

Parents - as -
Partners -
as - Learners
Project

by Marion Fear

PARENTS-AS-PARTNERS-AS-LEARNERS PROJECT

by

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Mother learns to read
Grandma cannot write her name
Daughter shall be free

MF

Report on
THE PARENTS-AS-PARTNERS-AS-LEARNERS PROJECT

Eastern Townships School Board

November 1987 - May 1988

Submitted to

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SUMMARY

In spite of some scattered efforts, parents remain a largely untapped resource for improving the reading skills and the attitude towards school of primary school children. Clearly, parents can play an important complementary role to the school.

As well, many poorly reading children come from families where illiteracy is a well hidden problem, not only of the parent(s) but also of aunts, uncles and grandparents. People who have this problem are generally so negative in their attitudes, towards themselves as learners and the school system, that a special outreach approach is needed to engage them in educational activities and this begins to break the recurring cycle of illiteracy.

Illiteracy in families is a complex problem where further research is needed.

CONCLUSIONS

From the results of this project, it can be concluded that a Parents-As-Partners-As-Learners Project can improve the oral reading skill levels of Grade III children, that it can improve the children's attitude towards reading and that it can function as an outreach to well hidden illiterate adults.

It may further be concluded that illiteracy in families is perpetuated by a complex interaction of many factors and that it needs further study.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Because of the positive results of this Project, particularly with respect to reaching illiterate adults, it is strongly recommended that funding be sought to continue the Project in schools where there is a large proportion of disadvantaged families.

Because of the health needs noted during the Project, it is recommended that close co-operation be maintained with the local health services.

Because of the attitudinal problems noted, it is recommended that staff education be directed towards this problem by the School Board.

INTRODUCTION

The Eastern Townships School Board serves a population of 35,000 scattered throughout a large geographical region including cities, towns, villages and extensive countryside. The 3,380 pupils in its two high schools and eleven elementary schools come from a wide range of families, from the well educated and financially stable to illiterate people living a marginal existence. The two schools who requested the project both serve a considerable number of disadvantaged families.

Although the 1981 census indicated there are over 3,000 English speaking adults within the jurisdiction of the Eastern Townships School Board who have less than a grade IX education, i.e. who are functionally illiterate, each year less than 5% have responded to conventional efforts to bring them into literacy programs offered by Adult Services.

At the same time, there has been considerable concern over the poor reading skills of primary school children, in spite of special teaching and grouping efforts. It has also been observed that many parents appear to have literacy problems.

The Parents-As-Partners-As-Learners Project was a co-operative endeavour of the Adult Education Services and two of the eleven primary schools. It was co-ordinated by a part time literacy animator from Adult Education Services.

The Project was aimed at the problem of illiteracy in families. Specifically, it sought to demonstrate:

- A. The value of informed parental assistance in improving the reading skills and the attitude towards school of primary school children;
- B. An avenue to discover illiterate adults and a means of drawing them into an educational process.

Special funding for the Project was given by the Direction Généralé de l'Education des Adultes and the Eastern Townships School Board as a result of a small pilot project. As well, the Québec Literacy Working Group agreed to sponsor the Parents-As-Partners-As-Learners Project.

PILOT PROJECT

Modeled on previous Parents-As-Partners programs in Toronto and England, a small pilot project was undertaken in one primary school during the Spring of 1987. Sixteen children who were having problems with reading were chosen; five from Grade 2, the remainder from Grade 3. Their parents were asked to help them each night with assigned reading. The parents were coached by the teacher on how to do this at a special meeting. As well, they were given written instructions. Parents who did not attend the meeting were visited in their homes and given the same instruction by the Literacy Animator.

The teacher reported an almost immediate improvement in the children's attitude towards school. They became enthusiastic over being listened to by their parents. Other children wanted to join the program.

The reading levels of 23 children were tested before and after the project on the Slosson Oral Reading Test. The average gain was 5.8 months in slightly less than 3 months. The range was from 0 gain (3 children) to 16 months (one child).

The observations of the teacher, Mrs. Leila Atkin, corroborated those of teachers in similar projects. She reported a significant and sustained improvement in the children's attitude towards reading and towards school.

Through the meetings with the parents of the sixteen children, twelve adults were identified as having literacy needs:

- (3) three mothers could not read English as a second language well enough to help their Grade 3 children with homework.
- (1) one English speaking mother could not read well enough to help her Grade 3 child.
- (3) three fathers were poor or nonreaders.
- (3) three grandparents could not read.
- (2) two friends of the family were poor or nonreaders.

Of these twelve people, only two welcomed the offer of free, private tutoring. Others were non-committal while some could not see any reason to want to learn to read.

At the follow-up meeting with the parents, two reported their children still hated school. All the others said their children loved reading now and enjoyed going to school.

The two parents, who accepted to have tutors, made good use of them and spoke positively at the meeting. As a result, the parents were unanimous in wanting the project to continue. More parents began looking forward to having help with their literacy problems.

THE MAIN PROJECT

The work was based on the Parents-As-Partners program developed in England as a result of the research done in the late 1970's by Jenny Hewison and the late Jack Tizzard; The Haringey Reading Project.

They demonstrated that the reading scores of children, who received informed help at home, improved dramatically over the scores of children who received additional, professional help at school.

Belfield Community School (Rochdale Lancashire) 1978, based its Reading Project on the Hewison & Tizzard research and found similar results including improved relations with parents.

More recently, the Board of Education of the Municipality of York, with the lowest levels of income and the highest rates of unemployment in Metropolitan Toronto, also tested the program. As a result of a positive pilot project in the Spring of 1984, they are now using the program regularly.

The Eastern Townships School Board Project replicated the earlier Parents-As-Partners programs with the addition of more emphasis being placed on the literacy needs and motivation of the parents. Hence the extended name, Parents-As-Partners-As-Learners, was chosen.

A part time literacy animator was hired for three days per week from November to May to co-ordinate the work. The Project was offered to the teachers of Kindergarten to Grade 3 in the two schools requesting it. Parents of younger children were asked to read to them instead of hearing them read.

As a result of a presentation to a Grade 3-4 teacher workshop, four other schools implemented Parents-As-Partners projects without the additional adult literacy component.

Due to the late start of the program because of delays in funding, only the Grade 3 projects in each school were actually started before Christmas. The Grade 2 teachers in each school declined to participate although one would like to do it next year.

One of the impediments to implementation was teachers' fear of facing a group of parents as opposed to discussing their child with them on an, individual basis.

The two Grade 1 teachers in the first school held a meeting of their parents together. They were assisted by the experienced Grade 3 teacher and the literacy animator. They went on to do two, six-week projects of having the children take home reading assignments to be read to the parents.

In the second school, the Grade 1 teacher was not able to meet the parents as a group but was engaging them in signing their children's book reports. She agreed to recommend certain families for visiting where she thought there might be literacy problems.

Each of the Kindergartens adapted the project in different ways. In School #1, the teachers held a parents' meeting, then did a one-month project of sending home a book with each child with a paper for the parent to sign that they had read to the child. In the second school, the Kindergarten teachers had rotating lists of the children's names on the board. Each day, the child whose name was at the top of the list was allowed to choose a book to take home to have it read by the parents. The child was also encouraged to discuss the story and draw a picture. The next day, the child and the teacher sat in front of the class and the child was encouraged to "read" or tell the story to the rest of the children.

As well as being present at parents' meetings, the literacy animator made visits to homes recommended by the teachers, met with teachers and community groups to increase the awareness of the problem of adult literacy. And finally, the animator developed a co-operative working relationship with local health officials who were serving many of the same families.

RESULTS

Both parents and teachers reported improved attitudes towards school and reading. At the end of the one month project in Kindergarten of School #1, a little boy said "I can't stop now. I haven't learned to read yet."

The teachers were particularly enthusiastic about the closer relationship with parents and having someone who could make the link with the homes by visiting. Many of the families are poor and have no phones or are away at work all day and difficult to reach.

Efforts were made to have the Slosson Oral Reading Test done before and after the Project on each of the Grade III's. Unfortunately, the testing in School #2 was done by untrained parents and by different parents before and after. The results proved to be invalid.

Reliable results were obtained on the Grade III in School #1 and on a smaller Grade III (part of a Grade III-IV class) in another school where they were using the Parents-As-Partners Project.

EASTERN TOWNSHIPS SCHOOL BOARD
Parents-as-Partners-as-Learners Project
School #1

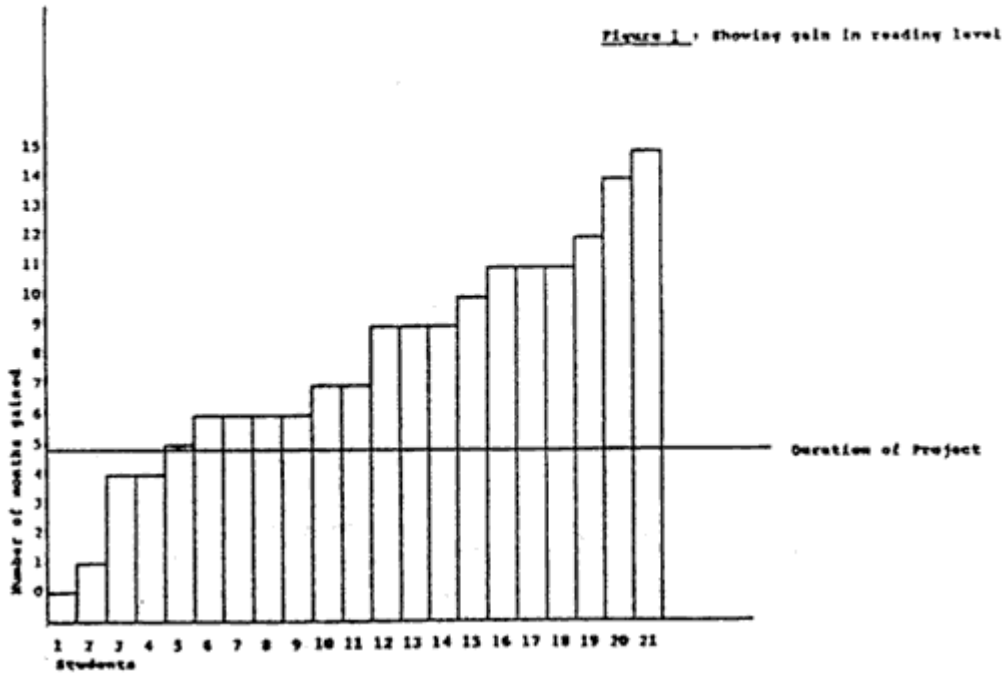


Figure 1 shows the number of months' gain in oral reading by the 21 children in Grade III of School #1. The average gain was 7.7 months during the Project which lasted four months and three weeks. The range was from 0 to 15 months gain. The one child who did not gain was already at a Grade 5.8 level.

EASTERN TOWNSHIPS SCHOOL BOARD
Parents-as-Partners-as-Learners Project
School #1

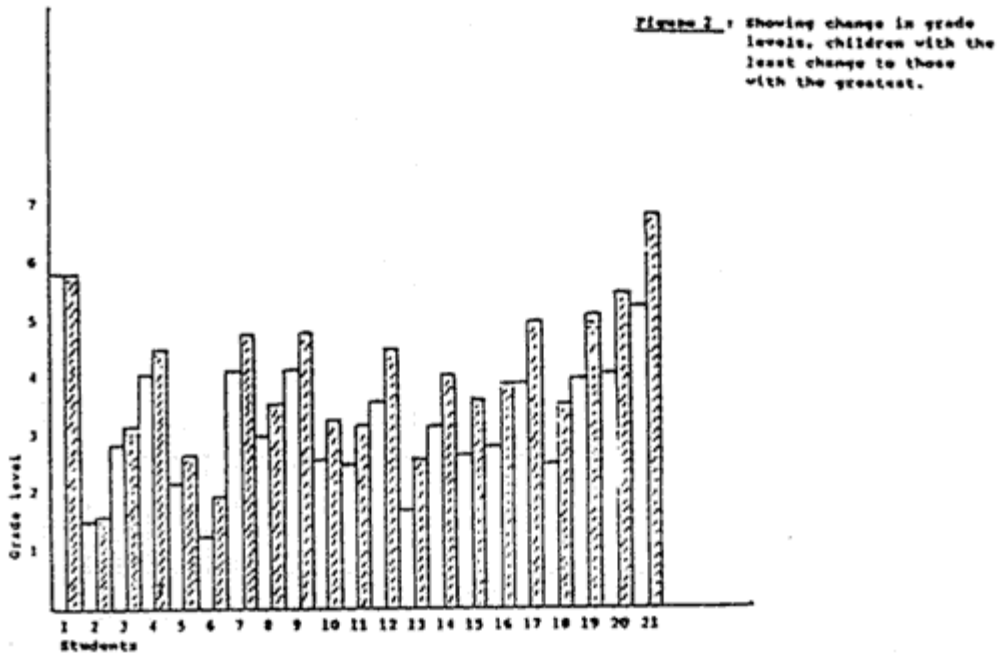


Figure 2 shows the before and after grade level for each of the 21 children. Those who were already functioning better improved more.

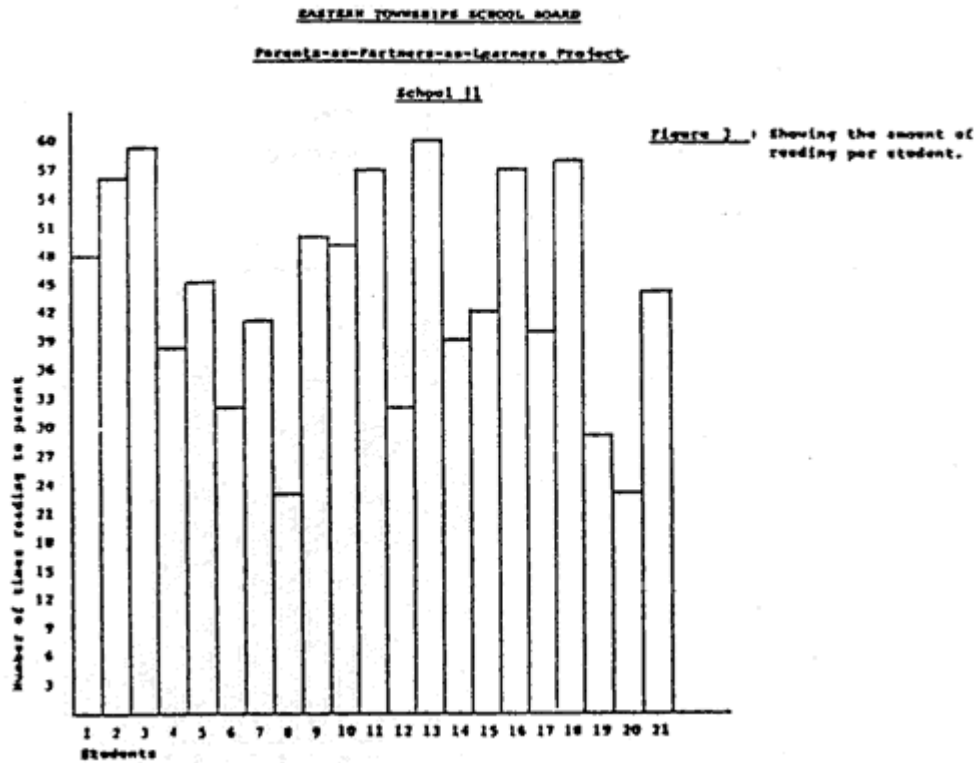
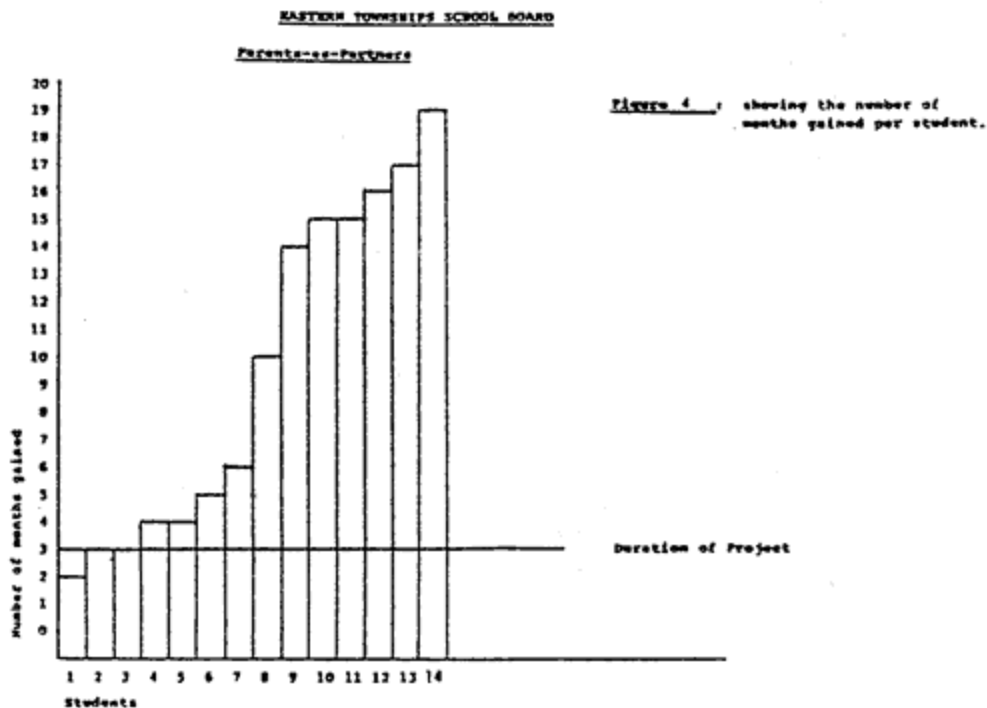


Figure 3 shows the number of times each of the 21 children read to their parents. There is no clear 1:1 relationship between the number of times the children read to their parents and the amount of improvement on the oral reading test.



The significant difference in average gain (9.5 months gain in 3 months as opposed to 7.7 months in 4 months 3 weeks) can be accounted for by the greater proportion of better functioning children. The average grade level of the Grade III students of School 1 on the pretest was 3.2. Their teacher described the class as having many problems: many repeaters, children with English as a second language and discipline problems. While the fourteen children in the other Grade III class had some repeaters and a few problems, they were described as being one of the best classes in the school. Their average grade level on the pretest was 3.6.

Although the Parents As Partners Project had good results with the children, no illiterate adults were found through this project. It was only where there was the presence of an Adult Literacy Animator that adult literacy students were found.

After 6.5 months of the Parents-As-Partners-As-Learners Project, 35 adults have identified themselves to the animator as having problems with either reading, writing or arithmetic. Two of these adults are still trying to find the courage to ask for help. The other 33 have all begun to take advantage of the educational programs available to them: an Adult Basic Education class with a qualified teacher or individualized work with a trained, volunteer tutor from the St. Francis Literacy Council.

Ten adults are friends or relatives of the parents in the Project. The other 25 of the 35 adults who came forward are parents. Six of these are parents of preschool children who heard about the project through friends. The remaining 19 adults are parents of children, all of whom have been doing poorly in school.

Eleven of the 35 adults belong to the same extended family. Two other families with frequent literacy problems were also identified. Several children who are having difficulty learning to read not only have parents with literacy problems but often grandparents, aunts, uncles or cousins as well who have had trouble learning in school. Most of the families were living in poor circumstances.

OBSERVATIONS AND DISCUSSION

Peter Calamai noted, in his report on the Southam Literacy Survey, that "Poverty and education play major roles in deciding whether illiteracy is transmitted from one generation to the next". Certainly this statement is not being questioned but rather enlarged.

Recently, the National Council on Welfare released its annual report which stated that one child -in six lives in poverty in Canada. But poverty is not distributed evenly across the country so that each community has its share. There are concentrations of poor families in economically depressed areas.

At the same time, again according to the Southam Survey, more than one in five Canadian residents over 18 years are illiterate in English or French.

Visiting families during the Parents-As-Partners-As-Learners Project reinforced the fact that poverty and illiteracy are closely associated.

It was also observed that there were many health problems which caused not only absences from school but preoccupation about relatives dying. Two mothers have heart problems. One of the two parents who accepted tutoring as a result of the Pilot Project died this year of heart failure after an operation. She was in her early thirties.

When the parents were found to be illiterate, there was also a greater problem of ignorance, not just of world affairs or Canadian Geography, but also about basic family management information such as nutrition, child development and the need for regular routines. Many children were reported to be tired in school.

In discussions with the adults, many attitudinal problems were identified. First, and most important, is their attitude towards themselves. They consistently put themselves down. They were also afraid of being laughed at if they tried to start learning again.

Negative attitudes in the community toward illiterate adults were noted. As well, often negative attitudes, in the schools themselves, were observed towards children, who were having trouble learning, and their families.

The interaction of the factors of poverty, poor health, illiteracy, ignorance and attitudinal problems creates an almost insurmountable barrier for these people to overcome, in order to improve their own and their children's lives.

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