

**The Effect of a Parent Resource Center
and a Home Learning Center on
Student Achievement and Parent Involvement
in a Low-income Minority Community**

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Research Question

Does the establishment of a Parent Resource Center in a low-income, minority community along with a Home Learning Center that provides homework assistance and after school access to technology for children increase student achievement?

Rationale

Our elementary school is located in a low-income inner city minority community. Ninety-five percent of our students qualify for free or reduced lunch. This is due, in part, to the fact that a majority of their parents or caretakers work long hours in multiple jobs and are unavailable to provide assistance with homework. Lack of parental involvement in general is an ongoing concern at our school and we are searching for ways to involve parents in their children's education while keeping in mind their time constraints.

Review of Literature

A significant body of research (Henderson & Berla, 1994; Olmstead & Rubin, 1983) indicates that when parents participate in their children's education, the result is an increase in student achievement and an improvement of students' attitudes toward learning. Research also suggests that with increased parental involvement, parents' perceptions of school being a positive influence on their children increased. This change in parents' perceptions holds even after socioeconomic status and student ability are taken into account (Epstein, 1983; Eagle, 1989). Therefore, policies that are reflective of and sensitive to the communities they serve are what schools need to develop and implement. When they do so, more parents become involved in ways that are recognized by the educators as being engaged in the schooling process (Zelazo, 1995).

Innumerable factors contribute to the varied ways parents relate to school and how they view appropriate levels of involvement (Ritter, Mont-Reynaud, & Dornbusch, 1993). Chavkin and Williams (1993) studied the attitudes and practices of low-income and minority parents regarding the issue of involvement in their children's education and found that the majority of parents are concerned about their children's education and want to take an active role; however, many of these parents are working more than one job in order to make ends meet. Their work schedules may not be flexible enough to permit their attending a parent workshop, and they may have to use what little non-work time they have for activities other than school visits. In families where English is not the language spoken in the home, the parents may feel uncomfortable attending meetings and classes.

An important key to involving more parents is creating an atmosphere in which teachers, administrators, and families are all seen as valuing and supporting parental involvement (Dauber & Epstein, 1989). Dauber and Epstein (1989) write,

Background information about parents' education, work, and family size also give the school insight into reasons for low levels of parental involvement. Parents may have reported little involvement at school, but expressed a desire for advice about how to help their children at home and better information from schools about what their children were doing and were expected to do in school.

Dauber and Epstein (1989) found that the level of parent involvement was directly linked to specific school practices designed to encourage parent involvement at school and guide parents in helping at home. However, parent involvement is not the only critical factor; thoughtful after school support that is in synchrony with instruction in the classroom has been found to be an important way to promote and sustain student achievement (Anliker, Aydt, Kellams, & Rothlisberger, 1997).

The Setting

As part of the Central EXPRESS initiative, our school opened a Parent Resource Center this year with grant funds from Washington Mutual, our partner in education. Our school also applied for and was granted the Governor's Florida Family Literacy Grant, which provided funding for parent training at the Parent Resource Center during school hours, after school, two evenings weekly, and Saturday mornings. The plan of my action research was to focus on this newly funded Parent Resource Center and follow the progress of the children of those parents attending. The Parent Resource Center is located in our school in an empty classroom adjacent to the parking lot. It is staffed by two paraprofessionals, one who is our CIS (Community Involvement Specialist). Both have other duties during the school day, but are assigned to the Parent Center during any scheduled parent workshops or gatherings. Classes were offered in parenting skills, computer literacy with Internet access, ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages), and GED (General Education Diploma) preparation. These classes were taught by classroom teachers, while paraprofessionals staffed the PRC and assisted visitors with parent information, etc. The classroom teachers were compensated hourly after their regular school day.

The children of those parents who made use of the PRC by visiting on a regular basis or attending workshops and classes are eligible to attend the Home Learning Center (HLC) staffed by a classroom teacher and six high school volunteers. During the time of this study, the HLC was open after school from 3:00-5:00 p.m. on Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Fridays, and from 5:30-7:30 p.m. on Monday and Wednesday evenings. Home Learning activities were varied to accommodate the diverse age range of the students attending. Students could bring in their class homework assignments and work individually or in small groups on math, reading, social studies, and science assignments. Students were encouraged to bring in all books needed, while the center provided paper,

pencils, crayons, rulers, calculators, etc. Computers proved to be an excellent resource for many assignments. During the month of the Science Fair, even science boards and other related materials were provided to assist the students with their projects.

During the time of the study, strategies for problem solving and math application were priorities at the HLC because most of the homework assigned by classroom teachers was math related. Also, the six volunteer high-school students seemed to feel more comfortable tutoring the children with their math homework than they did with reading and literacy related work.

The HLC was open for eight months, September - May. Classes began on September 24th of 2001 with only four students attending after school for homework assistance. Since our funding depended on the parent involvement component requiring a parent, guardian, or older family member to attend in order for the child to participate in HLC, our HLC attendance was slow in the beginning. We held to the requirement that a parent must use the PRC in order for their child to attend HLC. Before long, many students began encouraging their parents to attend a parent session so they could participate in the Home Learning Center. Soon, word of the after school Home Learning assistance began to spread and more and more students were registering. Consequently, attendance in both the Parent Resource Center and Home Learning Center began to grow. Of approximately 60 students enrolled in HLC, between 15-30 students attended regularly – three afternoons and two evenings weekly for the two-hour sessions.

Method

Since student achievement and success were our end goals, an evaluation of the achievement of those students whose families participated in the program was undertaken by studying the participating students' FCAT (Florida Comprehensive Achievement Test) scores in reading and mathematics. Scores were reported as criterion reference scores and norm referenced scores. In addition, I looked at student HLC attendance patterns relative to their FCAT scores, and I interviewed teachers, parents, and students.

FCAT Scores

As in many states, Florida's FCAT is a high stakes test used for evaluating not only the achievement of the individual students, but also the supposed merit of the schools administering the test. These scores are applied to the state's accountability system and each school in the state of Florida is given a yearly grade of A to F accordingly. Schools' staffing and funding requirements are based on these grades.

I focused my study on 33 fourth- and fifth-grade students. I chose this group because the data of the norm-referenced test that was taken in spring of 2000, 2001, and 2002 were available for both groups and, thus, for comparison of annual learning gains before and after the inception of the HLC.

Attendance

Taking into account vacation days and early release days, the HLC was open for students on 108 days. Approximately 85 of those sessions were prior to the FCAT test. FCAT achievement levels were correlated to the frequency of the students' attendance at the HLC. In other words, we wanted to examine the possibility of an association between excellent attendance at the HLC and children's FCAT scores.

Interviews

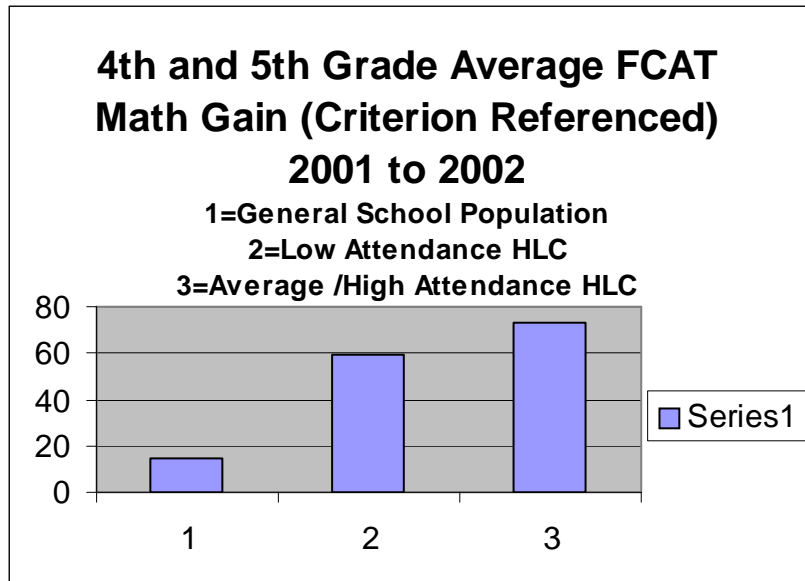
Students and parents were also interviewed during the year for their responses to the Parent Resource Center and the HLC.

Findings

My research indicates that the students with the highest regular attendance in the Home Learning Center made substantial overall gains in the Math portion of the FCAT in the spring of 2002. Those who participated felt that the support for homework made a big difference in their concept of themselves as capable learners.

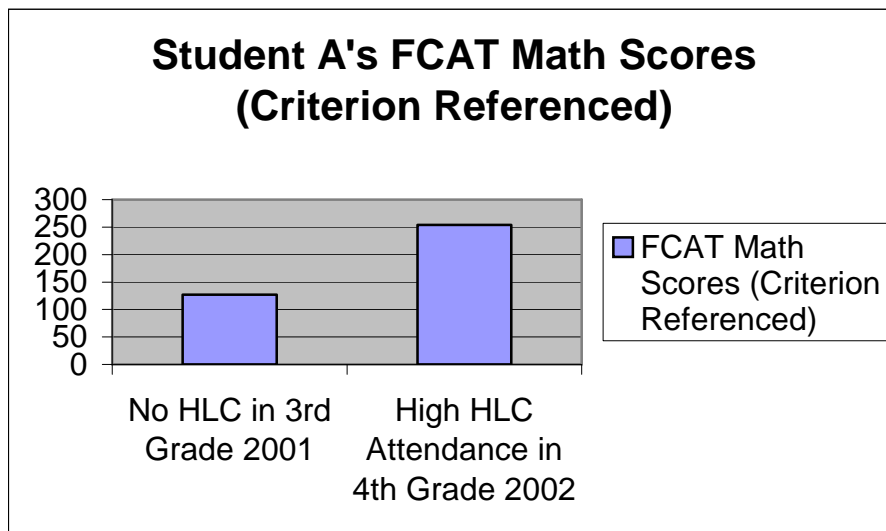
FCAT Criterion Referenced Math Scores and HLC Attendance

The following graph is based on fifth-grade FCAT Mean Scores in math from the years 2001 and 2002. In 2001, the FCAT reading mean score was 242. In 2002 it dropped slightly to 239, down 3 points. In 2001 the FCAT math mean score was 281; in 2002, it increased to 288, up 7 points. Among the general school population, the average gain was 15 percent. Thirty-three fourth- and fifth-grade students were tested. Among those whose attendance at the HLC was low (20 percent of available time during the week), the average gain was 59 percent. Those attending the Home Learning Center on a regular basis (80-100 percent of available time) made an average gain of 66 points on the math portion of the test, an average increase of 73 percent.



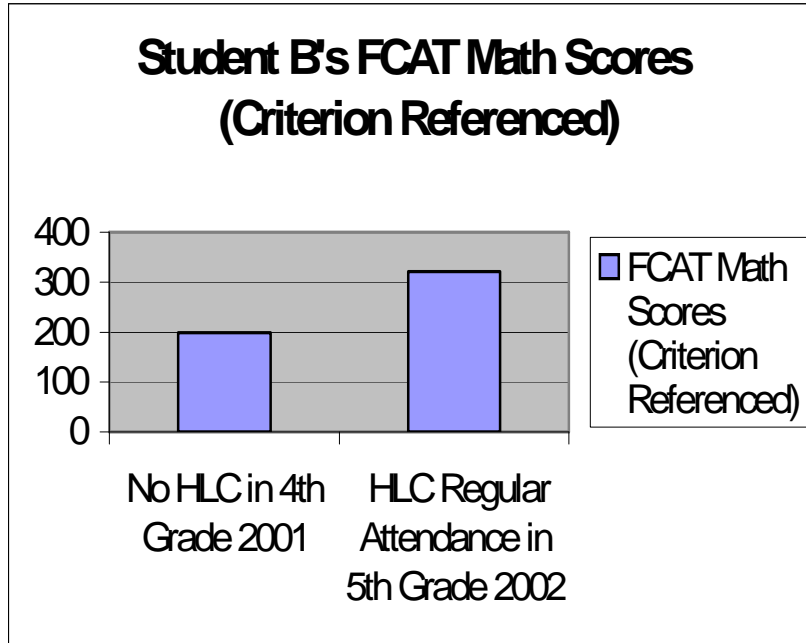
Individual Student Attendance and FCAT Math Scores

Student A, a fourth-grade student, whose mother gained a great deal from attending the ESOL classes in the evenings, had the best fourth-grade attendance at HLC, attending more than 90 percent of the sessions. Student A's math score on the FCAT jumped from 127 in third grade to 254 in the fourth grade, exactly double.

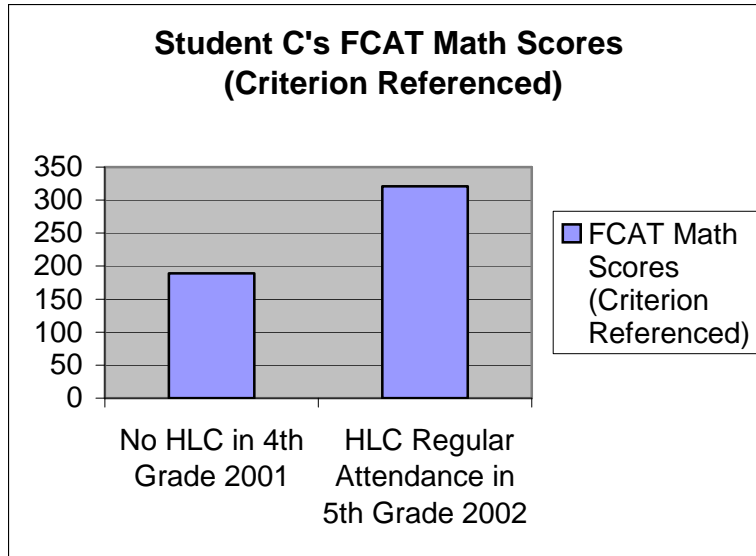


When Student A would complete his homework, usually math, he would logon the computer and play "Math Dodger," a math skill building game, or research a science or social studies project on the Internet. Student A's brother, a fifth-grade student, also attended HLC regularly. His math scores showed an improvement of 54 points. These children do not have a computer in their home.

Student B, a fifth-grade student who also attended the Home Learning Center regularly, showed remarkable gains in both math and reading. Her math FCAT scores soared from a 199 the previous year to an astounding 321 on this year's math assessment. She also made a 13-point gain in reading. Student B was awarded the Most Improved Fifth-grade Student at this year's honor assembly in June. Three members of Student B's family regularly attended classes offered to the parents.



Another success story is that of Student C, a fifth-grade student whose poor self-esteem led us to place her in our alternative education program. Student C's scores in math soared from a score of 189 the previous year to 321 on this year's assessment. Her whopping 132-point gain not only won acclaim from her teachers but also appeared to give her a wonderful feeling of accomplishment. Student C's favorite activity at Home Learning was playing teacher when she completed her own homework. She assisted the primary aged students with their math homework and drilled them on their subtraction, addition, and multiplication facts.



FCAT Criterion Referenced Reading Scores and Student Attendance

The picture for improved reading achievement was not as bright. There was a decline in criterion referenced FCAT reading scores across the board in fourth and fifth grades. Students attending HLC in both fourth and fifth grades had an overall decrease of 15 points in reading scores; however, when attendance at HLC was factored in, the students with low attendance (less than 20 percent or just one out of five days) had an average loss of 23 points compared to those with average or high attendance, who had only a four-point loss.

FCAT Norm Referenced Reading and Math Scores and Student Attendance

Scores on the norm referenced tests given at the same time showed a gain for students in both reading and math. Looking across a three-year period, we could see whether there was any relationship between attendance at the HLC and achievement in reading and math among the fifth-grade students. In reading, the average percentile movement for these students between third and fourth grade showed an average loss of 2.25 percent. At the end of fifth grade, there was an average increase of 1.35 percent from the previous year with a 3.6 percent gain among those who attended the Home Learning Center.

In math the percentile gain was even more. The average percentile movement for these students from Spring 2000-Spring 2001 was a gain of 1.75 percent. Students' scores for 2002 showed an average increase of 6.25 percent from the previous year among those attending the Home Learning Center.

Interviews

Interest and attendance by adults at the Parent Resource Center (PRC) fluctuated greatly in the beginning of the year. At first, for various reasons, recruiting parents to participate was difficult. According to informal interviews with parents early in the school year, some of the factors leading to low participation were their misconceptions of what might be expected of their attendance, their lack of familiarity with staff, their feeling unwelcome and unappreciated, and of course, the time constraints related to their work.

After considering this parental input, our program began to change some meeting times and class offerings to better meet their needs. As the school year progressed, parents began attending workshops, evening classes in ESOL, GED preparation, and computer literacy. This increase in parent attendance was due to various reasons. According to interviews with parents, many of them began attending because their children wanted to attend the popular Home Learning Center (HLC). They also felt more “at home” coming into the building for something other than Open House or a parent conference.

Students were interviewed in September and early October regarding their expectations about attending the Home Learning Center. Many voiced their opinion that they wanted to attend even though their parents might not always be able to come to the parent center. They claimed that having their parents enrolled in some sort of parent involvement program was nice. One student replied in his interview, "My mom and I walk to school together at night and it's fun. My little brother has to stay home until he is old enough to go to class with us."

The students also told me that they liked visiting the Parent Center and observing what their parents were doing and learning. The students were eager to go to the Center and show their parents how to log on to the Internet and search for answers to their homework, or a subject of interest. Working collaboratively with a parent or guardian was a favorite activity among both students and parents.

Analysis

In this analysis, I will address the linkage between the PRC and the HLC, the impact of the PRC and HLC on student achievement, and the issue of parent participation.

Linkage Between the PLC and the HLC

While our requirement for parental participation may have limited the attendance for HLC in the beginning, we think that we were beginning to achieve the goal of increasing parent involvement at our school. However, we are not sure that the rise in student achievement had to do so much with parent participation in the PRC as with the quality and focus of support provided in the HLC. This leads us to question the link that

we have established between parent participation in the PRC and student participation in the HLC.

The Home Learning Center appears to have had a major impact on achievement for students who were able to use it, but the issue of who has access to the HLC is one with which we are still contending. There is a group of students whose parents simply cannot participate in the PRC and, thus, their children are not able to participate in the Home Learning Center. If the HLC, which is staffed by teachers and high school students, can make such a difference in student achievement, we wonder whether it is educationally viable for us to exclude children from using it because their parents are unable to participate in an entity that is only tangentially related.

It is clear that those students who shared the PRC with their parents enjoyed it and that the children's self-esteem and self-confidence grew. Student C is a case in point. While her newfound feelings of self-confidence may not have translated into a high FCAT score, changes in attitude like these should not be discounted. They are bound to have an impact on a child's attitude toward school, learning, and herself as a learner. And, once again, we wonder whether there are ways in which children can experience the camaraderie and support that both the PRC and HLC provide regardless of their parents' involvement.

Student Achievement

The decline in reading scores and the rise in math scores suggest that when homework support is aligned with classroom instruction, students are likely to succeed. The fact that the high school tutors felt more secure teaching math than reading and writing may have been fortuitous for the students this year given the school's emphasis on math, but it suggests that there should be collaborative grade level planning that addresses specific strategies for increasing reading skills. Further, it is clear now that planning for the HLC should include grade level teams and should be done to insure training for tutors in all areas of the curriculum. In terms of my own teaching, this experience has helped me to plan to offer my students more opportunities to practice reading and writing skills both in class and for homework.

Parent Participation

While the data that I have reported do not highlight the importance of access to computers in these students' learning, my observations and conversations with students, parents, and teachers, suggest that the computers in the PRC were a major draw for the children and were an important way for them to get their parents to attend. In addition, the presence of the computers in the HLC was a powerful draw for the children – a very special reward for completing their homework.

What constitutes effective parent involvement in a school setting such as ours continues to be a source of concern for us. While it is clear that parent involvement in low-income, minority communities is often lacking, it is also clear to us as educators that

we must not equate unfamiliarity with school curriculum and procedures with a lack of caring about children's education – and we cannot assume that because parents did not use the PRC, they are not interested in supporting their children. My review of the literature and my experience in doing this research suggest to me that the PRC coupled with the HLC was a good first step. However, there is more for us as a school and school district to do. This may include finding other ways to connect with parents and finding better ways to support children when their parents do not or cannot participate. What this research has made clear to us is that **targeted after-school support that is synchronous with classroom instruction does make a difference and that the difference can be really big when parents are involved.**

Policy Implications

A policy implication that has grown out of this study and my observations is that establishing Home Learning Centers, rich in access to technology, has a very positive impact on student achievement. Previously difficult and frustrating assignments can be completed with success.

Providing Parent Resource Centers that meet the needs of parents in low-income communities where parent involvement is historically low allows parents the opportunity to attend workshops in parenting, technology, ESOL, and GED prep and is extremely beneficial for the parents and the students. With parents attending classes at the Parent Resource Center, learning becomes a family affair and the students appear to feel more connected to the purpose and value of their Home Learning assignments. The students are also motivated to finish their work so they can have computer time, something most of them do not have the privilege of experiencing at home.

I feel it is important for schools and teachers to develop attitudes and policies that are reflective of, and sensitive to, the communities they serve. **If we are truly interested in raising the achievement of our students to enable their future success in life, funding for Parent Resource Centers and technology equipped Home Learning Centers, staffed with teachers and trained volunteers, should become a high priority for school boards, education partners, and legislators.**

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