

Disciplined Interactive Literacy: Developing a Holistic Framework

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Abstract

This study challenges the current practice of the process of assessing and delivering family literacy programs and proposes a more holistic method. Responding to the National Research Council's Recommendation 17 in "providing more helpful structures..." this paper demonstrates a more holistic method. Drawing upon the research of Peter Senge, this paper argues that his disciplines of *personal mastery* and *mental models* can be used as the basis for developing a conceptual framework resulting in a rubric that would allow for literacy provider centers the ability to holistically understand and address the adult's current reality and where they want to be thus developing potentially more successful results regarding the transference of Interactive Literacy to the home.

Introduction

In response to Recommendation 17 (Research on Programs, Curricula, and Assessment) from the National Research Council's Committee on Early Childhood Pedagogy, Commission on Behavioral and Social Sciences and Education in Washington, DC, that states the need for programs to "provide more helpful structures, curricula, and methods for children at high risk of educational difficulties, including children from low-income homes and communities . . . (Bowman, Donovan, & Burns, 2000)" and the statement by US Representative William Goodling that "parents are...the first and most important teachers of their children (*The Importance of Literacy*, 2000)," this paper will propose a framework to describe, evaluate, and guide the transference of interactive literacy from the provider agency to the home. It will be stated up front, though, that this research is the initial investigation with the anticipation of this being a springboard for further research.

In an age where quantitative means seem to be the gospel by which funding and performances are measured and determined, this paper will argue that is completely insufficient, and unacceptable, when developing and delivering adult education programs.

The family literacy components of Early Childhood Education, Adult Education, Parent Education, and Interactive Literacy (IL) would seem to have the ultimate goal of transferring the ideas to the home. However, this would seem to make the assumption that the parents see themselves as a teacher, and an instructional designer, and have the ability to perform this role for their child(ren). How can this assumption be made if the literacy providers have little to no understanding regarding the efficacy and ability of the parent to perform this role. Such an understanding could only be realized through a discussion with the parent which the current methods of standards and testing do not address.

This paper will attempt to demonstrate that current structure of the adult basic education system is flawed in its initial approach of the adults and literacy provider agencies need to take the lead in determining what is best and most effective and successful for their adult learners (used in place of clients) as opposed to outside agencies (i.e. government and other sources of funding). Cunningham stated "Suppose we stop blaming students if they drop out and instead

begin to focus on ourselves and our structures as the problem. ... What would such a structure look like (Cunningham, 1993)? The current structural reality is the literacy provider centers compete for a limited amount of funding. The money distributed by these funding entities (who may not completely understand the adult learner) is done based on each center's past performance as exhibited and proven by successfully meeting a checklist of expected standards. It could almost be argued that the adult learners are of secondary importance. The literacy provider centers are also searching for methods of successful recruitment and retention of the adult learners but their motive seems to be misdirected in that they focus on meeting expected performance parameters instead of focusing on what the adult learner needs.

Framework Development

Although *The Fifth Discipline* (Senge, 1994) was written for organizational development, the ideas have transference to the education domain usable for literacy center staff. The book is based on systems thinking beginning with a bottom-up development method designed for employee growth. As the employees began to develop internally, they were able to more competently and confidently participate in workplace discussions revolving around the company's, and the employee's, success.

For the purposes of this paper, the first two disciplines, *personal mastery* and *mental models* will be considered. These two disciplines assist an individual to address and help develop their inner self through having the person to identify their current "position," where they wish to be (their goals), and using this gap as a means for motivation. A result of this framework is the development of a rubric by which the family literacy providers can use to describe, guide, and evaluate the parents regarding the transference of the interactive literacy exercises to their home.

Personal Mastery

Senge argued that this discipline accounts for an individual to clarify what they deem as important and to continually clearly distinguish their current reality which will determine the gap between the two. Senge refers to this gap as "creative tension" (p. 141-142) and it should be welcomed, generated, and sustained (Senge, 1994). When the parent is supported and urged in this practice, they will begin to have a change of behavior that will lead to personal growth and eventual evolution into a lifelong learner. A word of caution here however is this cannot be expected to happen in fifty hours (the normal standard of time for a post test). The individual has been in their current reality for a considerable length of time and did not happen over night. Therefore, results should not be constrained within such a small time frame, either.

Mastery in this sense is not to be viewed and understood as one's dominance over life's aspects but to demonstrate a level of proficiency in life's aspects (Senge, 1994, p. 142). It might be helpful for the literacy provider staff to think of this in terms of the journey and not the destination. Therefore, the literacy provider center may subject the adult learner to some sense of urgency for a goal attainment to which they may not have a favorable impression. A concrete example of this is pushing the adult learner to increase a test score (pretest/post test) within a fifty hour period when they may not have had testing success while in their K-12 experience. Too many times the adult learner is pushed to achieve the goal (i.e. GED) that the reason for why the path was chosen is forgotten (Senge, 1994). He argues that "...personal mastery must be a discipline. It is a process of continually focusing and refocusing on what one truly wants... (p. 149). A solid re-construction of the parent's personal mastery can be very effective for breaking

the poverty cycle since the parent can increase their educational attainment level through self-efficacy and becoming a better and positive influence on their child (Morrow & Temlock-Fields, 2004; Powell, 2004).

Horton argued that “it’s essential that you start where the people are” (Horton & Freire, 1990, p. 99) and educational programs developed in area may not be successful in another with area (p. 93-94) with area being defined as a geographical location as well as their state of self-efficacy (Horton & Freire, 1990). To which Freire added, “...I said *start* and not *stay* (italics are original authors) – from the levels in which people perceive themselves...” (p. 66). What this means is the initial content interactions with the adult need to be rooted in the context with which the adult is familiar with painstaking minimization of commercial instructional material. Once the adult becomes comfortable in the educational setting and gains self-confidence, then the gradual integration of commercially developed material may begin.

This paper is not proposing that the literacy provider center have numerous lesson plans (one for each parent/child dyad) but to have multiple-level educational activities rooted in a common theme and grounded in the staff’s understanding of the parent’s gap between their current reality and their wants so each parent’s learning is meaningful thus more readily used and reinforced as usable knowledge (Dodge & Heroman, 1999; Hohmann & Weikart, 1995; Jacobs, 2004; Morrow & Temlock-Fields, 2004; Parker, 1999; Senge, 1994).

Mental Models

Since the many and varied life experiences of an adult has crafted and shaped the lens through which the adult will view and interpret the world, the literacy provider center should give this significant consideration. Senge (1994) argues that “new insights fail to get put into practice because they conflict with deeply held internal images of how the world works, images that limit us to familiar ways of thinking and acting (p. 174). Their past experiences have been the lens through which their role in the community has been developed, redeveloped, and will continue to develop throughout their life. Hence, it would seem that the experiences through which an adult makes meaning to new information are the lens, and potential barrier, to an educational program.

But as Newman (1999) argues, as an adult learns through experiences, the adult may also give new meaning to what they have already learned through a re-learning process (Newman, 1999). In other words, as the adult experiences daily living and situations, their lens through which they interpret life and situations will also change and thus reshape the way the adult interprets and shapes old information, as well as new, and the world. This also means that the adult’s recollections of their past experiences and situations will also change as the new material is digested thus permitting the adult to learn and accept a new role through improved self efficacy brought about by examining and developing their personal mastery and mental models.

Since this is a continual cycle that evolved over many years, how can the expectation be placed upon the adult to have a change of habits and perceptions in the family literacy program that is a miniscule fraction of the time and does not holistically address changes within the adult? So in this light, an understanding of the adult learner’s mental models will help the literacy center to develop an educational program that will be more beneficial to the adult instead of the current structure of checking off standards in being complicit with authorities and funding agencies. As a possible result if the adult feels safe and is inspired to learn in the education setting, they may want to continue their educational pursuit through actually seeing themselves as a student and teacher of their child thereby benefiting both the adult learner and the literacy provider center.

Discussion

This paper argues that a significant purpose of the parent education, adult education, early childhood education, and the interactive literacy components delivered in the family literacy provider centers is for providing the parent with the ability, tools, and resources (Jacobs, 2004; Powell, 2004) needed to develop, incorporate, and sustain the “intergenerational transfer between the parent and the child” the fundamental skills for their child’s development (Jacobs, 2004; Morrow & Temlock-Fields, 2004). However, this would make the assumption that the parent is “ready” to be and see themselves as a teacher and an instructional designer in a sense. Senge’s (1994) argument regarding “managing mental models – surfacing, testing, and improving our internal pictures of how the world works – promises to be a major breakthrough...” (p. 174) has a significant potential allowing literacy provider centers the opportunity for increased success and greater retention rates. This is where standardized testing fails since there is no means to account for how the adult feels regarding this role and their readiness for their own educational efforts. Literacy provider centers would need to do a thorough and holistic qualitative assessment of the parent to ascertain the parent’s current “learning/teaching” capabilities and their home situation thus rooting the initial educational activities in the parent’s reality allowing a greater chance of success in retaining the adult learner and transferring the IL activity to the home (Bernheimer & Keogh, 1995; Gomby, Culross, & Behrman, 1999; Jacobs, 2004; Morrow & Temlock-Fields, 2004; Morrow & Young, 1997; Roggman, Boyce, Cook, & Jump, 2001; St. Pierre & Layzer, 1999; Wood, 2002). The literacy provider center would need to determine the factors that shaped the adult’s view of themselves and of the world thus surfacing their mental models allowing the center to begin to manage the adult learners’ mental models allowing the center to holistically develop and deliver the education program. Even the best family literacy programs will not have the best IL transference results if the parents’ mental model of themselves prohibits such a role.

Therefore, a tool (see Figure 1) is needed that will assist the literacy provider center the ability to more holistically assess the adult’s current reality regarding their ability to be the teacher of their child(ren) as well as be successful in their own educational efforts. According to the core elements of the original PACT™ (Jacobs, 2004), the foundational goals of it include helping the parents to feel comfortable when manifesting their day’s instruction to an IL activity for the child’s development ultimately transferring it into the home (Jacobs, 2004; Powell, 2004).

Figure 1: Proposed Tool (Initial Rough Draft)

Capacity	Dimension of the Capacity
Personal	Health, autonomy, freedom, efficacy, academic ability, substance abuse, emotional , behavior, demeanor, withdrawn or outward, cheerful or melancholy, exuberant or depressed, significant other situation, family situation
Social	Approaches others, meaningfully communicates with others, is open to suggestion, significant other situation , helps others, assists staff, contributes to the learning environment
Physical	Shelter, food, monetary sufficiency, utilities

The capacities, and the subsequent dimensions, were uncovered and synthesized from the literature and compressed thus resulting in the development of the rubric shown in Figure 1

(Bernheimer & Keogh, 1995; Bowman et al., 2000; Caulfield, 2002; Elksnin & Elksnin, 2000; Freire, 2000; Gomby et al., 1999; Grossman, 1999; Heinicke et al., 1999; Horton & Freire, 1990; Kaiser & Hancock, 2003; Morelli, Rogoff, & Angelillo, 2003; Morrow & Young, 1997; Parker, 1999; Powell, 2004; Renk et al., 2003; Roggman et al., 2001; Senechal & LeFevre, 2002; Senge, 1994; St. Pierre & Layzer, 1999; Wagner & Clayton, 1999).

Conclusion

This is the initial rough draft of this tool and field-testing and validation are needed to evaluate its accuracy and comprehensiveness as well as integrate necessary revisions. Further research will shed light on and tease out additional information resulting in a more fully developed conceptual tool for literacy provider center use. The tool can be used by the literacy provider centers to assist in a more holistic understanding of the adult's current reality as well as describe, evaluate, and guide the center as they provide education in preparing the adult for the role of "teacher of their child." In addition to their child(ren)'s first teacher, this qualitative approach permits a deeper understanding of "where the adult learner is" regarding their own education experience that a standardized test does not give.

Further research also need performed in regards to integrating Senge's other three disciplines thus getting a deeper insight into a family's participation in literacy programs which will help the literacy provider center in meeting other standards such as retention as well as educational gain.

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