Books

Unfulfilled Expectations: Home and School Influences on Literacy

by Catherine E. Snow, Wendy S. Barnes, Jean Chandler, Irene F. Goodman, and Lowry Hemphill


Reviewed by MARGARET C. NEEDELS

At some time in their professional careers, most teachers have struggled with the issue of the relative influence of home versus school on children’s academic achievement. Teachers working with children who come from low-income homes are especially concerned with this issue, for often these children have home experiences that are different from the experiences of middle-class children, and these differences may unwittingly put them at a disadvantage in the school setting. Working to meet the needs of their students and provide them with opportunities for school success, many teachers must face this issue daily.

Focusing on this question of home versus school influences, Snows, Barnes, Chandler, Goodman, and Hemphill present the findings of their study of the literacy achievement of elementary school children from low-income families. The researchers studied this question for two years as they followed thirty-one children eligible for the federal free-lunch program and enrolled in either second, fourth, or sixth grades.

To understand the background of each of the thirty-one children, the researchers visited the home, interviewed the family, and observed the parents interacting with the child. To understand each child’s classroom, the researchers observed in it, interviewed the teacher and the child, and reviewed the child’s school work. To understand the level of the child’s success in school, the researchers administered tests for reading comprehension, vocabulary, word recognition, and writing.

Realizing that educators hold several different views of how the family might influence the child’s academic success, the researchers developed three models for explaining how the family influences the child’s success. The Family as Educator model holds that if adults in the home read to the child and allow the child to see them reading and writing, the child will come to school with a sense of literacy and have a greater chance of success; the Resilient Family model holds that if parents are able to provide stability in the home, maintain a sense of order, spend time with the children, be free of stress themselves, and supervise television watching, the child will develop a sense of inner control and be able to attend to the learning tasks in the classroom, and the Parent-School Partnership model holds that if parents have frequent contacts with the school, are involved in school activities, and help with homework, the child will have a greater sense of continuity between the home and school and thus have success in school. The ensuing analysis of the influence of each of these models on children’s literacy achievement produced interesting
and unexpected results. Based upon the home observations and interviews, the researchers gathered data on the seven variables comprising the Family as Educator model. Interestingly, this model did not show strength in children’s reading comprehension or writing, but did seem to help children in skill development such as word recognition and vocabulary. The researchers interpreted this finding as revealing the importance of the way in which the family functions in promoting children’s literacy. That is, skills such as word recognition and vocabulary development can be enhanced by the family; however, the enhancement of more complex skills such as reading comprehension needs the structure and consistency of the teaching provided in most elementary school classrooms.

The Resilient Family model is based on the hypothesis that low-income families differ as a group from middle-income families in the degree of stress they experience, and it is this high degree of stress that mitigates against literacy achievement of children from the low-income families. For this model, the researchers used information on TV rules, home organization, family activities and time together, organization rating, outings with adults, activities, parental social stress, and family income. Analysis of this model revealed that neither parental stress nor family income were strong factors related to children’s literacy achievement. On the other hand, the children who wrote longer essays came from well-organized homes with rules about television viewing, participated in family activities, and had positive relationships with their parents. Thus, it appears that a positive, well-organized home contributes to children’s writing fluency.

The third model, Parent-School Partnership, was based on the hypothesis that parent partnerships with the school will contribute to children’s academic success. Five variables were used to form this model: parent-school involvement, contacts with teacher, homework help, parent-child interaction, and school punctuality. Of these five variables, the single variable most strongly related to children’s literacy achievement was formal parent-school involvement. Neither contact with the teacher nor parent assistance with homework was related to the children’s reading and writing. This finding is interesting in that these two practices are often named as important to the child’s school achievement. The researchers explain this finding by pointing out that simple measures of the frequency of homework assistance and parental contacts with the teacher reveal neither the quality of the assistance nor the reasons for the contacts, while formal school involvement measures parents’ commitment to working with the school.

On the basis of their research findings, the authors present two models for the relationship between home and school: the complementation model which asserts that home and school each have a distinct role in the literacy development of the child, and the compensation model which asserts that home and school produce similar opportunities for literacy development and can compensate for one another’s weaknesses.

To illustrate the compensation model, the authors present case studies describing the experiences of two children in their sample. The first, Charles, came from a home that scored extremely low on each of the three models of home influences but who was enrolled for two years in classrooms where the quality of teaching was extremely high. The second, Christina, came from a home that scored high on each of the three models of home influences but who spent the two years of the study in classrooms that scored low on the quality of instruction. The descriptions of these two children’s experiences present a thoughtful analysis of the home and school literacy environment. The authors concluded that these two descriptions and others like them illustrate the point that the “home and school relationship can be compensatory, one providing what the other fails to provide” (p. 164). This conclusion should be encouraging to teachers trying to meet the literacy needs of children from low-income families.

An epilogue reporting the progress of these children four years after the end of the original study is not as encouraging. In this phase of the study, the researchers were curious whether the compensatory relationship between home and school continued during the children’s secondary school experiences; however, during the four-year period, many children fell short of their ex-
expected gains. Accompanying their lower performance in school was a lower expectation of their academic goals — only a small group of the children were taking college preparatory courses.

The authors emphasize the need to maintain high expectations for children from low-income families. The factors that facilitated the children's literacy achievement during their elementary school years changed in magnitude during the secondary school years, and little support is available to these children. Society needs to establish high goals for all children and to provide and sustain the support that will help them achieve these goals.

The data analysis in this book takes into consideration the complexity of home factors. The three models allow both educators and researchers to look at this issue in a much more sophisticated fashion than has been done in the past. The authors deserve recognition for their blending of qualitative and quantitative data, especially in the descriptions of the compensation model.

The length of time devoted to the research is commendable. Not only was the original design a two-year, in-depth study, the follow-up study four years later provided some of the most valuable data from this research effort. Although disheartening to realize that the researchers' original optimism for the literacy development of these children was not realized, these data give us new insight into the tremendous importance of maintaining high expectations for children from low-income families.

The book lacks some of the quantitative data that researchers might look for; however, the findings of the complexity of home factors and the diminishing strength, over time, of the compensation model are valuable contributions of this book. I strongly recommend the book to teachers and researchers. Teachers will benefit by gaining new insight into the home versus school debate. I hope the book will inspire future researchers to continue this line of inquiry, especially at the secondary level.

Margaret Needels is professor of teacher education at California State University at Hayward.

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National Writing Project Resumes Publication Series with Writing Your Heritage

Writing Your Heritage: A Sequence of Thinking, Reading, and Writing Assignments by Deborah Dixon has just been published by the National Writing Project as the first title in its newly resumed Writing Teachers at Work series. This series features teachers' discussions of classroom practices centered around teaching writing. Writing Your Heritage costs $8.00 plus tax and shipping (tax for California residents is 8.25%, and shipping is $1.25 each). The second volume in this series, Theresa Finds Her Voice, by Sherry Seale Swain, director of the Mississippi Thinking/Writing Project, is now in press and will be available soon. To be placed on the NWP publication mailing list, write to Publications at The National Writing Project, 5627 Tolman Hall, University of California, Berkeley, CA 94720.

14th Annual International Conference on Critical Thinking

"Restructuring the Future: Critical Thinking Tactics that Work in the Classroom and on the Job" will be held at Sonoma State University near San Francisco, CA, July 31-August 3, 1994. Conference organizers are now accepting proposals as well as registration applications. Contact the Sonoma State University Center for Critical Thinking at (707) 664-2940 for registration information and guidelines for proposals. In addition to the international conference, a two-day Bay Area Workshop for Educators is offered at Sonoma State University July 29-30; a more extensive training session for teachers, administrators, and curriculum specialists is offered July 25-29. Contact the Sonoma State University Center for Critical Thinking at (707) 664-2940.

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How do we make connections between grade levels and different schools? How can we be assured that students are prepared for what's to come without our losing sight of what they need now? The Nevada State Council of Teachers of English will publish a collection of essays dealing with the knotty issues of articulation in our schools and colleges. They welcome essays that discuss ways, means, and experiences that lead to a smoother flow of knowledges, skills, and processes of language for K-college learners. Articles by classroom teachers are especially encouraged. Contact: Susan Tchudi, Department of English (098), University of Nevada, Reno, NV 98557-0031. Ph: (702) 784-6709.