said they were shocked to learn how high current expectations are for 5-year-olds. The district hoped the program would serve as a first step in forging a long-term relationship between families and schools, in which the culture of the district might come to reflect an increasing partnership between parents and educators that both could use for the benefit of children.

The three themes of *establishing, sustaining, and realizing the commitment* along with the sub-themes to each provided a lens through which to examine the parents' experiences. Finally, a central core theme emerging from the analysis of data is the extent to which parents came to believe that they were their child's first and best teacher. The data revealed a recursive relationship as depicted in Figure 2; the more the participants' commitment strengthened, the more they bought into the core belief, which in turn, resulted in participants attending more classes.

Figure 2. Recursive relationship between central theme of commitment and core belief.



Chapter Summary

As noted at the outset of this analysis, the purpose of this qualitative, phenomenological case study was to explore the experiences of parents who have recently participated in a school sponsored parent education program designed to help parents teach their birth-five year-old children. Data analysis revealed four central themes that were discussed in this chapter. Three themes centering on commitment were: (a) Establishing a commitment; (b) sustaining the

commitment; and (c) realizing the results of the commitment. The fourth theme is the parents' conviction that they are indeed their child's first and best teacher. A common thread connecting each of the four major themes was the extent of the physical, mental, and emotional resources from which a parent might draw support. Following a discussion of the four themes, excerpts from participant interviews were used to illustrate their attitudes and perceptions of attending and implementing a parent education program as described in their own voice. Participant's motivations and the practical considerations about establishing and sustaining the commitment were explored. The topics of child readiness and parents learning to use age-appropriate strategies were explored. Conversations from three participants who dropped out of the program illuminated how priorities can shift for some individuals who may not fully buy into the core belief. Finally, the analysis indicates the ways in which the data collected underlie the ways in which forming a commitment, sustaining it, and realizing the results of the commitment ultimately result in the conviction by the majority of the participants that they are their child's first and best teacher. This belief lies at the heart of the study.

CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Introduction

This qualitative case study sought to explore the experiences of parents who participated in one school-district sponsored parent education program in Washington State designed to teach parents to help their children learn preschool literacy skills. The study examined the general degree to which parents accepted a core belief of the program, “I am my child’s first and best teacher,” and described how a recursive relationship existed between the central theme of commitment and this core belief. Analysis of the interview data resulted in a set of four major themes: (a) Establishing the commitment; (b) sustaining the commitment; and (c) realizing the commitment. The fourth theme examines parents’ conviction that they are indeed their child’s first and best teacher. These themes were developed and discussed in Chapter Four.

This final chapter presents the conclusions of the study and discusses implications regarding possible significance to parents, educators, and school boards. Implications for further research will also be presented.

Conclusions

Analysis of data from this study as presented in Chapter Four resulted in the following four conclusions of the study:

First, parents lacking time and resources required district support in varying degrees in order to establish a commitment to the program. Second, parents who experienced satisfaction using the program materials with their children were more likely to sustain the commitment to remain in the program as their children progressed from ages one to five. Third, parents’

expectations about the program were met, that is, that their child would develop age-appropriate skills. Fourth, an interactive, recursive relationship developed between the central theme of commitment and the core belief of the program as parent and child engaged in program activities. Close interaction, or mediation, between parent and child using the curriculum together was a key to meaningful early learning experiences. This was a unique contribution of the study not reflected in previous research.

Parents Lacking Time and Resources Required District Support

Regardless of the income level of the parent, support in the form of easy-to-access program registration, encouragement from other parents, a convenient program location with a choice of days to attend classes, and childcare provisions contributed to parents establishing a commitment. ECEAP instructors offering either optional in-home lessons or assistance during the actual classes were particularly important for low-income parents. Parents unfamiliar or uncomfortable around the educational establishment were fearful and hesitant about attending classes, but the positive support of program staff helped to minimize these fears. Bilingual classes were important in addressing language barriers of Hispanic parents. The biggest barrier to attending classes was lack of time coupled with parents' level of confidence in their ability to use the curriculum without attending classes. Additionally, weak spousal support also contributed to withdrawal from the program for two participants.

Parents' Satisfaction with Program Materials Increased Commitment

The study's second conclusion is that parents' satisfaction kept them committed. Parents who were unsure about what and how to teach their child found the program increased their understanding about the developmental stages birth to five and the appropriate learning activities for each stage. Parents expressed particular satisfaction with the read-aloud strategies they

learned. The majority of parents who attended believed they should play a major role in their child's early education and learning activities. The majority of parents in this study internalized the core belief of the program, "I am my child's first and best teacher." These parents accepted this belief as their responsibility and used the curriculum for several years and with subsequent children as well. These parents made a commitment to meet the district expectations that all students arrive prepared for kindergarten with basic literacy and numeracy skills as outlined in the district's assessment instrument and were equipped with the tools to ensure it happened. The more the parents observed the satisfactory results of their efforts, the more classes they attended to learn strategies and get new materials.

Parents' Expectations Were Met

Parents gained more confidence as their children's first teacher by applying new read-aloud skills, using the program activities, and observing their children's steady progress. Parents learned how gradually to add complexities to activities when a child exhibited readiness for the next step. Relationships were strengthened as parents expressed less frustration and more patience when their child made mistakes; parents came to understand that some core learning principles, such as the idea that working in small chunks of time kept the activities more enjoyable and less of a chore. Parents increasingly understood the nature of their children's strengths and weaknesses and how to use positive reinforcement.

Additionally, an increased use of language both in and away from the home improved the children's vocabulary, which provided better communication between parent and child. Each of the participants in the study perceived that the program had a positive impact on their families as they watched the child develop academic and social skills for kindergarten. Sixty-seven percent of the participants enjoyed the support of spouses, extended family, and siblings who became

involved in using the materials with the child. An emphasis on learning insinuated itself into the families; family members used grocery shopping, driving trips, and errands as learning opportunities to recognize letters, words, numbers, shapes, and colors.

Parent Commitment Strengthened Core Belief

The fourth conclusion of this study is that, as parents' commitment deepened, they reported gaining such confidence in their own teaching skills that it reinforced the program's core belief. This, in turn, made them better able and more eager to gain new skills, and so on, in a recursively strengthening cycle. A unique aspect of this study was parents' realization of the importance of giving full attention, making eye contact, using positive, encouraging language, remaining patient, and letting the child set the pace of the activities. Both the parent and child were actively engaged in the learning process (mediation) which was not the same as passive learning via such programs as *Baby Einstein* videos. Close interaction between parent and child was chiefly responsible for improvement and readiness for school.

Implications

This study was limited in scope to 12 parents in one parent education program. However, given that this study is unique in giving voice to and exploring parent participants' perspectives, it is appropriate to draw tentative implications for policy, practice, and future research. In general, the findings of this study supported previous policy research in regard to early childhood preparation programs. For example, *The Washington Education News*, January 2006, printed a Citizen's Report Card on Washington Education which reported, "Overall early learning grade: Unsatisfactory. Recommendation: Invest Early." Less than half of the state's incoming kindergarteners were shown to have been adequately prepared to succeed, and students in lower-income communities tended to be even less prepared. Parental commitment to close

involvement in preschool preparation is crucial to these students' later success, as this study demonstrates.

Implications for Policy

As noted by Fielding, Kerr and Rosier (2004; 2007) in the literature review, 40 to 50 percent of students entering Kindergarten are not adequately prepared to succeed. Washington State has not yet embarked on a comprehensive early childhood venture supported by both the legislature and private foundations. One of the key policy issues in this venture is where to focus the efforts. There are proponents who support preschool programs run by various agencies. Others propose the focus be only on 3- and 4-year-olds.

This study reinforces the concept that parents should be viewed as the child's first teacher and that they should be supported in becoming the best possible teachers in the early years of their children's lives from birth to five years old. The study demonstrates that parents want to be effective teachers in preparing their children for school. Many parents are willing to attend training sessions and to create time to implement the program curriculum in their family lives.

Therefore, a clear public policy should be initiated at the national, state, and local levels to support parents in their role as the child's first teacher. Providing fiscal resources to support parent training programs needs to be explicit in legislation and school district policies as well as in federal, state, and local budgets.

A second policy consideration is that parents need specific support and resources to be the most effective as teachers of their birth to five children. This study demonstrates that parents expressed deep appreciation for having an explicit curriculum and age-appropriate materials to use with their children. Parents also appreciated the training in how to effectively use these materials in the best developmental sequence. Policy makers need to establish outcome target

expectations and support the use of curriculum and materials that align with these targets.

Again, policy must be supported by the fiscal resources to develop curricula and parent training programs.

A final consideration is that parents expressed a concern that they had vague ideas of what their children needed to know upon entering Kindergarten. Therefore, policy makers need to develop clear, easy to understand target expectations for each year from birth to five in order for parents to help their children be prepared for Kindergarten.

Implications for Practice

Parents have busy schedules and lives. One implication from the findings of this study is that parent education programs should take this into consideration when developing class schedules. For example, parents should be offered several choices of dates to attend with repeat and make-up sessions offered as well. Every effort to provide child care and other free materials is important. This is also an excellent chance for educators to ensure that parents have a positive and supportive first contact with teachers in hopes of forging a strong partnership K-12. The curriculum activities must be limited to five to fifteen minute segments as many times a day as best fits the family schedule. This study demonstrates parents can make time for short playful activities that add up to significant literacy and numeracy progress for their children.

Limited English speaking parents need to have the curriculum and materials available in the language they are most comfortable using. However, the skills a child needs are not language bound.

Early learning parent programs to increase parent effectiveness in kindergarten preparation may be crucial to a school district's strategic planning. Parents who successfully implement the family home curriculum can become trainers for parents new to the program. In

practice, these programs could be delivered independently at each elementary by parents who have attended all the parent education program classes. Parents training parents may be the most effective system for districts seeking community support in terms of time and resources.

Implications for Research

The following five recommendations for further research are suggested:

1. Longitudinal research could be conducted to track students whose parents participated in the parent education program to determine if there is any correlation to achievement.
2. Additional studies could be performed to better understand why some parents drop out.
3. Further work is needed to establish the effectiveness of similar programs in other, different districts.
4. Separate case studies could be performed to examine and compare different parent program models.
5. Follow-up studies on the parents could be conducted to determine what effects, if any, the program had on their parenting skills as the children matured. Were there any residual benefits?

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Appendix A

Interview Guide

The questions listed below form the core of the interviews, with the researcher asking the respondents to elaborate on their responses and provide specific examples. All interviews will be adapted to the particular setting and circumstances.

Motivations: Why and how participants got into the program

Why did you decide to participate in the new kindergarten readiness program?
 To what extent did you participate?
 How did you sign up or get started?
 Were there problems about starting the program or getting to the program?
 How did you feel when you first started?
 Did you face any barriers in the whole process?
 Why did you drop out of the program? (if applicable)

What were participants' experiences in the program?

What was it like in the classes? (concrete examples)
 What were the instructors like?
 How did you feel about the other participants, did you get to know anyone?
 What did you learn...what main ideas "stick out" in your mind?
 What did you do for follow-through at home?

Impact of the program

Do you think the program affected your family / your child? If so...how?
 Describe any specific events you remember.
 Probe for child readiness
 Probe for parent confidence
 Probe for changes in relationships
 Describe any changes in your ideas about parenting.
 Describe any positive or negative consequences before, during, or after the classes.

PROBES for elaboration (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003)

What do you mean?	I'm not sure that I am following you.
Would you explain that?	What did you say (or do) then?
What were you thinking at the time?	Give me an example.
Tell me about it.	Take me through the experience.

Appendix B

Parent Program Age Level Targets

General Headings:

Language and Reading

1. Eye Movements
2. Naming Letter Shapes
3. Matching Letter Shapes
4. Naming Sight Words
5. Singing, Chanting, and Nursery Rhymes
6. Listening Experiences
7. Phonemic Awareness
8. Reading Engagement
9. Concepts of Print
10. Verbal Development
11. Verbal Skills
12. Printing First Name

Math and Reasoning

13. Counting
14. Matching Number Shapes
15. Copying and Tracing
16. Geometric Shapes
17. Colors
18. Sorting
19. Add / Subtract
20. Patterns and Sequences
21. Spatial Relationships

Social Skills

22. Relating to Others
23. Increasing Attention Span
24. Following Instructions
25. Taking Responsibility
26. Developing Calmly and Competently, with Emotional Security

Appendix C

Parent Survey

Your answers to these questions will help us learn about the families and children coming to classes and will give us feedback about how we can improve the program over time. There are no wrong answers - just information that will help us evaluate the program. Your answers will be treated as confidential.

Place a check in the box that best answers each question:

<i>About how many times a week:</i>	Daily	4 - 5 times a week	1 - 3 times a week	Not every week
1. Does an adult read with your child?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
2. Does an adult read with your child 20 minutes a day ?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
3. Are you able to play learning activities with your child?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
4. Does your child have the opportunity to play with children of about the same age?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

<i>How often would you say:</i>	Always	Often	Sometimes	Rarely or Never
5. You go to other parent & child programs in the community?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
6. Your family follows a routine of reading to your child(ren) at a set time each day?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
7. Your child interacts or talks with you about the book you are reading?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

<i>About how many hours a day does your child:</i>	3 hours or more	2 hours	1 hour or less	Rarely or Never
8. Watch T.V. or videos?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
9. Play video games?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
10. Play interactive computer programs that teach counting, colors, letters, etc?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
11. Look at books on his/her own?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
12. Listen to recorded music, stories, etc?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
13. Do counting, sorting or comparing games or activities?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

14. During the times of day when you are with your child, about how many times an hour do you speak directly to him/her and encourage them to respond with some type of answer?

	About 30 times	About 20 times	About 10 times	Less than 10 times
Speak directly to my child	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
And of these, I encourage a response.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

15. For about how long would you say your child plays on his/her own before needing your attention?

- 15 minutes or more 10 minutes 5 minutes Less than a few minutes

16. Are other adults in the family interested in what you are learning at these classes?

- Yes No Don't Know

Appendix D

Parent Program Schedule for 2005 - 2006 School Year

Fall Program Schedule 2005

New Parent Orientation 6:00-6:30 October 4 and 10

Spanish Classes October 13 and 15

*Ages B-1, 1-2, 2-3, 3-4, & 4-5 held concurrently	Tuesday October 4 6:30-8:00 p.m.		Thursday October 6 6:30-8:00 p.m.	Saturday October 8 6:30-8:00 p.m.
Monday October 10 6:30-8:00 p.m.		Wednesday October 12 6:30-8:00 p.m.	Thursday October 13 6:30-8:00 p.m.	Saturday October 15 6:30-8:00 p.m.

Winter Program Schedule 2006

New Parent Orientation 6:00-6:30 January 21 and 24

Spanish Classes January 28 and February 2

*Ages B-1, 1-2, 2-3, 3-4, & 4-5 held concurrently				Saturday January 21 6:30-8:00 p.m.
	Tuesday January 24 6:30-8:00 p.m.		Thursday January 26 6:30-8:00 p.m.	Saturday January 28 6:30-8:00 p.m.
Monday January 30 6:30-8:00 p.m.		Wednesday February 1 6:30-8:00 p.m.	Thursday February 2 6:30-8:00 p.m.	

Spring Program Schedule 2006

New Parent Orientation 6:00-6:30 April 15th and April 18th

Spanish Classes April 15 and 20

*Ages B-1, 1-2, 2-3, 3-4, & 4-5 held concurrently				Saturday April 15 6:30-8:00 p.m.
	Tuesday April 18 6:30-8:00 p.m.		Thursday April 20 6:30-8:00 p.m.	Saturday April 22 6:30-8:00 p.m.
Monday April 24 6:30-8:00 p.m.		Wednesday April 26 6:30-8:00 p.m.	Thursday April 27 6:30-8:00 p.m.	

Appendix E

Parent Program: My Four-Year-Old Can...

Child's Name _____ Age _____ Entering School _____

My child knows the names and sounds of the following lower case letters:

a	b	c	d	e
f	g	h	i	j
k	l	m	n	o
p	q	r	s	t
u	v	w	x	y
z				

My child can recognize simple printed words such as:

When asked, my child can identify the following: (circle the ones they know)

book page picture front cover back cover
top bottom letter words print
comma period space title author

When reading a familiar book, my child can respond to questions and can retell the story with a beginning, middle and end. Yes No

My child can count in order to 20 only missing the following numbers:

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14 15
16 17 18 19 20 numbers still random

My child can match and name the following shapes:

circle square triangle rectangle star
heart cross oval diamond parallelogram

My child knows the following colors:

red blue yellow green black pink
white orange purple brown grey light blue

My child can focus on a simple task for:

1min. 2min. 3min. 4min. 5min.

Appendix F

Parent Program Attendance for Three Years

Class Attendance 2003 - 2006

Presentation and Training Attendance 2003-2006														
	2003			2004			2005			2006			TOTAL	%
	Winter	Spr	Fall	Winter	Spr	Fall	Winter	Spr	Fall	Winter	Spr	Fall		
English														
age 0-1	16	43	112	147	153	96	152	133	107	125	131		1215	15
age 1-2	40	46	125	149	196	199	178	141	126	150	142		1492	18
age 2-3	81	101	170	163	168	160	152	139	167	143	140		1584	20
age 3-4	68	86	184	199	215	203	200	134	163	153	139		1744	22
age 4-5	169	170	225	162	175	246	205	171	178	168	156		2025	25
Total	374	446	816	820	907	904	887	718	741	739	708		8060	100

New Attendees						297			164				461	
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# in Childcare		278			280			366			TBD		
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Spanish														
All age groups	12	17	33	43	43								148	27
age 1,2						15	20	26	7	27	33		128	24
age 3,4						40	51	43	19	57	53		263	49
Total	12	17	33	43	43	55	71	69	26	84	86		539	49

Appendix G

Initial Categories Data

Twenty-six Initial Categories	# of Participant Responses Per category	%	# of Pages transcribed per category
Motivations and Expectations			
1. New Skills	12	100	4 ¼
2. Attendance at sessions	9	75	4 ¾
4. Registration experiences	12	100	5 ¼
5. Logistics issues (time/place)	12	100	3
6. Child care	9	75	2 ½
Experiences: Were the expectations met?			
3. Implementation at home	11	92	6 ¾
7. Support (family or otherwise)	9	75	5 ¼
8. Kindergarten assessment tools	10	83	2 ½
9. Realizing child's potentials/attitudes about learning	8	67	2
10. Comfort level during classes	9	75	2
11. Sustained attendance level over time	10	83	2 ½
12. Class participation	8	67	2 ¾
13. Instructor characteristics	11	92	5 ½
14. Interaction with other participants	12	100	5 ½
Impact: What did you want to learn? Did you learn it?			
15. V.I.P. (knowledge that really hit home)	10	83	3 ½
16. Tools and activities used at home	12	100	7 ¼
17. Routines and teaching opportunities at home	12	100	12 ¾
18. Ideas about pushing kids too much (time spent)	5	42	1 ½
19. Child's readiness and reactions using materials	10	83	7
20. Confidence working with the child / materials	11	92	7
21. Research about the brain and developmental levels	9	75	3 ½
22. Relationship changes that may have occurred	8	67	3 ¼
23. Ideas about parenting (may/may not have changed)	12	100	6 ¾
24. Positive/negative consequences using program	10	83	3 ½
25. Any additional reflections (open-ended)	5	42	2
26. Dropping out at some level for whatever reasons	5	42	3 ¾

Appendix H

Reducing Categories Into Themes

Dimensions	Themes	Twenty-six Initial Categories Reduced
Practical Considerations	Making a Commitment * Working out logistics * Prioritizing time * Support Systems * Contrast: Under what conditions did they continue?	#4 #5 #2, #6 #7, #14
Motivations and Sustainability	Following Through on Commitment * Expanding skills * Empowering parents * Perseverance and Determination * Self confidence * Contrast: Under what conditions did they continue?	#1 #3, #16, #17 #20, #23 #11, #24 #10
Impact of the Program	Positive Interactions / Seeing Results of Program * Changing family relationships * Raising expectations for Kindergarten * Changing the culture * Contrast: “Commoditizing” education	#9, #19 #22 #8, #18 #12, #13, #21, #25 #15, #26
Core Belief	I Am My Child’s First and Best Teacher	*Quoted from selected appropriate categories

Appendix I

Themes: Number of Participant Responses Listed as Percentages

Theme	Descriptor of participant response	Fraction of Interviewees	Percent of Interviewees
Establishing a Commitment	ECEAP support	7/12	58%
	Received registration encouragement	6/12	50%
	Convenient location	10/12	83%
	In-home ECEAP instruction to 7 parents	5/7	71%
	Availability of child care	9/12	75%
	Apprehension about attending classes	7/12	58%
Sustaining the Commitment	Kindergarten expectations	10/12	83%
	Desire for new early literacy skills	12/12	100%
	Joined the first year of the program	5/12	42%
	Insecure during class	3/12	25%
	Described alphabet train activity	4/12	33%
	Described the large project book	3/12	25%
	Reading as the most important activity	12/12	100%
	Building vocabulary, pointing out signs	4/12	33%
ECEAP support	7/12	58%	
Realizing the Commitment	Use of curriculum / Child Development	12/12	100%
	Siblings / Spouse involvement	8/12	67%
	Interactions with other participants	10/12	83%
	Comfort zone	4/12	33%
Shifting Priorities	Child care issues	1/12	8%
	Felt competent without program	2/12	17%
I Am My Child's First and Best Teacher	Reading as the most important activity	12/12	100%
	Use of curriculum / Child Development	12/12	100%
	Comfort zone	4/12	33%