EMBEDDING NEW IDENTITIES: EQUIPPING PARENTS OF READING AT RISK PUPILS

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ABSTRACT

Regardless of a family's socio-economic status, many development studies show that parental involvement is crucial in the long-term learning of children. This study examined the non-formal education experiences of parents of reading-at-risk Grade Two pupils coming from an urban poor community in the Philippines. Focus group discussions, individual interviews and participant observation were utilized for data elicitation. Results show that through their non-formal education experiences, parent-participants took on new identities –story tellers, tutors and fun and effective parents. The parents became story tellers not only to their own children but to other children as well. They became effective tutors in developing literacy and numeracy skills at home and in the community. They also were transformed into fun and effective parents who no longer resorted to coercion or violence in helping their children with school work. The results of the study pose some implications with regard to educational theories about parent-school relationships, family literacy, and the management of parent non-formal education programs.

Keywords: *Parental involvement, Children, non-formal education*

INTRODUCTION

Discussions are currently ongoing about possible directions to take after the culmination of Education for All programs in 2015. One emerging direction is the broadening and strengthening of stakeholders which include the parents. Narayan (2012) wrote that their "inputs need to be earnestly sought and consolidated to build a more inclusive post-2015 EFA framework." Getting parents, especially those from poor communities more meaningfully involved in their children's education would require some training and equipping. When parents or caregivers are not equipped, they fail to participate in the education of their children and thus their "children's chances of gaining access and sustaining a commitment to education are significantly diminished." (UNICEF, 2007) There are actually quite a number of studies that have been made through time attesting to the fact that a child's academic achievement is strongly determined by parental involvement (Rapp, N & Duncan, H, 2012; LeFevre & Shaw, 2012: Durand, T, 2011; Erlendsdóttir, 2010; Scheerens, 2004; Walberg & Paik, 2000). These claims have propelled education planners to include in the education reform programs the idea of holistic and multi-stakeholders participation in the governance of education. (Genevois, 2008; UNESCO, 2007)

In the Philippines, the issue of facilitating parental support becomes more relevant in the case of providing intervention for reading-at-risk young pupils from poverty. The situations faced by urban poor communities can undermine the efforts of schools as parents are ill-equipped to help in their children's education.

This article explains what parents from poverty had experienced as they were non-formally educated so they can be meaningfully involved in the literacy development of their children who were identified as reading at risk. The overarching goal of this study is to describe the changes that occurred in the parents regarding their attitudes and actions towards involvement in their children's education and how this form of support improved literacy achievement.

Aside from a determinant of academic success, parental involvement does also positively affect school readiness of young learners. (Lao, Li & Rao, 2011) It specifically helps build literacy skills. (Durand, 2011) Its impact extends from pre-school to elementary to secondary education until higher education (Jeynes, 2012; Gordon & Cui, 2012). In a study among forty-one parents and their children in three Head Start Centers (with 18 low proficiency parent readers and 23 proficient parent readers) who were involved in a 12-week book club, results showed that text type influenced patterns of interaction and that the reading proficiency of parents affected conversational interactions, with various text types serving as a scaffold for parent-child interactions (Neuman, 1996). Even with differences in parental reading proficiency, children's receptive language and concepts of print improved significantly showing the value of parental storybook reading on children's emergent literacy.

Furthermore, parental involvement would be especially valuable for high risk and underperforming students. (Altschul, 2011) Likewise, parental involvement decreases the incidence of dropout, failure and repetition rates. (Gertler, Patrinos & Rodriguez-Oreggia, 2012) In a study among complementary schools in some disadvantaged communities in a number of developing countries, the factor that improved access, completion and quality of learning were strong parental and community involvement. (DeStefano, Moore, Balwanz and Hartwell, 2007)

Some studies on parental involvement have focused on certain components. One is differences brought about by cultural factors and ethnicity (Phillipson & Phillipson, 2012; Lao, Li & Rao, 2011). Another dimension is the affective factor specifically parental expectations (Phillipson & Phillipson, 2012; Gordon & Cui, 2012). Parental support can be either formal or informal support or school-based and home-based (LeFevre & Shaw, 2012; Muir 2012; Lao, et al, 2011). An article by Domina (2005) however pointed out that there are studies that dispute the direct correlation between parental involvement and student achievement. There are even studies that show negative outcomes of parental involvement. He however pointed out that:

> …parental involvement does not independently improve children's learning, but some involvement activities prevent behavioral problems. Interaction analyses suggest that the involvement of parents with low socioeconomic status may be more effective than that of parents with high socioeconomic status. (ibid)

The involvement of parents in the education of their children assumes that there is a link between family background and educational attainment (Crosnoe, 2001). The level of parental involvement can essentially be determined by factors such as the neighborhood in which they live, their socio-economic status and the parents' educational attainment. Parents from the middle class, especially those with college education are more focused and deliberate in helping their children. They stimulate their minds and plan for their extra-curricular activities like music and sports. It is unlike parents from the working class who tend to be more directive in their language and permissive with their relationship with their children. (Lareau, 2011)

Muir (2012) wrote that there are many parents who feel uninformed about current educational practices and how they can be more involved with their child's learning. Furthermore, there is

a lack of adequate avenues for communication and means of developing collective voice among marginalized parents (Durand, T, 2011). But once these parents participate in non-formal learning activities like the parent empowerment program, they are able to help decrease the dropout, failure and repetition rates. (Gertler et al, 2012). Local studies also show positive results of parent training programs in the literacy development of their children (Pado, 2006).

Interestingly, the impact of parental involvement is substantial regardless of the family's socio-economic status (Walberg and Paik 2000). In the Programme for International Student Assessment study among 14 countries, the literacy level among 15-year old students was determined by how parents read to them as children, regardless of socio-economic status. (OECD, 2011)

The significance of parental involvement in the child's education can be explained by several theories. One is the Ecological Systems Theory where learning happens through a process of socialization within a child's immediate family. (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) In socialization process, parents become their children's first teachers. Another theory is Bourdieu's Cultural Capital. Parents with higher level of education are able to equip their children with the type of behavior needed to experience success in school (Lareau, 2011).

This out-of-school learning has always played an important role in children's lives, and there is even a claim that it accounts for 57 percent of their academic achievement (Yaffe, 2010). This supports the idea that non-school learning can play a major role in helping children achieve their potential.

The question now is what types or levels of parental involvement would be possible? Epstein (cited in Griffin & Steen, 2010) provided a framework for six types of parental involvement that can bring about varying results for students, families, and teachers. School-home partnerships require enabling parents become involved in the following levels (1) parenting (becoming aware and knowledgeable about child development and providing resources to create home environments that enhance learning); (2) communicating (effective, appropriate, relevant, two-way contact about school events and student progress in the home environment; (3) volunteering (organizing and participating in activities initiated by school personnel); (4) learning at home (providing information to parents and families to help them augment their children's academic activities); (5) decision-making (including parents and families as representatives and leaders in school committees; and (6) collaborating with the community (integrating resources and services in the community to help meet the needs of school personnel, students, and their families.

This study sought to examine furthermore the dimension of parental involvement which was not strongly discussed in previous studies. It focused on the nature and types of embedded identities that of parents of reading-at-risk Grade Two pupils appropriated for themselves. It was guided by this research question: In what ways does a parent education program influence the identity of parents of reading-at-risk Grade Two pupils? What would be the results of such change?

A key concept in both psychological and anthropological research, "identity" provides individuals with a sense of self that is largely shaped by surrounding social contexts. These social contexts shape identities, which are developed by social roles and social positions. Parental involvement in the home, school, and social communities can contribute to the development of embedded identities that emerge as the result of everyday practices (Bernstein, 2005) and correspond to identifications in parents' routine social lives (Taylor,

2000). The performativity theory, which holds its origins in performance, linguistic, and gender studies, may be largely influential in the development of identities, as it constitutes certain identities as consequences of social norms (Schein, 1999). Social norms are unconsciously created out of habits, expectations, and fulfillment of personal objectives, but they make individual identities conform to social needs; social norms therefore acquire authority from regularity. Identity concern in the context of learning can be explained by Paulo Freire's (1972) idea that learning is a process of transformation from being objects to becoming subjects. In other words, learning is a process of subject-making, of acquiring new identities.

METHODOLOGY

This study utilized a descriptive qualitative research method called ethnography, which involves "a detailed description of a particular culture primarily based on fieldwork which is the term all anthropologists use for on-location research" (Haviland, Prins, McBride & Walrath, 2011). Such fieldwork requires participant observation popularized by Spradley (1980). This situates the ethnographer participating…"in people's daily lives for an extended period of time, watching what happens, listening to what is said, asking questions-in-fact, collecting whatever data are available to throw light on the issues that are the focus of the research" (Murtagh, 2007). Clifford Geertz likened ethnography to "peeling back layer upon layer of socially constructed meanings…towards a 'thick description' of the event in a detailed ethnographic narrative" (Haviland et al, 2011).

Participants' Profile

The parent participants are residents of two villages near the UP College of Education. They have children who were diagnosed as reading at risk. Intervention for these reading-at-risk pupils and their families was provided by the College of Education at the University of the Philippines. The intervention was three-pronged: a special one hour a week tutorial program conducted by a group of students. The second component is a one hour per week literacy program aired by a radio station in the University. The third component was a discussion group for the parents or caregivers. Parents who joined the discussion sessions were provided with a portable radio which they will use in listening to the literacy program aired by the local radio station. The discussion sessions were meant to discuss lessons learned and to answer questions they might have about supporting their children's education.

There were 40 pupils who were identified to participate in the reading intervention program. Their parents were invited to join the discussion sessions through house-to-house invitation personal and printed invitation sent through the teachers. And out of supposed 40 parent participants, only 14 participants were willing to join the group discussions which lasted for 10 weeks. The group consisted of one grandmother; one grandfather; one older sister; and the rest were mothers with an average age of 36. Two of the mothers worked as street vendors, one was a house helper, one was a volunteer teacher aid, and the rest were stay-at-home mothers. Only one of them reached college level education.

The participants lived in two (2) communities with a combined population of more than 15,000 settlers and a land area of 8 hectares. The whole area is vulnerable to calamities. When a super typhoon hit the Philippines in 2008, it was reported that the two communities were submerged in over 10-feet deep water (Tucay, 2009). In the summer of 2012, a fire razed several houses killing three people (GMA News, 2012). Both have been classified as urban poor communities and are populated by informal transient settlers who relocated in the area after their homes were demolished due to various government building constructions

(The UP Gazette, 2006). The two communities are typically poor urban populated. Many of the houses were crudely constructed shacks made of loose galvanized iron sheets, discarded plywood and used tarpaulins. On the roofs are old tires, rocks or hollow blocks that serve as counterweights for the roofs against strong winds. In front of the houses are many small children, adults and some pet animals like chickens and fighting cocks. On one side of the village is a one-story building that serves as the village health center. To its right is the elementary school, the largest structure in the community. There is a guard stationed at the gate to keep the children inside the school and to manage the traffic when the morning shift pupils leave the school at 11:00am (and the second shift pupils would be crowding the area). The last time one of the researchers visited the place, she saw several families who looked like flood or fire victims. Next to the small multi-purpose hall is a covered basketball court where shirtless boys and men are incessantly playing. Across the basketball court one finds a stage and the village hall. As one walks further, beyond the basketball court, one would find a busy road with all sorts of stores lining both sides. Sometimes a tricycle would come in causing a traffic jam. There is a chapel and a small playground in the middle and opposite to playground is the village day care center. One would hardly see the entrance of the village day care center because there is a meat shop blocking the entrance. Perpendicular to the main roads are more tiny alleys where most of the houses in the village are found. The houses near the main road are either concrete or semi-concrete. The crudely made shacks are found in the innermost parts.

The Program

As mentioned earlier, the program for parents was one of three components of a bigger project. Snapshot of a typical week would include literacy/numeracy lessons where undergraduate students tutor Grade Two reading-at-risk pupils every Monday morning. Simultaneously, every Monday morning too, parents listened through their radios to the Radyo Edukado program. It featured teaching strategies on reading, writing, arithmetic, and discussions on relevant educational issues through Radyo Edukado's hosts and guest experts, most of whom were College of Education professors. Then, every Saturday afternoon, group discussions with parents were conducted. The discussion group lasted from December, 2011 to March 2012. The lessons that were discussed on air and through the discussion groups were based on an Early Reading Modules written by Professor Felicitas Pado. The topics discussed during the 10-week program were the following. It must be noted that the lessons started weeks before the data gathering period:

Topic	Sounds and letters
Playing and Reading	Review Letter m, a, s
The Alphabet	Letter "i"
Reading and Writing at Home	Letter "b"
"Numeracy"	Letter "o"
Comparing (e.g. length, width, weight, etc.)	Letter "t"
Recognizing Shapes and Petterns	Letter "e"
Counting	Letter "l"
Computing	Letter "u"

Data Gathering

For data gathering, the ten (10) weekly group discussions were documented. Some of these sessions were video-recorded. One-on-one formal and informal interviews were also conducted to support data gathered from group meetings. Notes from the interviews, home visits, participant observation, reflection journals, and other formal and informal events were transcribed. Significant direct quotes were carefully jotted down. Fictitious names were used for the participants and places mentioned in this study to protect the privacy of those involved. Two faculty researchers who are doctoral students (majoring in Anthropology/Sociology of Education and Special Education) and two research assistants who were master of education students majoring in Non-formal Education were involved in data gathering and fieldwork.

The weekly group discussion sessions were held **e**very Saturday 3:00-4:30 pm from December 17, 2011 to March 19, 2012 at the Grade 2 classroom of the school site. The group discussion always started with an icebreaker or community singing. This activity would be followed by handling questions or concerns from the previous Monday's radio episode in order to evaluate what they had learned. Third, a videotaped replay of the radio episode was shown so as to reinforce what they had listened to. The videotaped program allowed the parents to see the faces of the hosts, guests, and the sample materials they use as illustration like a storybook or a poster. The viewing would be followed by the discussion and sharing time. After the discussion, the parents would swap children storybooks with each other. The storybooks were provided by the research team. A hands-on **s**imulated storytelling activity would be held where one parent would demonstrate her storytelling skills (taught earlier) and how she applied the strategies suggested by the radio episode. Lastly, snacks would be served. Parents would usually tag their small children along because no one would watch them at home. On research assistant was assigned to facilitate games and educational activities for them at an adjacent covered court.

DATA ANALYSIS

After the data gathering period, three doctoral students coded and analyzed the transcribed data using triangulation. Thematic analysis and case study were used. Firstly, this method involved crafting a dense and holistic description and, secondly, identifying emerging and recurring themes and categories. Categories were analyzed and tested to ensure convergence divergence. In the whole process, both inside and outside perspectives of the phenomenon were taken into account.

Upon completion of the program, the parents who participated expressed that they had transformed attitudes and beliefs about the learning process of their children. They were able to develop new literacy practices for use at home and in the community, and many revealed that their children had become more energetic about learning and studying outside of school. These changes in the parents and their children resulted from their conscious efforts to utilize new strategies to facilitate learning for their children. The transformations experienced by the parents confirmed that they acquired three new identities: identity as a tutor, identity as a storyteller, and identity as a fun and effective parent.

Identity as a Tutor

Parents realized from the radio program that they could be tutors to their own children. Private tutorial services in the Philippines have been proliferating. One owner of a tutorial center claimed that at least half of pupils from middle class and above families is enjoying tutorial services after class hours. Such services would cost at least $6 dollars per hour which

can be equivalent to more than half of a worker's minimum wage. Certainly, pupils from poor families cannot afford such special services. The only tutoring they can receive is provided by volunteers or by their parents or family members.

The parent participants shared how they were able to teach their children writing and letter recognition using familiar words and images such as environmental print like identifying signs, labels, and logos on billboards along the highway. In teaching letter recognition, one parent said she told her child: "For the letter B, what are examples of the letter B? Bear Brand, Bread Pan. Come, let's cut and paste them." The research group assigned to collect data from the tutorial services reported that there was a modest gain in the pupils' reading ability after a semester- long tutoring. (Preclaro & Alcazar 2012)

One mother expressed how she became more open to ideas for teaching and encouraging literacy practice at home: "Allow the child to write and write. Allocate a place in the house where he can draw, color. It's easier for him to hold a big pencil. Playing with clay, using sticky, clean soil…They also like books where animals speak. Maybe to let their imagination work…" The parents used what they learned to create regular learning habits at home, such as setting practice schedules and integrating teaching into everyday events within the home or the community. They also learned behavior management techniques that encouraged greater efforts in learning and more self-expression for their children. Moreover, parents applied the rewards system: "I put a star or give a gift if my child performs well and a sad face if he doesn't listen."

Identity as a Storyteller

The emphasis on literacy throughout the radio program encouraged parents to devote more time to reading with and to their children at home. Practice periods and discussions in the group sessions gave the parents more confidence in reading at home using strategies that would help develop literacy skills. Another parent realized the importance of letting her child choose what story to read: "It's different when she gets to choose what we read, she becomes more interested." Parents were able to use strategies that helped develop their children's listening comprehension skills as well, such as asking what the pictures represented. One of the attitudes specifically transformed by the program was that previously, the parents commonly viewed their children's incorrect answers unfavorably. The change that resulted revealed appreciation of mistakes and the use of encouragement in understanding the correct answers.

Identity as Fun & Effective Parents

Upon completing the program, the parents realized that they could create opportunities to have fun and encourage literacy learning through literary references, games, and songs. Parents said that they learned to play new literacy games with their children, as taught on the radio, like "Bring Me," "Touch the Color" and Filipino children's folk songs. The parents were able to integrate stories to self-help activities like taking a bath. One parent said that her child was no longer lazy in taking a bath because they read a funny story entitled, "Just add Dirt," where vegetables grew out of the skin of a child who refused to take a bath.

A mother confessed that after knowing how to tutor her low performing child, she has become kinder and more patient. She described how she would be harsh in dealing with her child in the past, "I'd hit him with a clothes hanger until it broke into pieces. Now, I have become more patient. Maybe that's the most beautiful thing that happened to me, I became more patient. Before I joined the program, if my child could not read, I would easily get

angry. But now, I understand him better. I don't hit him anymore. Before, I would scold him, 'We've been reading for a time now, still you don't get it?' Now, I do not yell at him anymore."

Another parent said, "Before, I would hit the fingers of my son if he doesn't get it. But because of the parent education program, I'm not like that anymore. Not anymore even if he is slow in writing." These transformed attitudes and new strategies used by the parents facilitated better learning and encouraged their children with more positive attitudes towards education. While in the past they thought that learning was solely the child's responsibility, now they have realized that it is a shared task.

Overall, the outcome of the parent education became so pronounced at the end. The storytelling skill of one parent was demonstrated as part of the culmination activity. At the end of the 10-week intervention period, pupils and their parents got together for a celebration. One parent, went forward, opened a book and read a story before the forty Grade Two children participants. The children were all eyes and ears on the parent storyteller during the whole 20-minute duration of the story. At the start, the children were seated on the floor but as the story was unfolding, they stood up and came closer to the parent-storyteller. At that point, it was not just a "plain parent" who was speaking at the front; it was a mother turned tutor, storyteller and a better parent.

IMPLICATION AND CONCLUSION

Transformation of attitudes and beliefs about identities and the learning process were evident among parents after the program**.** The development of literacy practices had a multiplier effect in terms of personal empowerment, leadership development, and parents' new identities as tutor, storyteller, and fun, non-violent parents. The study shows that parents' teaching skills can be tapped, and they can become Para-teachers or teacher-aides in order to address perennial problems in education among the poor. The quality of education for poor communities is usually adversely affected by large classes, large teacher-pupil ratio, lack of classrooms, textbooks, and other resources. Professional teachers in the classroom can serve as parent trainors, and the parent-teacher associations can be an avenue for training and greater participation of parents in the education of their children. Follow- up studies on ethno theories of parents can be done to better support and strengthen a parent training program. The interventions for earning of reading-at-risk pupils should be provided inside and outside the school

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