



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.

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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).