Family Literacy on the Defensive
The Defunding of Even Start—Omen or Opportunity?

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In the second edition of the Handbook of Research on Teaching the English Language Arts, we argued that strengthening the state of family literacy research required three fundamental steps: (a) increasing the methodological complexity of research, (b) changing the field’s deficit-oriented research terminology to recognize families as capable partners rather than victims, and (c) broadening the theoretical framework of literacy to reflect a bio-ecological stance (cf. Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 2005) that recognizes societal, cultural, political, and institutional (e.g., workplace) influences upon parents’ and children’s choices and behaviors (Yaden & Paratore, 2002, pp. 537–541).

Despite the passage of time and a fair amount of additional research, we continue to believe that these prior recommendations remain fundamentally important to the discussion of the current state of family literacy research, perhaps more so in view of the decision to eliminate funding by fiscal year 2010 of the U. S. Department of Education’s Even Start Family Literacy program (Office of Management and Budget, 2009), the nation’s largest family literacy effort.

Given that Even Start has provided the general framework for nearly all federally funded family literacy programs for the past 20 years, we have chosen it as both a starting point and as a backdrop for our review. First, we examine the national evaluations of Even Start. In the next two sections, we examine and discuss the evidence regarding (a) investigations that measure the impact of different types of home literacy activities on children’s early and later literacy development, and (b) studies of other family literacy programs which include some, but not all, of Even Start’s major components. Finally, we offer some interpretations which differ, from the current discussions of Even Start’s general failure to produce lasting outcomes for children and their families and we speculate on the future of “family literacy” as a field.

Even Start and its Outcomes

The Even Start Family Literacy Program was first authorized in 1988 as part of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (ESEA) and grew from a small set of demonstration projects to “more than 1,000 projects serving 40,000 families in all fifty states” (St. Pierre, Ricciuti, & Rimdzius, 2005, p. 955) with total funding over its 20-year existence exceeding 2.5 billion. Even Start was established to “improve the educational opportunities of the nation’s children and adults by integrating early childhood education and adult education for parents into a unified program” (P.L. 100-297, Sec. 1051). Numerous qualitative studies (e.g., Love & Thayer, 2004; Seaman & Yoo, 2001) and small, experimental studies (e.g., Ryan, 2005) have documented the efficacy of Even Start in local or statewide implementations. However, in each case, the design of the study (e.g., non-experimental), the nature of the data sources (e.g., primarily self-report), or a small or homogenous sample size limited generalizability of the findings. To find generalizable evidence of overall effects of Even Start, we turned to the three national evaluations and follow-up studies.

In the first national evaluation, St. Pierre, Swartz, Murray, Deck, and Nickel (1993) collected descriptive data of existing projects and conducted an In-Depth Study (IDS) of 10 projects (179 children) to determine short-term effects for parents and children. The IDS projects were set across five sites (all demographically similar and with poverty levels at or above 60%), and families were randomly assigned either to an Even Start or a comparison group. Results were mixed. On a test of cognitive development, Even Start children’s scores increased at more than double the expected rate. However, on vocabulary and early literacy measures, no program effects were found. Adult measures showed small or no effects on measures of reading growth. There was, however, a positive effect on Graduate Equivalency De-
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gree (GED) attainment when compared with adults in other adult education programs, but the percentage of adults who achieved this outcome was small. There were no program effects on parents’ use of reading and writing at home, on learning activities in the home, amount of parent-child talk, on parent-child reading interactions, or on parents’ personal skills thought to affect parenting behaviors (e.g., depressive symptoms, self-efficacy). Small, significant effects \( (d = .30) \) were found on the number of different types of reading materials in the home, favoring Even Start families. In a follow-up study of “medium-term effects” (p. 15) of the same families, Gamse, Conger, Elson, and McCarthy (1997) found no differences between Even Start and comparison group students on measures of school attendance, grades, achievement test scores, grade retention, and participation in special services.

In the second national Even Start evaluation, Tao, Gamse, and Tarr (1998) examined programs from 1993–97. Fifty-seven projects (representing approximately 10% of total number of projects) provided data on program outcomes (with no control group). Data sources documented child cognitive development, adult education, and parenting. Data were collected from participants who remained in Even Start for a period long enough to allow collection of two rounds of data, and analyses indicated that these families differed from those who participated for a shorter period of time. Families who participated long enough to have both pretest and posttest data were more likely to be employed, to have higher incomes, and to speak languages other than English at home. Fewer of these families were headed by a single parent, and mothers’ education was almost a grade higher than those with pretest only. Accordingly, as the researchers noted, the sample represented a biased subgroup of the population served.

Individual growth modeling indicated that, on tests of cognitive development, children made progress greater than expected on the basis of development alone; moreover, the longer the length of participation, the greater the gain. Adult outcomes were similar to those reported in the first evaluation: gains on tests of adult learning were comparable to those achieved by adults in other programs; and again, a small percentage earned the GED. There were also small gains (3.5 points from pretest to posttest) on a measure of cognitive stimulation and emotional support in the home environment for parents of children from birth to 3 years of age and of children between 3 and 6 years of age.

The third national evaluation (St. Pierre et al., 2003; Ricciuti, St. Pierre, Lee, Parsad, & Rimdzius, 2004) included an experimental design study of 18 projects implemented between 1999 and 2001 that met criteria for fidelity of implementation and also agreed to random assignment of eligible participants. Of approximately 750 funded projects, 115 met these criteria, and of these, 18 volunteered to participate, yielding 309 families randomly assigned to an Even Start group and 154 families to a control group. (Control group families were also participating in some form of adult education and early childhood education services.)

On every measure, Even Start and control group children and parents made similar gains. Moreover, Even Start families under-used services, participating for fewer months and fewer hours “relative to the amount of instruction received by children in other programs that have generated large effects on child development” (St. Pierre et al., 2003, p. 5). Further, according to quality of instruction indicators, in the early childhood classrooms “there was not sufficient emphasis on language acquisition and reasoning” (St. Pierre et al., 2003, p. 7) to enable Even Start youngsters to outperform their peers in the control group or other early childhood programs.

A follow-up study (Ricciuti, St. Pierre, Lee, Parsad, & Rimdzius, 2004) in which posttest data were collected 9 months later \( (n = 239 \text{ Even Start families and } n = 115 \text{ Control Group families}) \) yielded similar outcomes: gains of Even Start children and adults did not differ from those made by children and parents in the control group.

Finally, Judkins et al. (2008) studied a subgroup of 120 Even Start projects serving 3- to 5-year-old children that incorporated “research-based” early childhood curricula and parent-child literacy activities into their overall intervention structure. Despite projects’ reasonable fidelity of implementation to the prescribed early childhood curricula and parenting program over the 2 years of implementation, there were no significant advantages for any of the treatment groups on any of the language and literacy outcomes in Spanish or English. Regarding the overall efficacy of Even Start, St. Pierre et al. (2005) concluded,

The fact that two experimental studies of Even Start show similar results, even though they were done at different times, one in the early 1990s at the very beginning of the program (St. Pierre et al., 1995) and a second after a decade of program implementation and many amendments to the program (St. Pierre et al., 2003), lead us to question the theoretical model underlying Even Start and most other family literacy programs. (p. 965)

Evidence of Facilitative Family Literacy Events

Despite the convergent evidence of few programmatic effects attributable to participation in Even Start programs, unlike St. Pierre et al. (2005), we are unwilling as yet to generalize the outcomes to all family literacy initiatives and interventions. There are three reasons for our reticence. First, the reported outcomes are a clear contradiction of research on the effectiveness of literacy-focused parent involvement, and as such demand further examination. Second, critiques of the third national evaluation (e.g., Espinosa, 2006; National Council of La Raza, 2006) point out that nearly all of the measures used for children were in English only and have little validity for dual language learners, a group that comprises the majority of Even Start’s child population. Third, independent evaluations (Appel & Russell, n.d.) have documented that Even Start participants outscored other English language learners on statewide tests of achievement through second grade.
To understand the discrepant findings yielded by the national evaluations and other studies, we looked back at the programs included in the national evaluations to determine the particular family literacy events that were common across programs. According to St. Pierre et al. (2003), parent-child activities varied widely among the projects studied in the third national evaluation. Activities included arts and crafts, making toys or books, making food or play materials, playing active games, story reading, group singing, and at times, volunteering in their child’s classroom. In some projects, parents were taught how to use a toy or game at home, how to support children’s language development, and how to read to their children. Although the amount of time spent on particular literacy activities is undocumented, the range in types of activities specified suggests a lack of intensive focus on parent-child literacy interactions. In instances when projects described weekly routines, only one to two of the five days of the week focused on parent-child literacy interactions. With this description as a backdrop, we examined evidence of home literacy interventions in other studies that found positive changes in children’s literacy and language knowledge.

We turned first to Sénéchal’s and Young’s (2008) meta-analytic review of the effects of various types of family literacy interventions. They identified 16 studies (representing 1,340 families) that met five characteristics: they were experimental or quasi-experimental in design, published in a peer-reviewed journal, tested effects of parent involvement on children’s literacy learning, included at least five participants, and either reported effect sizes or reported statistics that allowed the calculation of effect sizes.

Meta-analyses yielded a mean weighted effect size of 0.65, which “would correspond to a 10-point gain on a standardized test (with a standard deviation of 15) for the intervention children as compared to the control children” (p. 889). However, Sénéchal and Young also noted the large variability in the effect sizes across studies (0.07 to 2.02).

To test their hypothesis that particular types of interventions might explain the differences, they classified interventions as: (a) parents read to child, (b) parents listen to child read books, and (c) parents tutor specific literacy skills (e.g., alphabet naming, letter-sound association, word or sentence reading, with activities). Tutoring children in specific literacy activities (7 studies) resulted in the most positive outcomes, yielding an effect size of 1.15. Listening to children read books (6 studies) yielded an effect size of .52, a significant outcome, but also significantly less effective that tutoring children in specific activities. Reading to children (3 studies) yielded an effect size of 0.18, indicating small or no effect. Effect sizes did not vary according to length of intervention or inclusion of supportive feedback, nor did effects vary according to age of children (kindergarten or grades 1–3), children’s reading facility (above or below grade level), or family background (working, middle, or high economic class).

The outcome related to positive effects of direct teaching of emergent and early literacy skills are largely consistent with other studies (Baker, Fernandez-Fein, Scher, & Williams, 1998; Sénéchal & LeFevre, 2002; Sénéchal, LeFevre, & Thomas, 1998; Sénéchal, 1997); the finding of positive effects of listening to children read is also validated by previous work (e.g., Toomey, 1993; Hindin & Paratore, 2007). Toomey (1993) noted, however, that achieving positive results requires more than simply listening to children read; training parents to listen and to scaffold and reinforce effective reading behaviors leads to significant achievement gains. Likewise, Hindin and Paratore (2007) found that children whose parents provided the most help decoding unknown words made the largest gains.

The finding that parent-child book reading has little or no effect on children’s reading achievement differed from the findings of two previous meta-analyses (Bus, van Ijzendoorn, & Pellegrini, 1995; Scarborough & Dobrich, 1994), both of which yielded evidence of positive, significant effects of storybook reading on children’s language and reading achievement. Although these analyses yielded effect sizes that differed in strength (for further discussion, see Bus et al., 1995; Dunning, Mason, & Stewart, 1994), for the most part, there is convergence around a conclusion that parent-child book reading positively affects preschool children’s literacy and language development but to a smaller degree than previously thought, partially because the process of shared book reading is more complex than generally assumed (Stahl, 2003; van Kleeck, Stahl, & Bauer, 2003; Yaden, 2003).

So, how do we make sense of the evidence and relate it to family literacy interventions? In a nutshell, we know that literacy learning is a complex enterprise, and different types of events and interactions influence its development in different ways at different points in time. Designing effective family literacy interventions, then, is fundamentally dependent on a clear understanding of the theory of change (see W. K. Kellogg Foundation, 2004; Organizational Research Services, 2004) and a clear statement of desired outcomes, followed by selection of activities and tasks that will prompt parent-child interactions that are associated with achievement of the specified goal. For those outcomes to have both short-term and long-term effects on children’s literacy achievement, the data tell us the following:

First of all, parents’ involvement in literacy instruction that is meaningfully embedded within authentic play settings, sufficiently repetitive, and of an appropriate duration has been shown to prepare children for the types of early literacy tasks that characterize kindergarten and first-grade classroom reading and writing demands.

Second, teaching parents to listen to children read books has positive effects on children’s reading accuracy, fluency, and comprehension, and even more so when parents receive instruction in how to mediate children’s word reading difficulty and how to reinforce and support children’s successful reading behaviors.
Finally, helping parents to engage their children in shared book reading has the potential to support interest and engagement in reading and accelerate vocabulary and concept knowledge, knowledge about print and words, and comprehension development.

Aligning Research on Facilitative Parent-Child Activities with Family Literacy Interventions

As we reflected on the findings of research related to family literacy interventions that effectively prepare children for school success and the description of parent-child activities provided by St. Pierre et al. (2003), we concluded that there is little evidence that Even Start policy requirements resulted in systematic and routine attention to the types of events and interactions that make a difference in children’s early and later reading achievement. But we wondered about effects of interventions based on family literacy models varying from Even Start. There are numerous reports of such programs having positive effects on language or literacy knowledge of young children (e.g., Brooks, Gorman, Harman, Hutchinson, & Wilkin, 1996; Neuman, 1996; Rodriguez-Brown & Meehan, 1998); however these studies did not include a comparison group. Since we wanted to make direct comparisons to the outcomes of Even Start’s national evaluations, we delimited our search to include only those that included control group comparisons.

Jordan, Snow, and Porche (2000) studied 248 kindergarten students and families (177 in an intervention group and 71 in a control group). The setting was a suburban school district of mostly middle-income European American and mostly English-speaking (as a first language) families. Parents of children in the intervention group attended five training sessions, each dedicated to a 1-month unit focused on a particular theme. At each session, the trainer provided parents information about the importance of a particular skill or ability (e.g., vocabulary knowledge); described ways parents could support children’s development of the skill or ability; provided activities for parents to use; and engaged parents with their children in modeled activities. During each of the next 3 weeks, teachers sent home scripted activities that built on the focal skill or ability for parents to use with their children.

Children in the intervention group outperformed control group children on several language-related measures. Moreover, children with the lowest scores at pretest experienced the greatest benefit. There was also a positive relationship between amount of participation (defined as number of completed book activities) and the effect size.

Yaden and colleagues (Yaden & Brassell, 2002; Yaden & Martinez, 2008; Yaden, Tam, & Madrigal, 2003; Yaden et al., 2000) examined effects of an intervention that engaged urban, preschool Latino children in routine storybook reading both at home and at school as compared to children in an affiliated center experiencing a toy intervention during play time. The intervention was based on a multilayered fundamental premise: children need and deserve challenging, meaningful tasks, adults who respect their intellectual ability and their cultural capital, and frequent opportunities to share their ideas and opinions in both their native language and English. Children participated in a 2- to 3-hour language and literacy community-based program which included an infusion of over 1,000 high-quality children’s books, a Big Book shared reading program, and participation in writing centers. In addition, the intervention included a book-lending library for families coupled with parent workshops on reading at home and other strategies for encouraging children’s engagement in literacy activities.

At the beginning of kindergarten, 55 children who had enrolled in the preschool program as 4-year-olds outscored their peers from other preschool programs on tests of upper- and lower-case letter identification and vowel and consonant recognition. At the end of first grade, these same children outscored all other first-grade children in the school district in reading, language, and math on the Stanford Achievement Test; at the end of second grade, they outscored all other English language learners (ELL) in the district on these same subtests. Data also indicate that participants became proficient in English twice as fast as other ELLs in the district and had a far smaller referral rate to special programs than any other population of students.

Paratore, Krol-Sinclair, David, and Schick (2010) examined long-term effects of children whose parents participated in the Intergenerational Literacy Program (ILP), a family literacy program that has three purposes: to help parents develop their own literacy, to support the practice of family literacy in the home, and, in turn, to support children’s school-based success. The ILP provides direct service to parents, and through parents, to children. During each week (for a minimum of 12 weeks) parents participate in 6–8 hours of instruction, half of which focuses on reading and writing texts of adult interest. These texts are typically timely and consequential, informing parents about current events in their neighborhoods or communities, in their children’s schools, or information about their home lands and cultural groups. The other half of the time is spent on texts of importance to child development and learning and on engaging and motivating children’s books.

Each day, teachers provide explicit instruction to help parents improve their own English literacy and to help them support their children’s literacy development. A cornerstone of daily and weekly routines is family storybook reading. Each week teachers introduce a focal book, model the types of read-aloud strategies parents might use when sharing the book with children, and parents practice reading the book aloud in preparation for reading at home with their children.

Earlier studies have documented the short-term effectiveness of the ILP on parent and child literacy (Paratore, 1993, 1994; Paratore, Melzi, & Krol-Sinclair, 1999). In this latest study, data were collected on 120 students who had participated in the ILP and remained in the school system for the next 10 years (or through the end of their school careers). These students served as the treatment
group sample: 86% qualified for free or reduced lunch; 87% spoke Spanish as a first language; others spoke either Bosnian, Cape Verdean Creole, Haitian Creole, Khmer, Somali, and Vietnamese. Average number of years of parent education was 7.8 years, slightly lower than the program population mean. Families had completed an average of 3.6 cycles in the ILP (above the program mean of 2 cycles). Twenty-nine percent were identified for Special Education services (with 10% of these enrolled in substantially separate settings). At the time that data were collected grade placements ranged from Grade 4 to 3 years post graduation. The general school population served as a comparison group (N = 5,627). Demographically, these students were similar to those in the treatment group: 87% qualified for free or reduced lunch and 81% spoke a first language other than English (mostly Spanish). However, a far smaller percentage (13%) was identified for special education services (with 4% of these enrolled in substantially separate settings). Children whose parents had participated in the literacy program had significantly higher rates of school attendance than their comparison group peers, consistently higher grade-point averages, consistently higher scores on both English Language Arts and Mathematics subtests of the state assessment, and higher rates of enrollment in post-secondary education.

This collection of non-Even Start studies is small in number, and two of the three have small sample sizes. Nonetheless, the consistently positive outcomes stand in contrast to the outcomes of the Even Start national evaluations, but not in contrast to the larger body of literature on effects of parent-child literacy interventions. The analysis of what these programs had in common is important: they were all intensively focused on literacy activities. Moreover, in each case, they used allocated time to explain, model, and guide parents in implementation of the types of literacy events and interactions that are known to prepare children for school success. Further, the literacy events were embedded in engaging, high quality texts and in motivating, interesting, and playful games and activities, and often within contexts that had social import for family members. Finally, in all cases, emphasis was placed on both development of emergent literacy abilities (e.g., phoneme awareness, alphabet knowledge) and language knowledge (vocabulary, concepts, linguistic and text structures).

Discussion
There is wide theoretical and empirical agreement regarding the important role that parents play in their children’s school success, especially in the area of literacy learning. However, attempts to interpret and apply theory and research to practical models have met with uneven levels of success. We believe that the unevenness is explained, at least partially, by the mismatch between what we know about parent-child interactions that influence literacy learning and the ways time and resources are allocated in particular programs.

At least for now, our review causes us to reject the conclusion of St. Pierre et al. (2003) that the findings of the national evaluations call into question the “theoretical model” (p. 965) underlying “most” (p. 965) family literacy models. Rather, we believe that a model that builds on families’ existing literacy knowledge and family routines, introduces, explains, models, and supports implementation of new literacy knowledge and routines, and maintains focused, intensive support to deepen knowledge and facilitate routines can be predicted to yield positive outcomes.

Moreover, as Bronfenbrenner (2005) described, it is not so much a matter of the number of hours spent in several activities that fosters development in an individual—or in our case, a family—but an ever-increasing complex relationship which grows in reciprocity, commitment, and trust between and among the people involved in the relationship. Bronfenbrenner’s description of the key aspects of development are relevant to a family’s engagement in any program that purports to increase social, economic, and intellectual capital, as Even Start claimed to do:

In order to develop—intellectually, emotionally, socially, morally—a child requires, for all these, the same thing: participation in progressively more complex activities, on a regular basis over an extended period of time in the child’s life, with one or more persons with whom the child develops a strong, mutual emotional attachment, and who are committed to the child’s well-being and development, preferably for life. (Bronfenbrenner, 2005, p. 9)

We suspect that large-scale programs such as Even Start, perhaps impersonally implemented, using a plethora of existing community-based resources with varying quality, goals, and even conflicting or unspecified theories of change (cf. Walker & Kubisch, 2008) actually work against the type of personal and professional cohesion that must take place between consortium partners and family literacy participants to produce substantial gains in children’s cognitive development or parents’ abilities to access resources.

Our concern also is with the absence of descriptions of specific logic models of cause and effect indicating the exact mechanisms to be put to work and effectively monitored so that the desired outcomes for families and children can be expected. In the last half decade, in particular, organizations such as the W. K. Kellogg and Anne E. Casey Foundations have commissioned work on developing theories of change documents (Organizational Research Services, 2004; W. K. Kellogg Foundation, 2004) as an aid to their grantees and others in specifying just what the links are between and among organizational goals, the full range of factors likely to contribute to goal achievement (social, economic, cultural, cognitive, linguistic), and the pertinent service networks that must be engaged for goal attainment. We have yet to see a process of this type described in any evaluation study of Even Start, or any family literacy program for that matter. Factors such as the delivery of the service, number of participants, and number of hours spent in an activity often suffice as indices of success. It might come as no surprise, then, that absent sufficient attention to the full network of possible causes, mediators, and effects of actions and in-
vestments, the deeper, more difficult-to-achieve outcomes are not realized.

There remains much to learn and understand about effective family literacy interventions, especially as they relate to families who are economically, socially, culturally, and linguistically different from the mainstream. However, existing theory and research should, at a minimum, teach us that as we seek to improve children’s and family’s literacy learning opportunities, we must maintain a clear understanding of the importance of attending to the broader context—the social, emotional, cultural, intellectual, and economic networks in which the families function day in and day out—even as we remain relentlessly focused on activities and events that have been proven to support literacy learning.

References


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