

Elements that May Have Contributed to the Implementation of a Successful Early Reading First Classroom

Yi-Juin Liu

Juniper Gardens Children's Project
University of Kansas

Abstract

The purpose of this study was to identify elements that may have helped foster the implementation of a successful Early Reading First program. Data collected included results of student assessments, documentation of fidelity of program implementation, and interviews with educators. Two classrooms with high fidelity of ERF implementation but contrasting student outcomes were compared to determine which elements were present in the classroom with greatest gains in student achievement, but were absent in the classroom with least gains in student achievement. Findings revealed that the factors unique to the classroom with greatest gains were professional development, leadership, and staff commitment.

Introduction

In 2007, the National Evaluation of Early Reading First report revealed that the implementation of quality language and literacy practices, coupled with an increased amount of professional development trainings (additional 50 hours over 12 months) for teachers, produced statistically significant effects on students' print and letter knowledge, as well as their ability to associate letters with the corresponding sounds (Burghardt, Clark, Ross, Schochet, & Swank, 2007). No statistically discernable effects, however, were found for phonological awareness and oral language. However, an evaluation of a local ERF program located in Midwestern United States revealed that for all three years of program implementation, students' post-test scores for letter knowledge and phonological awareness showed statistically significant improvement (Atwater & Howarter, 2008). Atwater and Howarter (2008) also found that students' post-test scores for receptive and expressive vocabulary significantly improved in years two and three. The report of the nationwide implementation of ERF, coupled with findings from a local ERF evaluation, shows that the ERF program could be the first promising, federally-funded program that produces positive emergent literacy outcomes in early childhood.

Introduction

The success of a program is measured not only by improvement in student achievement, but also by the fidelity of program implementation (Kurki, Boyle, & Aladjem, 2006). Fidelity of program implementation for elementary and secondary schools has been found to be dependent on various factors such as shared vision and mission of the program (i.e., faculty commitment), appropriate professional development and support, adequate resources and materials, and supportive leadership (Kurki et al., 2006; Taylor, 2006). Unfortunately, little, if any, research has been published on whether these same factors are pertinent to the success of early childhood programs such as ERF. Such information is critical because early childhood educators need to know what necessary supports need to be in place in order to ensure that evidence-based programs are implemented with high fidelity and are able to produce positive student outcomes in emergent literacy. **Therefore, the purpose of this study was to identify the elements that may have contributed the implementation of a successful ERF program.**

Introduction

- **Definition of a Successful ERF classroom**

- Classroom that implemented the ERF initiative (i.e., implementing quality language and literacy practices) with high fidelity
- Classroom that produced the greatest gains in student achievement in the areas of phonological awareness, oral language, and letter knowledge.

- **Research Questions**

- What elements contributed to the success of Early Reading First classrooms, as evidenced by gains in student achievement and high fidelity of program implementation?
- Of the classrooms who implemented ERF with high fidelity, what elements were evident in the classroom with the greatest gains in student achievement, but were absent in the classroom with the least gains in student achievement?

This qualitative, exploratory study was a substudy of an Early Reading First program that was implemented from fall of 2004 through spring of 2007.

Context for the Study:

Early Reading First Program-Midwest County (ERF-MC)

- Collaborative effort among community organizations (e.g., Head Start), an early childhood professional development center, and a university-affiliated research center
- Goals of ERF-MC
 - Increase the use of evidence-based materials and practices
 - Enhance the environmental support for emergent literacy development
 - Provide professional development on SBRR on emergent literacy development
 - Increase the use of screening and progress monitoring assessments to monitor progress and inform instruction

Participating Site

- 2 Head Start Centers in Midwest County
- According to the U.S. Census 2000, Midwest County was home to around 157,000 residents:
 - Ethnic Background
 - 51.6% Euro-Americans
 - 28.3% African-Americans
 - 16% Latinos
 - 4.1% other
 - Income Level
 - 17% live below poverty
 - 23% of children under 18 live below poverty

Participant Selection

- Selection was based on the following criteria
 - Classroom that produced the greatest gains in student achievement and implemented the ERF program with high fidelity
 - Classroom that had the least gains in student achievement, but who also had high fidelity of program implementation
- Examined student achievement scores and measures of fidelity of implementation for 2005 -2006 school year
 - Student Achievement
 - Areas Assessed
 - PPVT-III (Dunn & Dunn, 1997): Receptive vocabulary
 - GGG (CEED, n.d.): Picture naming, alliteration, and rhyming
 - DIBELS (Good & Kaminski, 1988): Letter naming
 - Fidelity of Program Implementation
 - High implementation of ERF instructional practices and strategies during circle time, center time, story time, and small group time (meeting 85% or more of criteria)
 - Teacher attendance at monthly ERF professional development trainings
 - Teacher implementation of language and literacy rich environments

Contrasting Classrooms

			Mean Raw Gain Scores			
Participating Classrooms	Fidelity Percentage	PPVT	DIBELS Letter Naming	GGG Picture Naming	GGG Alliteration	GGG Rhyming
Greatest Gains	92.70%	8.15	9.15	6.23	1.31	5.08
Least Gains	86.58%	7.36	3.73	0.18	1.82	2.91

Participants:

Participating Centers

2 Head Start Centers

- Participating Educators
 - 2 mentor coaches (1 for each site)
 - 2 center administrators (1 for each site)
 - 6 classroom teachers (3 in each classroom)

Educator Demographics

	Coaches	Administrators	Classroom Teachers		
			BA	AA	CDA
Age					
30-39	1	2	2	2	2
50-59	1	0	0	0	0
Ethnicity					
Caucasian	1	0	2	0	0
African-American	1	2	0	2	2
Area of Residence					
Midwest	0	2	0	2	2
Outside Midwest	2	0	2	0	0

Data collection consisted of interviewing classroom teachers, coaches, and administrators involved with the participating classrooms.

Data Collection

- Interviews
 - 2 interviews per participant
 - 1st interview: 45 minutes to 2 hours
 - 2nd interview: 20 minutes to 1 hour
 - Semi-structured, opened ended questions were used
 - Pre-identified elements guided the questions
 - Determined by National Center for Educational Accountability 's Best Practices Framework
 - Participants were able to provide additional elements
 - Videotaped and audiotaped
- Field notes
 - Documentation and reflections on settings, interactions and activities that occurred during the interviews
 - Email messages retained

Data Analysis

- Transcribing using QSR NVivo 7
- Coding
 - Based on pre-identified categories
 - Open coding

Building Trustworthiness

- Member checks
- Triangulation
- Referential adequacy
- Purposive sampling
- Audit Trail

Participants' Impressions of ERF

- All participants valued ERF due to:
 - Availability of a comprehensive curriculum
 - Exposure to emergent literacy skills
- One AA teacher withdrew her child from a private preschool to enroll her in ERF:

I actually took my child out of the school I had first originally put her into, to put her in...Early Reading First. And the school that she was going to, they have a good curriculum set up, but Early Reading First was just that notch above what they were doing.

Key Elements that Helped Teachers Implement ERF

- Professional development
 - Workshops provided by the ERF program
 - Teacher training programs at local universities/colleges
- Use of data to monitor progress and inform instruction
 - Outcome and formative assessments
 - Informal observational assessments
- Personnel commitment
 - Shared mission
 - Shared vision
- Leadership
 - Center manager
- Evidence-based practices
- Parent participation
- Participants identified additional critical elements of a promising ERF classroom
 - Cultural sensitivity towards others
 - Adequate funding for materials and equipment

Elements Unique to the Greatest Gains Classroom

- Professional Development
 - Greatest gains: Both AA and CDA teachers were pursuing their BA degrees in elementary education
 - Least gains: AA teacher was pursuing her BA degree in elementary education, while the CDA teacher was pursuing her AA degree
- Building-level leadership
 - Greatest gains: Center manager accepted responsibilities for being the leader of an ERF classroom
 - Least gains: Center manager reported that she was not the leader for the ERF classroom. The leadership responsibilities belonged to the mentor coach
- Staff commitment
 - Greatest gains: Teachers believed that they had the ultimate responsibility of providing emergent literacy instruction
 - Least gains: Teachers believed that they shared the responsibility of providing literacy instruction with parents

Recommendations for Educators

- Center managers
 - Select and hire teachers who are committed to the goals of an early language and literacy program
 - Monitor teachers' implementation of the ERF program
 - Ensure that the program is implemented with high fidelity
 - Contract for outside services and support, if the center's professional development trainings are inadequate in addressing and enhancing teachers' knowledge of evidence-based language and literacy practices
- Teachers
 - Committed to meeting the ERF goals
 - Integrate evidence-based practices with high fidelity and consistency
 - Seek outside resources to enhance language and literacy instruction in the classroom (when necessary)
 - Regularly monitor student progress through the use of curriculum-based measurements

Recommendations for Researchers

- Implement large scale longitudinal follow-up studies of schools and teachers
- Assess the validity of the findings
 - Identify the features of evidence-based early literacy interventions that have sustained over time
 - Determine elements critical to sustaining early childhood intervention programs