

Psychometric Analysis of the Elementary Experience Scale and Its Predictability of Elementary Literacy Scores

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Abstract

This research highlights the importance of promoting appropriate family literacy practices to avoid barriers between the home and school lives of students. The development of an Elementary Experiences Scale (EES) was necessary to predict the parent's perception of their own school experiences in comparison to their students' literacy achievement scores. Parents of elementary students were asked to complete a survey about their personal school experiences and the responses were compared to their student's Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS) scores. Results found that the parent survey predicted student reading achievement variance for correct letter sounds and whole words read in nonsense word fluency. The survey did not predict any of the reading fluency outcomes for the mid-year assessment; however, the survey did predict composite scores of the first grade students. These findings suggest some validation of the scale's use in predicting the effect of parents' elementary experiences on that of their students' early reading progression. This research also helps to support the need for family literacy practices in the schools.

OVERVIEW

As Meditation XVII by John Donne reads, “No man is an island.” The same can be said of the educators that have established themselves as the leaders in their classrooms around our world. What the great instructors already know is that they cannot remain oblivious to the world around them. They must reach beyond the walls of their classrooms to incorporate the community and traditions of their students into their curricula to have the most fulfilled and effective results from their teaching efforts. Building a home to school connection is essential for any educational establishment. The purpose of this study was to investigate the rationalization of the school to community connection, concentrating on the field of early literacy. There is discussion of the previous research conducted in this topic area and both a validation of the practices mentioned as well as a highlighting of the effective means for creating a community atmosphere in the schools. The primary purpose of this study was to conduct a psychometric evaluation for a newly developed Elementary Experiences Scale (EES) which was administered to parents in order to further investigate effective methods of bridging the gap students may encounter from their home to school environments.

According to Low (2011), “If children do not enjoy reading in school and do not read outside of the classroom, there will be an impact on their potential achievement both in literacy and across the curriculum” (p. 8). This is why family literacy opportunities can prove to be so valuable for students. Family literacy itself can take many different forms and variations, but typically has to do with some type of literacy activity being completed in the home environment, such as reading a book together (Leseman & Jong, 1998). Early childhood family literacy practices, or lack thereof, have been found to be directly related to later reading success or struggle for students once they enter formal schooling (Jordan, Snow, & Porche, 2000; Senechal & LeFevre, 2002; Sonnenschein & Munsterman, 2002; Hart & Risley, 2003). Parents need to be empowered in their abilities to sustain student progress at home and trained in ways to help foster the most vital early literacy skills (Bird, 2005; Lynch, 2009; Skouteris, Watson, & Lum, 2012; Swick, 2009). Bennett, Weigel, and Martin (2002) found that there was a significant relation to the Family as Educator theoretical model and student language and literacy academic outcomes during their research. Additionally, students who enter the school system from families of low socioeconomic status or from a nonnative language-speaking family have shown exponential gains and benefits from family literacy programming in particular (Zhang, Pelletier, & Doyle, 2010; Zaman, 2006). The evidence in early childhood literacy practices suggests schools and families must form a partnership in the beginning of a child’s educational career for the best interest of everyone involved. But how does one begin this process?

Meeting in the Middle

One could assume that as long as there have been families, there have been family literacy practices being passed down from generation to generation as part of the deeply rooted traditions of society. Unfortunately, the home to school disconnect has grown ex-

ponentially over the last few generations as each of the two camps have been almost pitted against one another. It seems that, “current conventional wisdom tells us that ‘many parents just don’t care anymore’...[causing t]eachers [to] decry this condition by announcing, ‘If parents did a better job parenting, we teachers wouldn’t have such a difficult time teaching’” (Shockley, Michalove, & Allen, 1995, p. 4). Needless to say, repairing the rapport between educators and families can be a slow and arduous process. However, like anything else, it has to begin somewhere. Just as teachers should not perform their daily tasks as “an island,” the student also should not be made to feel like they are utterly isolated and alone at school. Incorporating traditions from the home environment into the classroom provides access to the background knowledge that can ignite a child’s learning process. Velez-Ibanez and Greenberg (1992) refer to this tapping into students’ prior knowledge or family traditions as the “funds of knowledge” (p. 313). If educators correctly do their research on the backgrounds of their students, they will be able to access these so called funds of knowledge for their own classrooms’ benefit and also to the success and delight of their students. Getting the family involved is the key. Again, numerous research articles provide evidence that students whose families participate in reading practices at home have a better rate of success in literacy related practices than students whose families do not take an active role in their child’s education (Christian et al., 1998; Epstein, 2001; Smith, 2010).

Family Literacy Nights

One method for getting parents involved in their child’s education is through the implementation of family literacy nights at the schools. During these events, parents are invited to collaborate with educational specialist about the best literacy methods for them to practice at home with their students (Sink et al., 2005). Many times the parents are willing and able to help their child become more successful in school. However, they do not feel confident in their own knowledge to help out at home. These nights can help break down the barrier of school and home relationships. Also, these family nights can provide a better foundation for consistent reading intervention and practices conducted both within the school and at the student’s home environment. When families are provided with an easy-to-follow model and time to practice the model’s specifications with educator support, they are more likely to continue such methods at home with their students (Green & Anyon, 2010). Providing a cohesive reading foundation for the students to practice reading at both home and school can only result in more success for the young readers. Student success is the true goal of any family and school program, such as the family literacy night initiative. Rosemary (2010) supports this thought by stating that the major objectives for schools hosting family literacy nights should be to “entice parents into the school so they can become comfortable with an educational system that may be unfamiliar to them [and] give parents time to help their children read and be successful in school” (p. 10).

Study Groups

What better way to build once again upon the idealization that no man is an island than by the family literacy initiative known as study groups? The arduous process of de-

coding a text that is foreign in both language and background knowledge to the reader is one that often results in frustration and failure of proper completion by the student. As mentioned with literacy nights, parents can truly benefit from having one on one time with educators to learn strategies to help their student succeed. Parents need to be informed of what to specifically do at home to help. Study groups can be comprised of parents and teachers, older and younger generations, or even parents and students (Allen, 2007). Having this bonding time, no matter the pairing, has been shown to be an effective means of communicating and showing support for one another, all the while developing necessary literacy practices. When teachers have time to work individually with the families some of the stereotypes and barriers to communication that may have been present before the meetings seem to dissipate, thus opening the floor for both parents and educators working together in the best interest of the students.

Bridging Barriers to the Connection

The ideals of family literacy programming may sound enticing, but unfortunately many times they are easier said than done. Harris and Goodall (2008) bring up the point that, "schools rather than parents are often 'hard to reach,'" indicating that school officials need to be more open minded to what information they can gain from the families instead of the other way around (p. 227). Gaining a shared acceptance of one another in literacy practices is often times difficult, especially where language barriers may be present (Compton-Lilly, Rogers, and Lewis, 2012; Farver et al., 2012; Wong, 2012). Typical problems in family literacy programming can range from the small to the extreme, such as transportation problems for the families or even participants feeling that they are being judged as an outsider to the school personnel (Grace & Trudgett, 2012). According to Timmons (2008), there is even hardship on the research end of family literacy studies due to funding, recruitment, and authentic participation. Attrition of participants was found to be an issue noted in the family literacy studies as well, which affects both research opportunities and the efficiency of the program. The bottom line is that families are not going to attend where they do not feel welcome. Additionally, the programs offered should be worth their time. Families with young children seem to have so many responsibilities that could be deemed valuable to their everyday lives. It is no surprise that some family obligations may be considered more valuable to a family's current life goals than literacy practices being implemented correctly in the home. Literacy programs in the community have to compete with many extraneous factors, but it is vital for planners of family literacy events to note these issues and be conscientious to the diverse needs of those they are serving. Being positive, considerate, and as flexible as possible when designing the program is a good beginning to implementation of a successful series. One should keep in mind that occasionally the events that unfold around family literacy programming are beyond anyone's control and these opportunities can provide both negative and positive experiences for all involved. Remember, negative experiences can be molded into positive ones if participants work together and build upon growing beyond previous mishaps or work to rectify any miscommunication. In literacy

practices and beyond, clear communication between all parties is key, but this practice may require time and patience to develop.

Context of this Study

Bridging the gap between home and school in order to maintain that neither the pupil, the teacher, nor the parent feels like they are treading the sometimes desolate territory of teaching and learning alone is the true goal of incorporating family literacy into a school's curricula. An educator equipped with the funds of knowledge from a student's family heritage and home life can truly be the foundation for formatting authentic literacy lessons (Moll et al., 1992). These parallel practices help to build a stronger school community. In an ideal situation, students are free to share openly about their family traditions or customs at school and later share with their families what they have been immersed in during school hours. When family literacy is implemented properly in this circular path, the school truly feels like a home away from home for the students, and the gateway for future success is open for all to travel. As the literature review indicated, getting parents into the schools is the first step. However, there are few research studies that have been conducted to indicate exactly what can happen if an adult caretaker has a negative attitude towards their own early educational journeys and what effect that may have on their own child's learning progression. Medinnus (1962) developed such a scale for determining "parent attitude toward education," but the results left much to be validated in the single-study experiment (p. 102). In contrast, our study proposed a similar parent attitude towards education scale, with an added component of correlating the parents' scores to their students' early literacy skills. It was hypothesized that the positive or negative educational experiences that the adults had when they were in school could have an influence on their children's attitudes towards school, and therefore their students' academic progress in school. An investigation was necessary to see if any particular school factors had more influence than others on the parents' elementary experiences. Research was also needed to determine if the data found could be of use in future family literacy programming in order to aid in breaking down any home to school resistance or animosity present in adults with young literacy learners.

METHODS

Participants

Even though student scores were used, the participants for this study only included the parents of first graders who agreed to take the online survey. Students' scores used were based on their parents' willingness and agreement to participate in the survey, and were drawn from two schools in the middle Tennessee area. The schools were located at various geographical locations throughout this large, mostly suburban school system. It should be noted that both schools used for the purposes of this study were considered to be community schools, each on the outskirts of the district. For conformity purposes in participants and in type of student scores available from the schools to use, only parents of first grade students were given the opportunity to participate. This created a grand total of 13

classrooms involved in the study, with an average of about 20 families per classroom. Even though this accounts for approximately 260 families initially being offered the opportunity to partake in the research, 42 students' families signed the permission form to participate in the study and 41 completed scales were received for data analysis by the researcher.

Since all of the surveys were completed online by one guardian in the first graders' families, the adult participants' ages varied greatly. The first grade students' ages were more consistent, ranging from about 6 to 7 years old, on average. Both genders of adult and student participants were asked to be part of this study and no participant's data were excluded unless the researcher could not collect a complete data set. For example, if a student had recently moved to the school district and correlating test scores could not be obtained for valid comparisons of scores, they were excluded from the study. While about an even number of male and female students were represented in the literacy scores, a disproportionate number of parents taking the survey were females. Only 10 of the 41 parents participating in the study's questionnaire identified themselves as male. Student names were coded to match their guardian's assigned participant number for confidentiality purposes and students were not personally contacted during the research experiment. Socioeconomic factors and ethnicity of the families were not considered for the purposes of this research. The socioeconomic status of the students was not taken into consideration since this information was not attached to the students' literacy scores and therefore was not feasible to be gathered for this experiment. This particular project did not investigate the home language of the families involved either, considering the student populations at both the schools used for the experiment had low English language learner (ELL) populations and that extraneous information could skew the limited data available for the parameters of this study.

Materials

As mentioned above, an online scale was administered to the parents. This process took place through a link delivered in an email exclusively to those adults who indicated they were interested in participating in the study. Agreeing to participate in the study simply involved taking a survey and allowing their own child's pre-existing mid-year Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS) tests scores to be compared to their survey results. The scale used in this study was newly developed due to the lack of tangible resources that could be administered to convey accurate information about adult guardians' own elementary school experiences. During the development of the Elementary Experience Scale (EES) by the researcher, six overarching categories emerged from the research in the field of education that indicated some possible effect on a person's elementary school experience. Those themes are as follows: parental support available, social and emotional well-being, teachers and staff at the school, curriculum and assignments given, student organizational skills, and overall attitude towards elementary school. Almost ten questions for each of the six categories were formed, making of a total of 59 questions to be answered on a five-point Likert-type scale. For example, one of the items from the parental support category of the scale stated: "My parents were proud of my progress in elementary school."

Possible responses to the scale's statements ranged from *strongly disagree*, *disagree*, *neutral*, *agree*, or *strongly agree*. It should be noted that questions varied in wording type from positive to negative statements in an effort to help avoid invalid responses from an adult participant by keeping them alert and sensitive to the scale throughout the length of the questionnaire. Also, even though the questions were initially developed in categories, once the scale was administered the questions were each distributed at random.

Students' pre-existing scores from their mid-year DIBELS tests were obtained from the two schools' Response to Intervention (RTI) coaches with parent permission. The DIBELS tests were administered to all of the first grade students throughout the school district during January of 2013 by the same team of RTI coaches who traveled to the elementary schools together during the benchmarking process. This helped ensure conformity and accuracy of the tests' administration. According to the specified protocol for DIBELS first grade mid-year benchmark tests administration, two main test categories and five subcategories were developmentally appropriate to be given and were used for evaluation scores in this study: Nonsense Word Fluency (NWF) was a main category with Correct Letter Sounds (CLS) and Whole Words Read (WWR) as the two subcategories; Oral Reading Fluency (ORF) was the second test domain, with Words Read (WR), Accuracy, and Retell as the three test subcategories under ORF. All tests were administered orally for each individual first grader. During the testing a brief explanation of the directions was given to the students for each subtest, complete with some practice examples and normed feedback by the test administrator. Lastly, the tests were timed for one minute in length and results were recorded into an individual testing booklet for each student. The collected data was later entered into an online database for easy retrieval and comparison between classrooms, schools, and districts (Good & Kaminski, 2010).

DIBELS scores were selected by the researcher for the student literacy scores in this study for several reasons. First, the DIBELS tests were administered throughout the district by the same team of educators in order to provide consistency in implementation. Also, the results were previously compiled for quick and feasible access before the school year's conclusion. Additionally, DIBELS was a widely used and recognizable standardized assessment format in elementary education for literacy, therefore the research-validated scores that DIBELS provided aligned seamlessly to the study's purposes (Rouse & Fantuzzo, 2006).

Procedures and Data Collection

Upon approval from the necessary agents to conduct the research, parental consent forms were sent home with every first grade student from the two schools to divulge the study's purposes and required elements. Classroom teachers communicated to the parents to look for the study information being sent home and also collected the signed consent forms the following school week. No incentives were offered for study participation. After the consent forms were gathered, the educators then sent the researcher the email addresses of the parents who volunteered to participate in the study. The link to the EES

was sent via email directly to the interested parent participants. Data from the scale were collected over two weeks after gathering and securely storing the parents' consent forms. Scale results were entered into a data spreadsheet along with the acquired student DIBELS scores for statistical analysis purposes. As previously noted, a student's scores and matching guardian's scale results were assigned an identical numerical code to prevent confidential information from being distributed inappropriately and to correlate both student and parent data with one another. All data were entered into the Statistical Package for the IBM SPSS version 20 for analysis.

RESULTS

Means and standard deviations for each EES item are listed in Table 1. Means ranged from 2.02 to 4.56. Standard deviations ranged from 0.60 to 1.45 but remained in a stable range overall. Exploratory factor analysis (EFA) was used on the data set to detect survey items with low factor loading scores. Factor loading scores had a wider range of limits with one negative value for item 35 at $-.34$, and the highest value being for item 15 with a factor loading of $.89$. Any survey question with a factor loading score greater than 0.60 was selected for reanalysis for validity purposes of questions used. Since all of the question items with factor loading scores greater than 0.60 pertained to general or overall elementary school experiences, this became the sole named factor in the analysis results. A second analysis was completed with the remaining 35 question items after the items with low factor loadings, and therefore lower impact, had been eliminated. The second factor analysis on the consolidated survey question list resulted in a clear one factor solution with 50.49% of the variance explained by a single factor, confirming the single named contribution factor in the EES as being the impact of general or overall elementary school experiences. In order to confirm the single factor solution, Cronbach's Alpha was computed. The computed Cronbach's Alpha on the remaining survey items revealed a strong reliability index of 0.97 . A regression analysis was done to predict various DIBELS scores with the combined total EES scores. Parents' EES scores were used as a predictor of their own students' DIBELS scores and the results were significant for a couple of DIBELS sub-factors. Parents' EES significantly predicted CLS, $F(1, 40) = 4.26, p < .05, R^2 = .10$, and WWR, $F(1, 40) = 4.28, p < .05, R^2 = .10$. However, parents' EES scores did not predict student fluency goals such as WC, $F(1, 40) = 2.90, p = .10, R^2 = .07$, Accuracy, $F(1, 40) = 2.43, p = .13, R^2 = .06$, or Retell, $F(1, 40) = 2.09, p = .16, R^2 = .05$. Lastly, parents' EES was a significant predictor for the composite DIBELS score, $F(1, 40) = 4.05, p = .05, R^2 = .09$.

DISCUSSION

Several meaningful findings resulted from this family literacy-related research. First, the EES was psychometrically validated. During the validity process of the EES, certain questions developed for the scale were found to have lower impact on the children's reading scores than others, and therefore could be eliminated during further analysis of the data. The survey questions regarding the overall impact of elementary school had significant fac-

tor loadings for almost every question asked. It was most likely for this reason that upon analysis of the results that a clear, single factor solution emerged to account for the variation of parent survey responses when compared to student literacy scores. It is both a significant and a meaningful endeavor to explore the predictability of children's reading ability utilizing parents' elementary school experience. Since family literacy requires a cooperative effort by family members, discerning the relationship between parents' school experience and children's reading skills shed light onto family literacy research. If practitioners in the field of education know specific areas to target in regards to welcoming families into the schools and helping to alleviate parents' past problems encountered during their own school experiences, this information could prove to be immensely groundbreaking. If parents can overcome their negative childhood educational experiences they might be more open to working with the schools to learn strategies to help their students succeed. Teachers can gain many useful communication tips from parents to reach the students as well, but only if parents feel comfortable divulging that information. Families that follow cyclical patterns and therefore suffer generations of reading struggles can benefit indefinably from one educational stakeholder standing up and saying, "The cycle stops here. I care about you and your child. I need you as a partner to help his success. Let's work together."

Pertaining to the literacy scores, two subtests showed significant correlations and two subtests did not materialize significant data. The two subtests that were significant fell under the NWF category of the DIBELS test and included the CLS and the number of WWR. This leaves the subtests under the category of oral reading fluency (words correct, accuracy of reading, and retell) turning up insignificant in the variance of the findings. One could hypothesize that these findings were most likely result of the fact that the DIBELS fluency section is only given as a baseline for mid-year testing in first grade, and this was the first time this test section had been administered to the students (Good & Kaminski, 2002). The NWF categories have been administered to the students since their Kindergarten year, and therefore the pupils have had many opportunities to work past test anxieties with this type of testing format. Test misunderstanding and or anxiety, especially with the youngest learners, has been known to distort data and could be a possible factor in this research (Cassady & Johnson, 2001). Furthermore, the retell test section of DIBELS does not even list a benchmark goal in mid-year administration for first graders. Since the three insignificant fluency score components were included in the composite score, the overall score of the students showed a small significance in the variance of the findings. During future experiments with the EES using DIBELS scores researchers may consider eliminating the fluency scores from the analysis completely or using the year-end benchmark scores. Adjusting the fluency score factors in the future would help investigate if a more significantly correlated composite score could be achieved from the data.

The major limitation of this study included the low sample size and, therefore, the lack of statistical analysis that could have yielded significant results from the data. This was the first time the newly-developed EES was administered, so the small sample size

affected the power of the statistical tests. Effects are more difficult to detect in statistical analyses without error during small-scale investigations. Additionally, survey participants were gathered from the same local school district and not administered on a large enough scale to help rule out any results found from this research being generalized to a single area's population. The primary researcher plans to collect data indicating parents' socioeconomic status for comparison in future studies with the EES since that information was unobtainable during this study.

Implications for future studies using the EES are great. Using the validity factors of the questions conducted in this study, researchers could reduplicate the experiment eliminating the questions that were found to have low factor loading scores during EFA. Administering the survey to a greater number of parent participants would allow for a more in-depth statistical analysis, such as employing the item response theory (IRT) methodologies. IRT could be performed in order to further validate and refine the individual effectiveness of the questions used in the EES survey. The schools used in this study did not contain large ELL populations of students. For this reason, the primary language spoken by the families was not investigated during the experiment but certainly could be taken into consideration in future studies using the EES. Family literacy practices are contingent on schools and families being able to effectively communicate to one another. Consequently, language barriers are a crucial potential factor to both the literacy acquisition process for students and a parent's overall school experience.

Families that read together learn and grow together. Schools that offer family literacy opportunities also benefit from the cohesiveness developed during school and community uniting events. An issue arises when some adults do not feel welcome or comfortable in the school settings simply based on their own experiences when they were students themselves. The EES results highlight this fact. The adults' level of anxiety, mistrust, or general aversion to the world of academics can transfer to their students' early learning progress if action is not taken to alleviate fears and break down the barriers of a preconceived negative notion about schools and their intentions for students. Parents want to help their students achieve; they just need to know how. Moreover, they need to feel comfortable approaching educational professionals for guidance. Educators and parents alike can gain from each other's expertise. Families are the schools' greatest resource and a better bridge to helping welcome them into the school community. Family literacy initiatives are the key to paving the way for better practices between home and school.

Table 1

Means and Standard Deviations for EES Items

Item	M (SD)	Item	M (SD)	Item	M (SD)
1	4.20 (0.90)	21	4.46 (0.60)	41	2.61 (0.89)
2	3.80 (1.17)	22	3.85 (1.04)	42	2.02 (0.94)
3	4.07 (0.85)	23	3.38 (0.92)	43	4.00 (1.02)
4	3.51 (1.14)	24	4.02 (0.85)	44	4.41 (0.74)
5	4.00 (0.84)	25	3.95 (1.30)	45	4.24 (0.86)
6	4.56 (0.78)	26	4.27 (0.74)	46	4.02 (1.04)
7	3.95 (1.18)	27	3.85 (1.20)	47	3.46 (1.21)
8	4.44 (0.67)	28	4.02 (0.91)	48	4.37 (0.92)
9	4.12 (0.90)	29	3.90 (0.74)	49	3.24 (1.45)
10	3.90 (0.83)	30	3.46 (1.14)	50	2.93 (1.15)
11	3.76 (0.99)	31	4.00 (0.97)	51	3.73 (1.03)
12	4.22 (0.85)	32	3.93 (1.06)	52	3.93 (0.98)
13	3.20 (1.29)	33	2.95 (1.38)	53	3.66 (0.82)
14	3.44 (1.23)	34	4.00 (0.87)	54	4.00 (0.77)
15	3.66 (1.02)	35	3.73 (0.95)	55	3.59 (0.97)
16	4.34 (0.82)	36	3.67 (1.26)	56	3.73 (0.87)
17	4.00 (1.00)	37	3.98 (0.79)	57	4.46 (0.78)
18	3.95 (0.89)	38	4.17 (0.92)	58	3.17 (1.38)
19	3.85 (0.91)	39	3.61 (1.05)	59	4.24 (0.80)
20	4.32 (0.69)	40	3.90 (0.83)		

Note. n = 41.

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