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Do Parents Benefit? Perspectives of Low-Income Parents Who Received a Free Early Readiness Program for Their Child

By
Donita Massengill Shaw

Abstract:

The purpose of this study was to discover the interpretations and perspectives of 4 low-income parents who received a free early readiness program for their child. Two interviewees were parents who had a child enrolled the year data was collected, and the other two interviewees were parents whose children had participated previously in the early readiness program. The results of this study show that the early readiness program offered benefits to the parents as well as the child, regardless of enrollment year. The benefits include, but were not limited to, social support for parents, financial assistance, greater understanding of their children, and practical parenting ideas. The findings of this study supported the value of free early readiness programs for low-income parents. The discussion substantiates the findings of this study with previous research and concludes there were several identifiable benefits for the parents.

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Do Parents Benefit?

Perspectives of Low-Income Parents

Who Received a Free Early Readiness Program for Their Child

In my work with low-income parents, I have found they often experience stress and barriers to their parenting, despite their parental desire to be good providers and caretakers. As Hofferth (1995) has said, most of these parents do not have abundant resources or options to assist them in meeting their child's needs.

Communities in America are attempting to serve these families and provide them with resources and options. One example is a local business/education partnership and a family literacy grant, which have provided funds for early educational opportunities for children who would not otherwise have the chance to benefit from an educational setting until they were in kindergarten. Even though this early readiness program is developed to help four and five year old at-risk children, it is really targeted to assist families. The philosophy of this program states that parents are their child's first and most important teacher. These early childhood educational programs with family involvement serve a dual purpose. By addressing adult and child needs, the goal is to positively impact lifelong changes and attitudes towards education and learning.

Currently, children who have experienced the preschool program in previous years are being tracked for their educational progress as they continue schooling in the primary grades. However, little information has been solicited from the parents regarding their interpretations of this program. Therefore I was interested to find answers to the following questions. Do parents benefit from

having their child enrolled in this program? If so, how do they benefit? What does it mean to the parents who have a child currently enrolled in the early childhood education program? What has it meant to the parents who have had a child previously enrolled in the early childhood education program? Are the perspectives of parents with a child previously or currently enrolled similar or different?

Theoretical background

During the last decade, early childhood education programs have moved from traditional parent programs to parent collaboration models in which families are empowered (Powell, 1998). Educators have made more attempts to get to know the family, not just the child. When parents feel they are active participants and resources in their child's education, the parents' positive feelings about themselves increase (Bruckman & Blanton, 2003). The success of programs may be linked to the degree to which parental self-efficacy is incorporated into the program and intervention model (Coleman & Karraker, 1998).

The concept of self-efficacy was defined by Bandura (1977, 1989) who said self-efficacy refers to self-perceptions of how competent one is behaviorally and his/her ability to carry out specific actions in certain situations. Personal efficacy may be influenced by numerous factors, such as personal accomplishment history (past successes and failures), vicarious experiences (observing others and estimating personal mastery), verbal feedback from others, and emotional arousal (psychological input). Individuals with high self-efficacy trust their abilities to face demands, conceptualize problems as challenges rather than threats, experience less negative emotional arousal, and exhibit perseverance (Jerusalem & Mittag, 1995). In contrast, people with low self-efficacy experience significant levels of self-doubt and anxiety during adversity. They assume more

responsibility for failure than for success, they appraise environmental demands as threatening, avoid challenges, and cope dysfunctionally with problems.

Parenting self-efficacy can directly impact the quality of care provided as well as the degree of enjoyment derived from the parenting experience, which potentially influences parental responses (Elder, Eccles, Ardel, & Lord, 1995). Swick, Da Ros and Kovach (2001) advocate that parents' efficacy may be positively impacted by a caring inquiry approach. "Parenting is a dynamic process where growth and change are integral to the family's well being" (p. 66). This growth and change can be nurtured through the caring of healthy relationships with others. One goal of early childhood programs is to support and strengthen parents and families' learning. Early childhood professionals can help parents gain tools to use resources, ideas and experiences to optimize growth, which in turn, empowers parents.

The study

To investigate the purpose of the study, interviews were conducted. I began by soliciting willing participants through an introductory letter. After numerous parents responded positively to the invitation, four individuals were selected, including both male and female interviewees. Two female individuals, whom I'll call Kim and Jennifer, had children in the program in previous years. Kim's oldest two children (out of a family of three children) completed the early readiness program and Jennifer's one child attended in a previous school year. Mike and Bob had their first-born child currently enrolled in the program when data were collected.

I contacted the four selected individuals by phone and each one confirmed s/he was willing to meet for one visit. Each participant chose his/her meeting time and place, which alleviated discomfort with the physical location. The interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed as soon as the interviews were completed. The notes were analyzed for patterns and themes were gathered.

The categories were checked to see if they made sense together, and thoroughly reviewed and investigated to see if other categories would better identify the interviewee's voices. Finally, the responses were tested against the research questions and compared to the literature review. While validity and reliability are without absence, Maxwell's (1996) suggestions, such as member checks, were heeded.

In this article, I discuss the most significant themes that emerged in my analysis. The most predominant was "parent involvement." The second category that emerged was "pleased with the program" and the third was "serendipitous benefits." To explain these further, each category will be supported with themes and remarks from the four individuals who took part in this study.

Parent involvement

The early readiness program encourages parents to come into the classroom on a weekly basis. Additionally, parents are asked to be involved in field trips, evening, weekend and holiday activities. As the interviewees and I discussed the parental involvement and responsibilities, several themes within each category emerged: involvement in the classroom, parenting benefits and social benefits.

Involvement in the classroom. Three of the four interviewed parents were so thrilled to share how much they enjoyed going into the classroom to spend time with their child. Kim stated, "It was so enjoyable because you could join in the class and interact with your child, but also interact with other children too. It was fun because you got to see their program."

Mike approached the involvement aspect from two perspectives: his responsibility to fit time in his schedule and the influence his involvement had on his son.

I enjoy it. I think it helps the kids see going to this (program) is really worthwhile. I think they are really influenced by what the parents think of the program. I didn't have any problem with that, with that demand from them. . .A lot of it is time management. The way I

feel is that if I put the effort that the educators are and the school itself, and volunteers, paras, if I just had a percentage of the effort they put into it, I'd meet them at a common meeting somewhere, it will be to my son's benefit. So as far as making the commitment to the program it isn't too much. It's not too overbearing or anything.

Bob discussed parental involvement within the domains of another question. We were visiting about his original perception of the program at enrollment time and if/how it had changed.

Bob readily stated,

I didn't realize the parents would be so involved. It's great. I remember when I was a kid, they never had anything like that. So that's what I was thinking. You send her off to school and we pick her up and she comes home. I never realized they would want the parents to be so active, which is great.

Jennifer, the only parent who didn't eagerly share her enthusiasm, clearly mentioned that she understood the reason for their request - it was to get parents involved with their child. However, Jennifer believes her parenting style is quite interactive as she provided specific examples of things she does with her daughter and then she said, "We always do everything together." Therefore, Jennifer didn't feel the need or desire to become so involved in her child's classroom.

Parenting benefits. In addition to the participation in classroom activities and events, the parents had the opportunity to attend a parenting seminar in the fall. Again, three of the four parents took part in this opportunity and felt it was worth their time. Their comments share their perspectives. Bob stated, "It was really useful. There was a lot of information that we've tried to use at home, structuring her behavior, respond to how she acts. We've changed the way we do things and we've been surprised it works really well. It's good. It's really good information." Mike readily agreed, "The methods that were presented I was able to implement a few of them immediately and they made a difference. . .It was pretty amazing. . .They had picked up the fee for the classes and all I had to do was show up. I got the book and everything. It was worth my time." Kim stated, "I thought the workshops were terrific because the main gist that I got was how to

interact with your child in a positive way to just encompass the whole thing, not just the school experience, but also at home.” Jennifer was the only interviewee who did not attend the parenting sessions. She spoke of James Dobson and her discipline philosophy and said, “I didn’t attend and the reason is that I parent the way that the program teaches anyway.”

Social benefits. When discussing the activities, events, and responsibilities of the school year, the parents’ words created a theme about a social connection with other parents. Having their social needs addressed seemed to create a sense of enjoyment and appreciation. Kim verbalized, “It’s funny because five of the mothers that were in my son’s class are still friends. I still maintain that.”

Mike shared two important statements. At first, he talked about the parenting seminar. “Even the first week, it amazed me how everybody has different situations but similar problems and challenges the kids have. I wasn’t the only one. I felt like, ‘Hey these guys are going through the same thing.’ Some kind of camaraderie with the parents.” Later when Mike and I were talking about the parent’s perspective of the preschool program, Mike continued with his statement of social support by saying, “Even the parents, I have a feeling we are a close-knit team. We are all involved with this program. You get a lot out of it, the more you put in it.”

Bob mentioned early in his interview that he and his wife had met all the parents. Then later, when answering another question, he expanded, “Again, I go back to the fact that we’ve met all the parents and I didn’t know we’d do that. My daughter has made little friends and we do sleep-overs and it’s nice because we know the parents. We’ll be out somewhere and see parents and we’ll talk. So it’s not only good for the kids, but it’s like we’ve broadened our circle also.”

Pleased with program

All four of the parents readily agreed on the fact they were pleased with the early readiness program. Three themes emerged within this category: the program met/exceeded expectations, the educators cared about the children, and there was a positive learning environment.

Met and exceeded expectations. Kim was apprehensive about the program at first, but then, “Once I got into the program and saw how wonderful it was, I felt more comfortable.” Bob shared, “My expectations were lower than what the program actually is.” When I asked Bob if the program met his expectations for academics or social networks, he readily agreed to both. Jennifer said, “I thought it was going to be daycare and I didn’t really want that. I hoped she would learn something and she did. . . Again, the cooperation she learned and other things I couldn’t give her here, so I was happy with that.” Mike said, “I was hoping, my expectation is that it would keep him busy and occupied during the day constructively for him. . . But it’s more than met my expectations.”

Parents’ expectations were met due to their own social needs being addressed, some personalized individual child benefits, and the following two themes: educators care and quality learning environment.

Educators care about the children. When the parents mentioned how much the educators seemed personally interested in their child, their words seemed to be said in such a grateful tone of voice. Jennifer shared a personal story about her daughter’s struggle. She concluded with these statements. “But we worked together to take care of what my daughter needed and I appreciate that. It said to me that they were concerned about her, not their class or their program, but figured out what she was doing.” Later in the interview, Jennifer continued with the theme, “I was impressed the teacher is very concerned for the kids individually. . . The teacher pushes students individually as far as they can go. He caters to the individual child.” Bob’s message was simple. He said, “I think the teachers are really dedicated to what they do, and they genuinely care about the

kids. . . I like to see the teachers are really involved and they really actually love the kids.” Mike shared his insights about a teacher-student relationship from a child’s perspective. “I think they (kids) feel real comfortable there. I see a real comfort zone there. They see their teacher and para as if they need help with anything, they just go ask. They have a lot of confidence in their teachers and paras.”

Positive learning environment. Several parents stated how much their child enjoys the program. “It’s fun for them,” Bob said. “I think along with that, it makes it funner to learn when you have that environment. At least I notice that in my daughter. She comes home everyday and talks about school and what she does. She loves all the teachers because they get to go to the art class and gym and she thoroughly enjoys it.” Jennifer mentioned her daughter’s pleasure too. “The learning is fun. They do a lot of learning through creative play. They learn more that way than being forced into formal learning.”

For Mike, the positive learning environment included the fact that his son, who has special needs, is not removed from the classroom and doesn’t feel like he’s treated differently. Mike said clearly,

I feel real fortunate I have my son in that program and they gave him the opportunity to be there, especially with his special needs. He doesn’t feel like he’s an outcast, like I did when I was in gifted (as a child). We got completely taken out of the room. Three hours a day we were in gifted class. But his situation, they just kind of work with him. He doesn’t have to be mainstreamed because he’s always there. So he doesn’t feel indifferent to anybody. I think it’s positive.

Serendipitous Benefits

Goals are a part of every program. However, there are many times when bonuses about a program happen from unexpected circumstances or from unplanned moments that are not listed as a specific goal. The interviewed parents seem to feel they’ve been blessed with some serendipitous

benefits from their involvement in this program. The themes that emerged include financial support and miscellaneous.

Financial support. As mentioned previously, low-income is one eligibility requirement for these parents. Several of the parents expressed their appreciation for financial assistance in raising their child. Bob was working two jobs to make ends meet. He is thankful he now only has to work one job and he can take his daughter to school and pick her up in the afternoon.

Kim talked about the situation in their home when their oldest child was ready for preschool. Her husband was working toward his college degree, she was employed at an all-purpose discount store and money was tight. Kim said, "We wanted our children to go to preschool, but we couldn't really afford it, so it was wonderful. It was a blessing for us and we were so grateful." Kim's husband has finished his education and now works to support the family. In fact, their youngest child was not able to go through the early readiness program the year the data was collected because the family income surpasses the eligibility limit. Even though Kim and her husband were disappointed their last child could not benefit from the early readiness program, she said they were grateful they were doing better financially.

Mike, who is a single father, intertwined the financial aspect when discussing how pleased he was with the program. Mike said,

I just feel pretty fortunate that they have that. If they didn't have that, I had them in the child development center, and it took almost 1/3 of my income a month to keep them there. It wasn't half, it was a good program, but it doesn't even come close to comparing with what they have over there (current early readiness program).

Miscellaneous. This isn't exactly an organized theme, but it is important to include the personalized and individual benefits parents have received. Each parent has a story to share about

how this program has impacted his/her life. Together, their words leave us with some real pictorial benefits that can't be stated with words as well as they can with feelings of happiness and gratitude.

Jennifer, who is actively involved in parenting her daughter, and who hopes to home-school her daughter someday said, "It helped me teach her. It also gave me ideas of how to better teach her in some ways. It also gave me an idea of how my daughter was in school and how the teacher should be. . . More than anything, it helped me — not just for that year. It helped me know what she can do."

Mike shared some insights into his family life within the last year. A divorce took place and his wife moved a long distance away. Essentially, Mike has all the responsibility of raising two sons. He talked about the challenges at home, but since his son has received stability and structure, "It's been wonderful at home too. . . Just everything has been so great at home since school has started. We don't have time to get into trouble or do those things. It all reflects back to the structure he's getting there."

Kim talked about her time in the classroom and all that she learned by being in the classroom. Kim discussed a situation in which the teachers dealt with a child and what she gained from that observation. "They really touch on good parenting skills too. . . It was really beneficial to me because it really gave me some other strategies to use." She talked about how she was a mom who would cut every child's food, but when she was at the early readiness program, she saw how they taught the children to become more self-sufficient. "I picked up on things by being in the classroom." Furthermore, Kim shared how the attitude, approachableness, and openness of the teacher gave her courage to approach teachers her children have had since they left the preschool program. Because Mr. S. is not an intimidating professional, Kim said, "I feel that it's been easier

for me to work with their teachers my children have had since then because it (their communication) was so open.”

Discussion

The data from these interviews suggest answers to the research questions that query how the program influences parents. Yes, it may be concluded that the early readiness program offers benefits to the parents and has meaning for the parents as well as their child. Their responses showed related and similar perspectives regardless whether their child had previously enrolled in the program or their child was currently enrolled the year when data was collected.

In answer to the main research question, it seems clear the parents benefit from the program socially and emotionally as friendships are formed. This indicates the power of healthy relationships (Swick, Da Ros, & Kovach, 2001). Furthermore, the parents learned parenting techniques through their involvement in the classroom and/or through the parenting workshop. Three of the four parents attended the free programs and it appeared that the parents who attended were open to parenting change because they tried the discipline methods at home and saw positive results. Jennifer said her classroom involvement gave her ideas to help her teach her daughter and Kim said she felt being in the classroom enabled her to reflect on her parenting skills, which influenced her actions. These examples are illustrative of the fact that learning is especially relevant when parents can use the knowledge to help their child (Swick, Da Ros, & Kovach, 2001) and that many programs indirectly facilitate parental change (Coleman & Karraker, 1998).

The findings within this study confirm the value of involving parents in the preschool programs (Bruckman & Blanton, 2003). Roberson (1998) identified an increased participation of parents in a program when they felt important, welcomed, and that their presence made a difference. Three of the four parents willingly discussed their enjoyment of going into the

classroom to spend time with their child, which seems to indicate the parents experienced Roberson's emotional qualities during their classroom time. Jennifer, the only participant who did not become "actively" involved, seemed to believe her personal at-home involvement was adequate. Jennifer spoke of James Dobson, her philosophy of parenting and many of the activities she continuously shares with her daughter, which reflect high self-efficacy and knowledge of parenting.

Self-efficacy is a factor that influences the adults' parenting. The words of the parents indicated that their feelings of competence increased through their classroom involvement experiences (Bruckman & Blanton, 2003), by gaining knowledge of their child and developing healthy relationships (Swick, Da Ros, & Kovach, 2001) and through verbal feedback from others, including fellow parents (Bandura, 1989). Jennifer and Kim mentioned all they learned from watching the teachers in the classroom and Mike said that during the first parenting seminar he realized other parents were going through similar problems and challenges. These types of experiences can support adults to develop higher self-efficacy because they don't feel threatened and they learn how other adults face similar demands (Jerusalem & Mittag, 1995). This learning, in turn, results in efficacious parents who find enjoyment in their parenting experience (Elder, et. al, 1995).

It appeared that this early readiness program was built on one fundamental principle: all families need support (Weissbourd & Kagan, 1989). All four of the participants spoke of this support. For example, the teachers and parent communication was open, the parent and teacher worked together to solve a problem to help the child, and the parents felt welcomed into the classroom. Also, it appeared that the educators believed each family had strengths and these strengths were valued, respected, and nurtured (Swick, Da Ros, & Kovach, 2001).

In summary of the themes that emerged, there were several identified benefits. The program has positively impacted the parent's lives by providing a social support system. Furthermore, they feel their participation in the early readiness program enabled them to have a greater understanding of their child. The parenting programs gave them practical, useable, workable ideas that had been implemented at home. Financial support at a time when it was needed seemed to be a further benefit. Personal, individualized meaning for their child or themselves also emerged in each interview. In conclusion, all four parents stated their appreciation and gratitude for this experience for both them and their child.

There are several implications that should be noted for research and practice. Due to the fact that there were only four participants and they were involved in the same early readiness program, the findings of this study are limited and not generalizable for all parents in early readiness programs. It is recommended that future research investigate similar inquiries with larger samples and a range of early readiness populations. If similar results are found, the findings of this particular study would be strengthened. Furthermore, there appeared to be some slight discrepancies between Jennifer's involvement and the additional three participants' active participation. Even though Jennifer appeared to have strong parenting beliefs and skills, it may be of value to further investigate, through subsequent interviews with Jennifer and/or more interviews with less-involved participants to determine greater substantial analysis of parental views of involvement in early readiness programs for low-income parents.

Another research recommendation is to combine the data from parental interviews with the data of children's academic progress through the first several years of school into one coherent report. The statistical and qualitative combination would provide a well-rounded picture of the holistic impact of these early readiness programs.

Despite the limitations and recommendations for future inquiry, the study does offer insights into the value that early readiness programs afford low-income parents. Based on the results of this study, it is recommended that communities look at their low-income populations and seriously consider the benefit these programs have for the families. Conclusions can be drawn that early readiness programs, such as this one, positively impacted parents' self-efficacy, parenting knowledge, and provided social support for the parents. These factors may contribute to breaking the intergenerational cycle of poverty or low-income.

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Optional Appendix: Interview Questions

1. Tell me how you came to hear about the Early Childhood Education program and why you chose to enroll your child here.
2. While your child is engaged in an educational program, you have the opportunity to work or attend school, or achieve personal goals. By enrolling your child in this program, has it enabled you to do something for yourself? Would you please describe it for me?
3. When you enrolled your child in this program, you committed to some responsibilities. Would you describe those responsibilities and how do you feel about them?
4. Workshop sessions and family activities are scheduled in the evenings several times throughout the school year. Do/did you attend? Would you please share your perspectives about those?
5. When you completed application papers for this program, you had a view in mind of what the program would be like for you and your child. Would you describe to me what perspectives you held at the beginning of the school year and if/how those perspectives have changed?
6. There certainly are other parents who have similar situations and circumstances similar to yours. If you had the opportunity to share your story/experience about this program with them, what would you say?
7. As a teacher who has visited this classroom, I feel very good about the children's education; the program and structure offered here. How do you feel about the program from a parent's perspective?
8. In summary, would you describe for me what it is like for you to have this opportunity to enroll your child here in preschool?