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Involving parents in paired reading with preschoolers: Results from a randomized controlled trial

Shui-fong Lam [a,*], Kamfung Chow-Yeung [b], Bernard P.H. Wong [c], Kwok Kiu Lau [b], Shuk In Tse [b]

[a] Department of Psychology, The University of Hong Kong, Pokfulam Road, Hong Kong, China
[b] Hong Kong Young Women's Christian Association, 1, MacDonnell Road, Hong Kong, China
[c] Department of Counselling and Psychology, Hong Kong Shue Yan University, 10 Wai Tsui Crescent, Braemar Hill Road, Hong Kong, China

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ABSTRACT

A paired reading program was implemented for 195 Hong Kong preschoolers (mean age = 4.7 years) and their parents from families with a wide range of family income. The preschoolers were randomly assigned to experimental or waitlist control groups. The parents in the experimental group received 12 sessions of school-based training on paired reading in 7 weeks. They were required to do paired reading with their children for at least four times in each of these 7 weeks. At the end of the program, the preschoolers in the experimental group had better performance in word recognition and reading fluency than their counterparts in the control group. They were also reported as more competent and motivated in reading by their parents. More importantly, the program had many favorable effects on parents. Parents in the experimental group had higher self-efficacy in helping their children to be better readers and learners. They also reported that they had better relationships with their children. Their changes in relationships and self-efficacy were found to mediate the program impact on some of the child outcomes. However, family income did not moderate the effectiveness of the program. Families with high and low income both benefited from the program alike.

1. Introduction

An extensive literature suggests that parental involvement in reading is beneficial to children (e.g., Bus, van Ijzendoorn, & Pellegrini, 1995; Erion, 2006; Mol, Bus, De Jong, & Smeets, 2008; Sénéchal & Young, 2008). Some studies even showed increased parental involvement to be more effective in increasing children's performance than reading instruction at school by teachers or specialists (Hewison, 1988; Lonigan & Whitehurst, 1998; Tizard, Schofield, & Hewison, 1982). There are many advantages of family-based interventions over school-based interventions. Most family-based interventions take place in a one-on-one context rather than in small group settings. They provide ample opportunity for probing, practice, teaching, feedback, and repetition in the learning process (Lonigan & Whitehurst, 1998). In addition, as family-based interventions involve permanent and positive changes in the parenting skills and routines of family life, they can promote literacy skills for the long term (van Steensel, McElvany, Kurvers, & Herppich, 2011). In addition, parental involvement plays a critical role in the nurturance of children's motivation in learning. It enhances a sense of relatedness between parents and children, and helps children to internalize the importance of education (Gonzalez-DeHass, Willems, & Doan Holbein, 2005).

1.1. Barriers for parental involvement

Although it is widely accepted that parental involvement in academic performance is important, not all parents are ready to participate in their children's literacy development. Weinberger (1996) found that only a small proportion of the parents in her study felt that they knew how reading was taught in school. McMackin (1993) also pointed out that many parents feel inhibited about teaching their children to read once formal reading instruction begins in school. Even when parents are willing and eager to read with their children at home, they are unlikely to initiate a regular reading program with their children unless school makes a special effort to involve them (Epstein, 1987).

Baker (2003) warned that teachers should not assume parents know how to help their children in reading. She advised that "teachers should provide specific advice on what to read, how much to read, how long to read, how to respond to mistakes, what kind of discussions to hold with children, and how to keep the experience enjoyable" (p. 93). Her advice is particularly important for working with low-income families. Parental involvement is a form of social capital (Coleman, 1988, 1992). Families with different socio-economic status (SES) may not have equal access to this

* Corresponding author. Fax: +86 (852) 2858 3518.
E-mail address: lamsf@hku.hk (S.-f. Lam).

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social capital. Low-income parents do not have the same paid leave and flexibility to attend to the educational needs of their children as higher-income parents (Heymann & Earle, 2000). Consequently, they engage less in school-related activities with their children than do parents with high SES (Evans, 2004). When it comes to their perspective on reading, parents of different SES are also different. Past studies have shown that parents with low income and less education tended to focus on drilling of reading skills but parents with higher income and more education tended to focus on informal and playful opportunities for literacy learning (Fitzgerald, Spiegel, & Cunningham, 1991; Goldenberg, Reese, & Gallimore, 1992; Weigel, Martin, & Bennett, 2006). These different focuses may result in different parental practices and child outcomes. Sonnenschein et al. (1997) found that parents with an entertainment orientation (vs. a skills orientation) tended to read more to their children and reported using a more sensitive manner of interaction. In addition, a substantial amount of research on the relation between familial SES and children's academic achievement has indicated that children of parents with higher SES had better academic performance than children of parents with lower SES (e.g., Ginsburg & Bronstein, 1993; Marjoribanks, 1996; Scarborough & Dobrich, 1994; White, 1982; White, Reynolds, Thomas, & Gitzlaff, 1993).

In view of the above findings, many educators (e.g., Chang, Park, Singh, & Sung, 2009; Tizard et al., 1982) advocate that actual guidance and support should be provided to parents with low SES so that they can contribute to their children's academic success. Parents need more specific strategies to be effective in reading with their children at home. Kelly-Vance and Schreck (2002) suggested that schools could be an important catalyst in training parents in reading instruction.

The present paper reports a parental involvement program in which schools made a substantial effort to provide guidance and support to parents so that they could help their preschoolers to read at home. The parents came from families with a wide range of income levels. The tutoring strategies adopted were based on the paired reading program invented by Morgan (1976) and further developed by Topping (1987).

1.2. Paired reading program

Paired reading strategies were adopted in the present study because they are easy to acquire and carry out. They are cost-effective and time-efficient methods for teaching children to read. As they are neither difficult nor costly, they can be readily mastered and implemented by parents with low income and less education. In a paired reading program, parents and children read together at home for 5–15 min, 5 days a week, on the "little and often principle" (Topping, 1986). The procedure is relatively simple and easy to manage:

> The procedure consists of two phases: simultaneous and independent reading. The child is allowed to choose any book and the child and parent begin reading out loud together in close synchrony (simultaneous reading). When the child makes a mistake, the parent supplies the correct word, the child repeats it, and they continue reading. When the child feels confident enough to read alone, s/he gives the parent a signal and the parent stops reading (independent reading). If the child makes a mistake, the parent provides the correct word, the child repeats it, and the pair begin reading again (Law & Kratochwill, 1993, p. 120).

This procedure gets children some peaceful private attention from their parents. In addition, the procedure gives parents a clear, straightforward, and enjoyable way of helping their children. Therefore, parents should not "get confused, worried, or bad tempered about reading" (Topping, 1987, p. 611). In fact, research findings have demonstrated the effectiveness of paired reading. The Kirless Paired Reading Project was the largest of its kind in the United Kingdom ($N = 1165$). The results of this project showed that children on average improved their reading at a rate of 3.7 times "normal" gains in reading accuracy and 4.8 times "normal" gains in reading comprehension. Parents also reported that their children were reading more, understanding books better, and more willing to read (Topping, 1986).

Despite these positive research findings, paired reading programs still invite criticism from some researchers. From a motivational standpoint, Baker (2003) criticized it for not giving systematic attention to getting meaning from the reading materials. She argued that the affective atmosphere of shared reading is more positive when parents and children discuss the story content rather than focus on accurate word reading. In a review of the research on emergent literacy in early childhood, Whitehurst and Lonigan (1998) concluded that adult–child verbal interactions were important in the acquisition of literacy skills. For example, DeTemple (2001) found that the chat that goes beyond the reading of the story can promote the development of a cluster of language skills that children will be expected to use in school. The abundance of evidence pointing to the importance of parent–child talk has led Tabors, Snow, and Dickinson (2001) to posit that how parents read with their children is as crucial as whether and how often parents and children read together. They suggested that the inclusion of enriched conversation during book reading is of great value.

In view of the importance of parent–child discussion, Overett and Donald (1998) added a new dimension to Topping's model of paired reading. They emphasized the discussion and interaction between parents with children around the story, title, and illustrations. They thought that it is important for the parent–child dyad to actively discuss and think about meaning before, during, and after reading. Therefore, the paired reading procedure should also include:

> reciprocal questioning around the reading materials; prediction with regard to the story line and vocabulary; relating the reading materials to the child's present experience and knowledge, assisting insights into less explicit levels of meaning; and using contextual clues in thinking about the understanding the reading matter (Overett & Donald, 1998, p. 350).

The present study modified Topping's (1987) paired reading approach according to the suggestions of Overett and Donald (1998). The discussion for the construction of meaning was added to the procedure. To enrich the discussion, some techniques of dialogic reading (Whitehurst et al., 1988) were adopted. Compared to paired reading, dialogic reading is less structured in procedure but more elaborate in the techniques in interactive discussion. In the present study, the specific use of purposeful questioning (How? What? Where? When? Why? Who?) was modeled and practiced by the parents.

2. Overview of the study

The present study was a collaboration between school personnel and university researchers. With the commitment of parental involvement, a group of principals and teachers in Hong Kong launched a paired reading program in their preschools that served families with a wide range of family income. To evaluate the effectiveness of the program, they invited researchers from the university to conduct a randomized controlled trial.

Most of the past studies on paired reading did not focus on preschoolers. Its effectiveness with preschoolers, particularly Chinese