

READING THEATRE, PARENTS AS ACTORS: MOVIE PRODUCTION IN A FAMILY LITERACY WORKSHOP

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The goal of the family literacy workshop "*Reading Theatre, Parents as Actors: Movie production in a Family Literacy Workshop*" is to empower and motivate parents to learn various storytelling strategies through theatrical production experiences and apply them at home. This is a theory-based family literacy practice supported by McClelland's motivational theory and constructivism. The delivery approach of this workshop is an adaptation of the reading strategy called *Readers Theatre*. Unlike *Readers Theatre*, *Reading Theatre, Parents as Actors* workshop was developed for parents. Parents moved through the entire process of a movie production based on the *Reading Theatre* method from script to premiere. Through this hands-on workshop conducted by family educators, parents were empowered to enhance their involvement in family literacy activities at home. Parents' workshop evaluations, implications, and suggestions for educators are discussed in the paper.

Grounding the Workshop in Theory and Research

Family literacy

Family literacy has been a component of early childhood literacy development for nearly twenty years. In the past, however, it was overshadowed by issues that were considered more pressing, such as

school literacy and teacher training. Nevertheless, research has indicated that families across socio-cultural and socio-economic groups play an important role in children's literacy development (Anderson, Kendrick, Rogers, & Smythe, 2005; Gregory, Long, & Volk, 2004; Purcell-

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Gates, 2000). Research specifically connects a literacy-enriched home environment to children's acquisition of literacy. Family literacy practices such as shared reading, reading aloud, and making print materials available have been found to have a significant effect on children's literacy learning (DeBruin-Parecki & Klein, 2003).

Research indicates that reading aloud to children is a very important reading activity for building literacy knowledge (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998; Van Kleeck & Stahl, 2003). Many studies emphasize the importance of parent-child storybook reading for developing children's reading skills (Hammer, 2003; Hammer, Nimmo, Cohen, Draheim, & Johnson, 2005).

However, Enz (2003) indicated that many parents are frustrated with storybook time when their children do not respond enthusiastically. Providing parents with examples of various effective storytelling strategies will enhance storytelling quality which encourages children to stay engaged and get excited. How can family educators facilitate parents' learning? There are many ways to help parents learn various strategies, such as newsletter, individual conversation, parent-teacher conference, family education workshop, and so on. Finding an effective approach that can maximize parents' learning experiences is a critical task. Learning the content (what) is critical while the effective learning will occur only when the educators utilize the appropriate method (how).

Theoretical Foundation: Constructivist Learning Theory and Motivational Theory

Reading Theatre is a workshop which has been developed to provide parents with successful strategies for engaging their children in at-home literacy activities. The workshop is based upon a strategy which draws upon parents' previous experiences and strengths to create and broaden effective storytelling skills. *Reading Theatre* is grounded in constructivism (Marlowe & Page, 2005) and McClelland's theory of motivation (McClelland, 1987).

Constructivist learning is about building knowledge, not only receiving it. In the process of active rather than passive learning, learners discover their own answers and concepts. They create their own interpretations, reflect on their own understanding, and apply rather than recite what they learn. Such learning is deeper, more comprehensive, and longer lasting (Marlowe & Page, 2005). This workshop is consistent with this constructivist model of higher-level learning. Dewey, an important constructivist proponent, encouraged the use of hands-on projects. Projects can increase motivation and active involvement. Kilpatrick, a Dewey's protégé, stressed the importance of providing students with a variety of projects to enhance interest and allow them to succeed and also encouraged collaborative work (Marlowe & Page, 2005). *Reading Theatre* promotes the use of small group and collaborative learning to achieve these goals.

McClelland's theory of motivation identifies three types of intrinsic motivational needs. They are the need for achievement, the need for affiliation, and the need for power (McClelland, 1987). In Deci and

Ryan's (2000) self-determination theory (SDT), they also point out three essential psychological needs for competence, autonomy, and relatedness. To understand human motivation, these components need to be considered. People are motivated toward a certain pattern of behavior by either one or a combination of these needs. According to McClelland, intrinsic motivators are critical to meeting a person's needs because they describe a pattern of how an individual may behave. This theory is applicable and relevant when understanding the behaviors of the parents participating in *Reading Theatre*.

Based on a series of workshop surveys, observations, and conversations with participants, it became clear that connecting with each other was a motivating force for the parents in the workshop. In other words, these parents had needs for affiliation and relatedness. Individuals with a high need for affiliation have a desire to establish and maintain friendly and warm relations with other individuals, and thus are attracted to tasks involving groups (McClelland, 1987). They enjoy the challenge of group work. They want to be accepted by the group; therefore, they tend to listen, compromise, and enable a group to move forward. Therefore, to support the motivation of strong affiliation needs and enhance their learning in the workshop, small group tasks were implemented.

Background Information

Participants

The participants included family members of preschool children attending Head Start programs in a large, Midwestern urban city. In terms of demographics, all

participants ranged in the lower socio-economic category. The income level ranged from \$20,000 to \$49,999. Most (95%) families were African Americans with a small representation of Caucasian and Latin participants. In this paper, the term "*parents*" refers to mothers and fathers as well as grandparents, siblings, aunts, uncles, and caregivers.

Workshop Nature

Reading Theatre workshop was part of a large project funded by Early Reading First grant. The project goal was to prepare preschool children to enter kindergarten with literacy skills necessary for reading success. One of the components in this project was family literacy. The primary goal of the family literacy program was to enhance parents' knowledge and strategies in family literacy and support family literacy activities in the home. This workshop intended to help parents learn storytelling strategies which enhance family reading activities at home with their children.

Workshop Procedure: Theatre in Action

Reading Theatre: Parents as Actors workshop is an adaptation of a well-known reading strategy called *Readers Theatre*. *Readers Theatre* is a learning activity for interpreting and orally presenting a written text (Owocki, 2001). It was designed to motivate students to read at all ages and abilities. Typically, students select an appropriate piece of literature and transform it into a script. The children rehearse the script. They present, portray, and perform a story to classmates and others, typically with physical actions, props, sets,

or costumes. (Tierney & Readence, 2005). The audience relies on the cast's oral interpretation and their own imaginations to understand the performance. Through this, learners improve their overall literacy skills.

Like *Readers Theatre*, the *Reading Theatre: Parents as Actors* workshop used a theatrical production approach based on children's literature. The purpose of this workshop was to motivate parents to learn various storytelling strategies through theatrical production experiences. Unlike *Readers Theatre*, *Reading Theatre* workshop engaged the parents as the actors and the children as the audience members. Immediately after parents' completion of their movie production, their movies were played for children and parents. Parents would receive children's feedback afterwards.

The entire *Reading Theatre* Workshop activity took place over the course of two hours. The workshop was divided into three sessions, including *Parent education* session, *Children education* session, and *Parent-child interaction* session. Each section contained a variety of different activities to keep families engaged and learning.

Parent Education Session: Getting Prepared

The *parent education* session was designed to help parents learn effective storytelling strategies through theater production. Parents moved through the stages of a fast paced preparation process, including small group discussion, movie production and rehearsal, and filming. It provided an active learning environment and promoted active learning.

Openings: Small Group Discussion

The opening of the workshop set the tone for the entire session. It helped prepare parents to engage in the learning activities and served to motivate and focus participants.

Warm-up activity: light dinner and identifying effective storytelling strategies.

Most of the parents in this workshop worked. Therefore, the workshop was offered in the evening right after their work. Light dinner was offered. Numerous articles indicate the positive impact of serving food on participation in the arena of parent education, particularly those that include the provision of dinner (Campbell, & Palm, 2004; Kieff & Wellhausen, 2000; Wasik, 2004). Parents didn't have to think about what to prepare for dinner after the workshop and so were not distracted by that concern. Everyone was fed, including the children. Additionally, it was critical that basic needs to be met in order to reach maximum learning potentials. Lastly, eating helped create a relaxing environment.

When parents arrived, we led them to their seats. A small group was formed and participants stayed with the same group for the rest of the workshop. Four to five people in a group was optimal (Barkley, Cross, & Major, 2005). A larger group would dilute the interactive experiences. In a smaller group, parents could participate fully, yet it was large enough to have sufficient diversity and generate ideas in a short period of time. Additionally, a sufficient number of cast members were important to the success of movie production. Usually three or four characters

and a narrator in a children's literature were common.

While parents were eating, they were asked to work on a small group task. The task was to answer the following question: What makes a great storytelling experience for children? The parents identified good storytelling strategies and listed them on the paper. Prior to *Reading Theatre* workshop, a storyteller had been read stories to the children and families at another family literacy workshop. During this previous workshop, these parents identified storyteller's exemplary strategies, including props, body movement, and intonation. Therefore, the parents already had some previous knowledge and experiences regarding storytelling. Following the small group discussion, each group shared the strategies with the whole group. Results were then put on the board by the family literacy educator as a summary and closure for this segment.

Movie Production and Rehearsal

Giving clear instructions helps a group completes a task effectively and efficiently. In the workshop, a power point visual aid was used to show how to create a movie. In the slides, the purpose and the components of the movie production were explained, such as the script source (children's book or one's innovation), actors, targeted audience (preschoolers), and project procedure (rehearsal, videotaping, family movie night, and movie critique).

Each group had a piece of children's literature. They were asked to read the story together. The educator encouraged parents to create their own version of the story if they would like to. They were also

asked to assign roles including a narrator, develop print (i.e. poster with a title and cast), and make props. Parents were encouraged to show their creativity and have a sense of humor which could make the movie more attractive. Additionally, a video clip of the family educators' own movie production process was shown. This served two purposes. One, it created a visual example for parents; two, it motivated parents and created momentum for their own movie production. Parents were novice to the movie production process. Seeing an actual production in action would enhance their confidence. It was reassuring for parents to know that this project could be accomplished successfully.

During this session, parents learned how to do movie production and tell the story effectively by socially constructing their knowledge (i.e. discussion, brainstorming). The small group created a shared meaning about what made a story attractive and creative. For example, a group discussed the sound effects of a key actor, Clifford, in a popular children's literature called "*Clifford, the Big Red Dog*." Another group decided to create a new character to enrich the story. These two groups recognized the importance of storytelling enrichment. After group discussion, they added sound effects and a new character to enhance the story. These were new storytelling strategies developed through social construction within the small group.

Through discussion, they transformed the children literature into scripts. With the new knowledge collected as a group, they put their interpretation into a production and expressed it through acting.

It was an active learning process. Parents read the book, discussed, wrote the script, cast the actors, created props, rehearsed, acted, and filmed. The facilitator's role was to move around and assist if necessary. For example, a group was stuck when they realized that there were three characters in the stories and five members in their group. The facilitator noticed their dilemma and provided suggestions for them: adding a new character and a narrator.

Filming: Lights, Camera, Action

Each group was then videotaped what they had prepared and rehearsed. It was critical to find a person who was familiar with video camcorder operation and practiced filming before hand. A tripod is strongly recommended to hold the camcorder steadily during filming. It was also important to define the actual videotaping scope which helped producing clear shots. To ensure a high quality product, we made careful technical preparation. This included a quiet environment, appropriate background, such as plain color for videotaping, a good quality video camcorder, proper lighting, varieties of props, and so on. The props included various patterns of fabrics, hats, children's toys, chairs, markers, posters, and so on. In our experiences, parents were very creative. They were able to use the limited resources and create a different object or props.

Children Education Session: Learning to Critique

The purpose of *Children Education Session* was to provide children opportunities to express their thoughts and feelings orally and prepare children to watch movie

during the *Parent-Child Interaction session*. While parents were in *Parent Education Session*, in a separate setting, children were involved in their own learning activities. They learned appropriate theater behaviors and practiced movie review.

The teacher initiated a group discussion regarding appropriate movie theatre behaviors and listed children's responses. Following the discussion, the teacher introduced a movie and explained that they would talk about how they liked the movie. After watching an age-appropriate movie, the teacher modeled the movie review. For example, "I like this story because...; my favorite character was...because..." Afterwards, children took turn sharing their views about the story. Their responses were recorded on a poster paper. This process helped children practice speaking skills and prepare them for critiquing the adults' work in the following session, *Parent-Child Interaction* (giving oral feedback).

Parent-Child Interaction Session

This session included two activities. They were family movie and critique activities.

Family Movie: First Opening Night

Right after the filming, children rejoined their families. Popcorn and lighting created a movie theater atmosphere. The family watched the "premier" movie parents produced together. All were enthusiastic while watching the movie. Parents wanted to see how the production went, while children wanted to identify their parents and others they knew.

Critique: Receiving Feedback from Children

During this parent-child interaction time, children did a movie review. A movie review form was distributed. In this review form, parents were asked to interview their children and write down any comments their children (the reviewers) made about the movies. Sample interviewing questions were provided. For example, which story did you like? What did you like about

it? Which character did you like? Why? Parents were also encouraged to ask more open-ended questions. Afterwards, children volunteered to share their reviews with the whole group.

**Reflecting on the Reading Theatre
Workshop Activity**

The two-hour workshop was filled with active discussion, brainstorming, and the-

TABLE 1

Samples of Parents' Workshop Evaluation

<i>Active learning</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>I liked moving around and not just sitting there listening to someone. I think I'll remember this a lot better by having done it myself.</i> • <i>The reenactments were great and our involvement in the role play was fun.</i> • <i>The creativity in this room is amazing!</i>
<i>Application</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Learning that you can make stories exciting and come alive!</i> • <i>I learned to change the story around a little.</i> • <i>I want to involve my children in the story more actively, so they can have fun.</i> • <i>I learned to use props and act out the stories.</i> • <i>I learned to use my voice to make the story more attractive.</i>
<i>Affiliation with other parents</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>I learned a lot working with other parents.</i> • <i>Getting to know the other parents are the benefits of this workshop.</i> • <i>I enjoyed role playing with other parents.</i> • <i>This workshop was great. All the parents came together and had fun making the movie for our children. We are doing it for the same goal.</i>

atrical practice. It culminated with the critic's review session at the premiere. At times participants were so involved that they were not even aware of the presence of the facilitators. Allowing parents the room to develop their own understanding and make their own choices about how to create effective storytelling through theatre production made learning more meaningful and memorable.

Directly after the theatre production, parents were given the opportunity to reflect upon what had happened and evaluate the activity through oral reflections and surveys.

Aside from acknowledging that the activity was fun and that they learned a lot, three major themes emerged. One was that parents were *active learners*; two, that they would certainly be able to *apply* what they learned to the home environment; and three, that they felt a sense of *affiliation* with the other parents that was very positive for them (see TABLE 1).

Implications

Creating an Effective Family

Literacy Workshop: Bridging

Theories and Practice

The following two theories, constructivism and motivational theory drive the workshop and provide a direct tie-in between theory and practice.

Constructivist Learning

Prior knowledge and experiences play a key role in the constructivist learning process. In this workshop, parents' background and experience were recognized and valued. By bringing previous experiences of effective storytelling, parents

participated in small group discussions and applied their skills to the movie production activity. Parents actively engaged in their movie production practices and through the process, they learned more storytelling strategies. They were sound effects, hand gesture, inventive story lines and characters, facial expression, and body gesture. They also viewed the process of storytelling with a new vision of what constituted quality and came away with renewed confidence in their ability to tell stories to their children.

Rather than being a traditional workshop reflecting the family deficit model where the goal was to teach parents the "right" way to do family literacy activities, this workshop valued what parent had. It valued what parents brought to the setting and facilitated their learning through personal and social construction of knowledge as shown in family strength model.

As research indicates, even families with limited education know a lot of language that they can share with their children (Gregory, Long, & Volk, 2004; Weizman & Snow, 2001). However, language might not contribute directly to academic literacy achievement. The key to applying such knowledge to children was to help parents draw upon new as well as prior strategies and connect them to academically related literacy interactions. *Reading Theatre* workshop successfully served this purpose. Through movie production process, participants became involved in reading (children's literature), speaking and listening (group discussion and movie production), writing (script writing and poster making), and thinking (group discussion and movie production),

the key components of literacy. They integrated all the elements with hands-on experiences which reinforced their understanding; they then could apply it directly at home in their reading time with their children.

Need for Affiliation Based on McClelland's Motivational Theory

It is evident from research that parent retention rates in family education programs are low in low-income urban families (Gross, 2001; Spoth, Goldberg & Redmond, 1999). Practitioners implement a range of incentives, such as monetary rewards, gifts, food, child care, and transportation to encourage family participation (Dumka, Garza, Roosa, & Stoerzinger, 1997; Gross, 2001). Based on McClelland's motivational theory, it is important to identify and evaluate parents' needs in order to motivate them and increase their participation in family education programs. Additionally, parents' needs and motivation inform the structure and format of the program. With the dramatic change in family backgrounds, we now find more diversity in American families. It is important for educators to identify the families' diverse needs.

Suggestions for Workshop Effectiveness

In the following, several suggestions are provided to help you adapt *Reading Theatre* workshop effectively.

1. Strategies of engagement

- Educator's facilitating style: In the *Parent Education* session, the family educator needs to be careful not to intrude into parents' interaction. At the same time, finding appropri-

ate opportunities to comment on specific ideas, affirm their thoughts, and clarify when needed are helpful to promote productive work. Additionally, the educator needs to move through the setting and be aware of each group's dynamics and process. This is the means to make an appropriate judgment as to how the facilitation should go. Parents are more likely to engage in open discussion and learning activity when they feel affirmed and supported.

- Room arrangement: Arrange desks in a semicircle or circle which allows small group members to face each other. It will facilitate more frequent direct exchange within the group.
- ##### **2. Selection of children's literature for movie production**
- Fiction is recommended to produce an interesting movie in such a short time. Choose stories with tight plots, clear endings, interesting characters, simple story line, and appealing themes to young children.
 - Here are some suggested books for *Reading Theatre, Parents as Actors* workshop. They are *David Gets in Trouble* by David Shannon; *Is It My Turn Now?* By Catherine Lukas; *Clifford, the Big Red Dog* series by Norman Bridwell; *Don't Let the Pigeon Drive the Bus!* By Mo Willems; *Froggy Goes to School and Froggy Goes to the Doctor* by Jonathan London; *Green Eggs and Ham* by Dr. Seuss; *The Ugly Duck-*

ling by Hans Christian Anderson; *Little Bill* series published by Scholastic; and *If You Give a Pig a Pancake* by Laura Numeroff.

3. Planning effective workshop

- Video sample: Due to the time constraints, a sample of movie production video can be provided. The family educators may videotape their own movie making process and show it to the participants which help them know what to expect.
- Family educator roll-out session: To prepare family literacy educators to facilitate this fast-paced workshop, it is beneficial to have a roll out session, experience it first hand and allow them to practice the procedure.
- In *Parent-Child Interaction* session, the process runs more smoothly when educators give participants specific and clear instructions about their role and activity before the section starts.

4. Reflective learning

- After the workshop experience, allow parents room to think about what they have just learned and how they will apply the knowledge to their daily life. It helps them take the ownership of their learning, see how they have succeeded, and encourage transfer of their learning to a real setting which is the workshop's ultimate goal.

- Here are some suggested reflective questions: What was this experience like for you? What have you learned from this workshop? What would you try and work with your children at home? Why?

Conclusion

Numerous researchers have indicated the importance of family involvement in children's literacy development (Anderson, Kendrick, Rogers, & Smythe, 2005; Purcell-Gates, 2000; Ramirez, 2004). Although parents want their children to be successful readers, not all parents feel confident or are familiar with strategies to work with their children at home. Family literacy workshop is one of the means to promote family involvement (Epstein et al., 2002). As educators, we can use the workshop to help parents build their knowledge and learn strategies for how to support their children's literacy development. To enhance parents' motivation and sense of competence to apply what they have learned at home, it is critical to develop an effective approach to maximize their learning. A process in which parents actively engage in learning activities and leave the workshop feeling good about comprehending the information and motivating to work with their children at home.

Through promoting constructive and interactive learning, this *Reading Theatre* workshop effectively facilitated parents' learning of new strategies for storytelling and applied them at home. It was a theory-based family literacy practice. Methods used are supported by McClelland's motivational theory and constructivism. Learning occurs through social interaction.

In this workshop, parents were motivated to learn through affiliation. Encouraged conversations and connections would facilitate learning. Throughout the process, family educators played key roles. They moved through the setting, checking in, cautiously joining in the activity, affirming, and commenting on the interaction that was occurring. It was a challenging task to find an appropriate level of involvement in parents' interaction. Additionally, learning makes sense to learners when knowledge is drawn from their prior knowledge and when active learning activities take place. Through these practices, parents built their sense of competence in using a variety of strategies and skills, so family literacy activities would emerge. In turn, children's literacy skills would be enhanced. It is essential that we, educators, continue sharing innovative workshop ideas and approaches with other professionals. It provides a springboard to a better idea that will bring the families and schools together that bridge family literacy and classroom literacy.

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