

ABSTRACT

Title of Dissertation: Parent/Family Involvement in an Even Start Family Literacy Program: Reaching Beyond Accountability

Susan Finn Miller, Doctor of Philosophy, 2003

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The purpose of this descriptive ten-month qualitative case study was to investigate how family involvement was conceptualized and actualized within one Even Start family literacy program. The research explored how educators and family members perceived and experienced family involvement in their school-aged children's literacy and learning and examined the relationships among the family literacy program, the home, and the school. The study sought to document events related to family involvement as they emerged within a family literacy program context, as well as to illuminate how culturally and linguistically diverse stakeholders interpreted these events. The ethnographic methods utilized included participant observation, phenomenological interviews, focus groups, and the analysis of documents and artifacts.

Major findings indicated that families involved in the program demonstrated resourcefulness and resolve in supporting their children's learning and that educators had much to learn about becoming co-learners with families, thus effectively tapping families' rich linguistic, cultural, and community "funds of knowledge" and multiple literacies. Well-intentioned family literacy practitioners and school teachers in the study wrestled with the need to support families while also meeting accountability requirements.

The study reveals that educators need more awareness of the complex issues families face as their children learn English and sometimes lose their native language. All participants need a deeper understanding of the role of the first language in the development of second language literacy. Family literacy staff could more effectively mediate between the home and the school if structures existed to support such work and if the program recruited more bilingual or multilingual staff members from the community to assist. A recommendation is for families to participate in the training of family literacy practitioners as well as in-service and pre-service school teachers. Educators might benefit, as well, from engaging in action research with families to examine their own assumptions about family involvement and the effects of those assumptions. When educators and families combine their expertise in support of children's learning, they have the potential to improve outcomes for families as well as to lay the groundwork for effective advocacy with policymakers.