Journal of Research in Rural Education, Winter, 1997, Vol. 13, No. 3, 165-169

Exploring the Use of Rural Community Members In Support of First Grade Readers

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We describe an exploratory project to enrich the reading experiences of first grade children by using rural community members. Community members, who were trained to use enrichment activities with beginning readers, worked individually with 84 children in three elementary schools for 1 school year. Statistically significant results were found on a standardized measure of reading achievement. Explorations such as this help provide insight into how rural schools may use community members to help enhance the beginning reading program.

Rural students have made steady gains in reading achievement since 1984 and are now well ahead of children in disadvantaged urban communities (National Center for Education Statistics, 1995). Although rural children still lag behind their peers from advantaged urban and suburban areas, the increase in rural students' reading achievement is impressive, coming as it does when reading scores nationwide have been flat for a quarter century. To continue this upward trend, children must get a strong start in first grade (Gillet & Temple, 1990) because this is the time when the foundation for reading is established. By the end of the school year, first graders are expected to read easy books on their own, use phonics and context to identify unfamiliar words, automatically recognize many words, write legibly, and spell words that others can read. Therefore, first grade is the most propitious time to offer extra support to children who may have difficulty making smooth reading progress.

Some children move into reading easily and succeed early, while others struggle. The children who are most likely to struggle are those who have not had adequate opportunities to learn about speech and print during the preschool years (Schickedanz, 1993). While there are many first graders nationwide who would benefit from enrichment activities that compliment regular classroom reading instruction, proportionately more of these children may be in rural schools. Rural elementary teachers report more problems with student achievement and success than do teachers in suburban schools (Bainer, 1992-1993). The poverty levels and accompanying unemployment are often higher in rural families (Miller, 1993), with approximately one out of every four children in rural areas living below the poverty line and having less access to early childhood programs than children in nonrural settings ("Call for support," 1993).

The National Congress on Rural Education in 1992 identified, as barriers to improving rural education, needy children coming to school who are not ready to learn and a lack of integration of social services for needy families who live in rural areas ("Special report," 1993). The reason for this is that the typical model for preschool child care in rural communities may not always provide the type of organized, orchestrated opportunities to learn about speech and print that are found in large, structured day care centers in advantaged urban and suburban communities (Beach, 1995). Research suggests that it is much less likely that the family or relative child care used by low income children will be as beneficial to development as that which is used by moderate-income children (Kontos, Howes, Shinn, & Galinsky, 1997). Teachers in one state perceive that over half of the low income students whom they teach do not come to school prepared to learn ("Ready or not," 1992). The challenge for any school that serves low income rural children is to meet children's literacy needs by giving them many opportunities to extend their knowledge of reading.

Expanding Reading Experiences for First Graders

Our project focused on giving first grade children extra experiences with reading and writing, experiences that complement the regular classroom reading program. This exploratory project took place in three elementary schools in a rural, agriculturally oriented county in a southeastern state. County demographics suggest that many children who begin first grade are not ready to learn. One fourth of parents who have children in elementary schools in this county do not have a high school diploma or the equivalent, and the poverty rate, as measured by federal guidelines, ranges

This exploratory project was funded by a grant from The Cannon Foundation.

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from 60% to 75%. Testing done at school entry showed that more than half of kindergartners were at risk of having difficulty learning to read.

Participating Children and Rural Community Members

Children. Teachers felt that the children who would benefit most from participating were those who were the lowest achievers and who had the most challenging home conditions. The 84 participating children lived in families where the adults worked in agriculture, in low skill occupations such as textile mills or furniture manufacturing, or in service jobs, such as those in the fast food industry. At the beginning of the school year, most of these first grade children could not identify letters of the alphabet, identify beginning and ending sounds in words, or spell their first and last names. A few children even lacked basic book handling skills, such as knowing which way to turn pages and locating the top and bottom of pages.

Based on teacher judgment and results of the Gates MacGinitie Reading Tests (MacGinitie & MacGinitie, 1989), 37 boys and 47 girls participated in the exploratory program for a full school year. No child scored above a kindergarten level in the fall on the Gates MacGinitie Reading Tests Level R (readiness), even though all had spent a full year in kindergarten. This result becomes even more important when we consider that the test given was designed for kindergartners, not first graders. One advantage of the Gates MacGinitie Reading Tests is that they are designed for off-level testing. A three-grade range of norms exists, one for the appropriate grade, one for the grade below children's placement, and one for the grade above. Fall testing resulted in an average stanine of 2.11 (low achievement) with a grade equivalent of K, indicating kindergarten level performance. The Gates MacGinitie Tests confirmed teachers' judgment that these first grade children were not ready to read.

Community Members. The community members were 15 women who lived near the three elementary schools. They ranged in age from 29 to 76 years, and all had a high school diploma. Four were grandmothers, ten were mothers with children in school, and one had grown children living away from home. Half had some type of work experience: a retired mill worker, a retired teacher assistant, two school bus drivers, two nursing assistants in nursing homes, and a retired teacher. The women shared an interest in education and understood the contribution that school makes to community life. It is not surprising, then, that these women had a keen interest in working with children and a strong sense of responsibility to do their best to help the children with whom they interacted.

Aspects of the Exploratory Program

Children and Community Members Working Together. Community members worked one-on-one with 5 or 6 first grade children for 30 minutes 3 times each week. Activities were chosen that connected with children's classroom learning. Teachers made suggestions about what children needed to learn and shared ideas about how to work effectively with individual youngsters. Community members were supported in their work with children through weekly visits by a reading specialist from a nearby university who observed them working with children, and answered questions and offered advice regarding how to use enrichment activities.

Preparing Community Members to Work with Children. Before school started, community members met with reading specialists from the university and county curriculum coordinators from the central office for a full day to learn about the role the women would play and how to begin using enrichment activities. Throughout the remainder of the year, they attended 15 inservice training sessions to help them understand how children learn to read and develop a storehouse of activities to use with children.

Each inservice training session was divided into four parts. Sessions began with a discussion of how a particular activity supports classroom learning for beginning readers. Second, the activity was demonstrated so that the women developed an understanding of the how the activity was to be implemented. Third, community members practiced the activity. Finally, the women asked questions, which ranged from points of clarification to advice on how to solve problems and modify activities already in use. In addition to the 15 sessions, 3 meetings were held so that the women could share ideas for activities and games which they had developed or found successful with children. To help community members organize materials, each was given a notebook for keeping handouts from inservice sessions, teaching suggestions, tips, and examples of effective practice. Each community member also had a large plastic storage box, kept at school, which contained learning materials such as games, books, puppets, magnetic letters, lettered tiles, and colored markers.

Choosing Enrichment Activities for Children. Nontraditional and traditional activities were used to develop knowledge and skills in six areas that are essential for success in classroom reading: phonemic awareness (the ability to analyze spoken language into words and sounds), phonics, comprehension, vocabulary, spelling, and writing (Templeton, 1995).

Activities were interactive and/or manipulative, and as such were fun for children and easily used by community members with moderate or minimal training.

For example, phonemic awareness was enhanced with activities such as (a) playing rhyme time, which involves

pairing pictures of things that rhyme, like *fox* and *box* (Blevins, 1997); (b) clapping for words heard in a sentence (Robertson & Salter, 1995); and (c) deciding which of three spoken words does not belong because it does not have a shared sound, (e.g., *fan, fox* and *sit).* Support in phonics consisted of activities such as (a) making word ladders in which one letter-sound is changed on each rung to create new words; (b) building many different words from one short word, such as beginning with the word *it* and then building the words *pit, spit* and *split*; and (c) manipulating words using tiles with letters on them, like changing *pot* to *top* or *cap* to *cape* (Bolton & Snowball, 1993). Reading vocabulary was enhanced by working with words that were part of classroom reading. Examples of activities include (a) playing bingo with important words; (b) sorting words into related groups, such as color words, animal words, weather words, and so forth (Cunningham, Moore, Cunningham, & Moore, 1995), and (c) using word cards to label things in the classroom. Some spelling activities were (a) using small tiles with letters on them to spell words, (b) solving word puzzles in which certain letters were added or deleted, and (c) making word worms which combined a beginning letter-sound written on the head with ending letter-sounds written on the body segments (Fox, 1995). Examples of comprehension activities included (a) oral retellings of stories, (b) putting pictures in the sequential order used in a story, and (c) drawing a picture of a story event and then dictating what happened in the story. Writing activities involved (a) arranging word cards to form sentences, (b) writing as many words as children could think of in one minute, and (c) dictating stories at the beginning of the year and writing stories at the end of the year.

At the beginning of the year, community members used activities that required the least training and were explicitly told which activities to use each day. Then, as the women learned how to use a greater variety of activities and learned more about the children with whom they worked, they were given greater and greater latitude to choose activities that they believed were suited to individual children. Thus, as the program evolved over the course of the school year, activities became more and more tailored to the needs of each child.

Outcomes of the Exploratory Project

The project was evaluated by comparing scores from the Gates MacGinitie Reading Tests Level R (MacGinitie & MacGinitie, 1989) in the fall with scores from the Gates MacGinitie Reading Tests Level 1, Form K in the spring to determine whether there were significant changes in children's position in relation to the norm group. Additional information came from anecdotal reports from classroom teachers about the children's progress.

When the project was first introduced, teachers expressed a strong desire to include as many of their low-readiness students as possible. To accommodate this, the decision was made to forego a control group, thus allowing a large number of the teacher-recommended, low-readiness children to take part. A stringent evaluation of this exploratory project would require the use of a control group that received only the regular classroom reading curriculum. Such an evaluation plan, while methodologically desirable, would have curtailed the participation of one half of the children who teachers felt needed the most help. Therefore, project outcomes are limited to a comparison of fall and spring stanines, normal curve equivalents, and grade equivalents on the Gates MacGinitie Reading Tests, as well as anecdotal reports from teachers of the 84 children.

To demonstrate growth, children in the project must have moved up in relation to the national norm group to which they are compared. For example, a child who began the school year in the fifth stanine (average achievement) and who ended the year at the fifth stanine made 1 year's progress over the course of 1 school year. This hypothetical child's reading ability increased from the fall to the spring, yet the child's standing among children in the norm group did not change. By way of contrast, a child who began the year in the first stanine (the lowest achievement level) and who ended the year in the fourth stanine (low average achievement) made more progress than is expected in 1 school year.

As a group, the 84 participating children changed position from low reading achievement to low average achievement as measured by the Gates MacGinitie Reading Tests. Table 1 shows means and standard deviations for fall and spring Gates MacGinitie testing for stanines, normal curve equivalents, and grade equivalents. Dependent samples *t*-tests revealed that the means of the fall and spring stanines were significantly different ($t = 14.85$, $p < .001$), as were the means for normal curve equivalents ($t = 15.11$, $p < .001$) and grade equivalents ($t = 36.19$, $p < .001$).[1]

Fall to spring comparisons of the Gates MacGinitie Reading Tests scores can be put into a classroom perspective by considering teachers' anecdotal remarks. Eleven of the 12 first grades were taught by experienced teachers with at least 5 years of classroom teaching in the primary grades. All of the teachers reported that the children showed more confidence doing reading tasks, participated more in classroom activities, and had more positive attitudes toward learning to read than similar children whom they had taught

[1]To examine the effect that differences among the 12 classroom teachers may have had on achievement, a between groups ANOVA ($k = 12$) was performed on all measures taken during the year. No statistically significant differences were found, suggesting that differences in achievement were not due to variations in the teaching styles of these first grade teachers.

Table 1
Means and Standard Deviations for Fall and Spring Gates MacGinitie Tests: Total Score (n = *84)*

	Fall		Spring	
	M	*SD*	*M*	*SD*
Stanine	2.11	1.08	4.43	1.41
Normal Curve Equivalent	18.46	12.59	43.77	14.41
Grade Equivalent	0	0	1.72	.44

in previous years. Teachers remarked that children who lived in troubled homes adjusted to first grade much better than did children from troubled homes who were better students and therefore did not participate in the project. Teachers thought that children were better able to manage traumatic life events when they had extra support and personal attention from a community member. The teachers also felt that the relationship children had with community members, which was based on learning to read and being successful in school, contributed to more positive classroom performance.

Teachers commented that children made more progress in reading, spelling, and writing than they anticipated. Teachers also observed that the children were better readers at the end of the year than the fall test scores would have predicted. For example, one teacher commented that two children in her classroom would not have been promoted to second grade if they had not participated in the project and another child who was going to be retained had made substantially more progress during the year than she expected. Another teacher reported that after 2 months in the project a child who had been retained and had already spent a year in a reading intervention program was for the first time able to spell correctly words the class was studying. Interestingly, two children in different schools who were receiving services from a speech and language teacher and who were considered by the school staff to be at serious risk learned to read and to use phonics to unlock new words. Teachers observed that as the year progressed and reading skills improved, children became more enthusiastic and independent learners in the classroom. By the end of the year, although the children in this exploratory project still lagged behind their higher performing classmates, substantial progress had been made.

Conclusion

This project was designed to augment the classroom reading curriculum of first grade children who attended three rural schools. Strengthening the primary program right from the beginning is an important strategy for children who may not have had a strong preschool background in spoken and written language. They need the kind of academic learning that results from a solid curriculum, and they may also need extra time to practice and apply what they learn in regular classroom reading instruction.

The children who participated in this exploratory project were the most academically needy, as indicated by low readiness scores on the Gates MacGinitie Reading Tests and teacher judgment. Results of testing and anecdotal reports from teachers indicate that this exploratory project supported beginning readers. The children on average moved from exceptionally low reading achievement in the fall to low average achievement in the spring on the Gates MacGinitie Reading Tests. All 12 teachers reacted positively to the project and reported greater than expected reading growth in their students who participated.

Rural schools can be an important part of community life (Hutto, 1990), and training community members to support classroom learning could develop a new asset for these schools. In order to replicate this project, careful attention must be paid to the interest and commitment that community members have in their local elementary schools. Training for community members and supervision of their activities with children are vital components, as well. Project learning activities focused on skills and knowledge that are generic to learning to read. As a consequence, this model can be used with any beginning reading curriculum and is not sensitive to the varying priorities and teaching styles of different first grade teachers.

Although this project was developed specifically with the rural context in mind, it could be used in urban and suburban schools where children need extra support and where community members are supportive of the school's role in community life. The encouraging trend of rising reading achievement in rural schools can be supported and extended in many ways. Projects such as this and others which focus on children when they are beginning readers help to establish the foundation upon which reading independence and future academic achievement rest.

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