

11-22-2017

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### Recommended Citation

Holder, Ashley; Wilson-Jones, Linda; Phillips, Brian; Jones, Paris; and Jones, Jerry D. (2017) "Elementary Administrators' Exploring the Factors that Promote or Inhibit Reading Achievement," *Journal of Research Initiatives*: Vol. 3 : No. 1 , Article 16.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.unccfsu.edu/jri/vol3/iss1/16>

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# Elementary Administrators' Exploring the Factors that Promote or Inhibit Reading Achievement

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## ELEMENTARY SCHOOL ADMINISTRATORS EXPLORING THE FACTORS THAT PROMOTE OR INHIBIT READING ACHIEVEMENT

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### Abstract



The purpose of this study is was explore the factors that public school administrators felt promoted or inhibited the reading achievement of elementary children. The participants for this study were administrators who were employed at eleven Title I schools in North Carolina. The study used a qualitative design and collected data by phone interviews. Several overarching recurring themes and patterns surfaced that administrators perceived promoted reading achievement (a) family support, (b) early literacy exposure, and (c) teacher effectiveness and expectations. The recurring themes that they perceived inhibited reading achievement were (a) lack of early literacy exposure, (b) lack of family support, and (c) lack of teacher and parental expectations.

### Introduction

Over the past decades, many programs have been implemented to address the concerns of low reading achievement among elementary students. However, despite these programs some elementary children continue to be low proficient in reading. According to a report published by the Annie E. Casey Foundation (2010), failure to read proficiently by the end of third grade is linked to higher rates of school dropout. Webley (2011) referred to a study conducted by Hernandez, a sociology professor at the City University of New York, who found that 26 percent of third-graders who lived in poverty and not able to read on grade level would eventually drop out or fail to graduate on time.

Poor reading comprehension continues to be a dominant trend among elementary students, especially those attending Title I schools. Even though federal dollars have made it possible to detect the early warning signs of low reading performance, many Title I students continue to lack mastery in reading. Therefore, research is needed to understand exactly why this is a continued pattern in public schools and most importantly, how educators can begin to resolve this phenomenon.

The purpose of this study was to explore the factors that public school administrators felt promoted or inhibited the reading achievement of elementary children.

The following research questions guided this study:

1. What are administrators' perceptions of the factors that promote students' reading achievement?
2. What are administrators' perceptions of the factors that inhibit students' reading achievement?

### Economically Disadvantaged Students and Education

Research is necessary to find solutions to stop the catastrophe of economically deprived individuals' failure to obtain an education, it is society's responsibility to ensure that an equal

education system is available to all children (Ford, Watson, & Ford, 2014). It is essential to investigate factors that inhibit the economically deprived child from scoring low on reading proficiency, which hinders them from being successful in a globally competitive society.

According to Stinnett (2014), students from higher economically advantaged homes generally outperform students who come from lower socioeconomic families. This is mainly due to the availability of resources that are sometimes not available to children from low socioeconomic families. Hagens and Good (2013) also indicated that children from low socioeconomic backgrounds were more prone to reading difficulties, and these children were more likely to acquire persistent learning problems that may have long-term detrimental consequences. Stinnett (2014) claimed that students from low-income families enter high school five years behind those from high-income backgrounds. Again, this is contributed to the unequal distribution of wealth that separates one group from another, solely based on wealth. It is vital for individuals to obtain literacy skills that will enable them to excel and become productive citizens of society, and it is the responsibility of the school systems to provide the resources for all students' success.

Research from the Annie E. Casey Foundation 2014, found that children raised in economically disadvantaged homes encountered excessive levels of stress that impacted their health, brain development, and social and emotional well-being. Jensen (2009) stated that disadvantaged children are often left at home to fend for themselves while the guardian works strenuous hours. Ironically, it was noted that individuals from financially stable homes were unaware of the level of pressure that children from low-income homes face on a daily basis. The researcher further noted that children raised in poverty face overwhelming challenges that affluent children never have to encounter. Therefore, it becomes the responsibility of educators to close the achievement gap that exist among the two groups of students.

However, despite the barriers that many low-income children face, studies have found that these children can be successful and resilient during their academic path. Fenske (2013) reported that low-income elementary children could be successful when teachers demonstrate positive perceptions and high expectations for these students. Simpson (2014) also found that low-income students were able to succeed against the odds in literacy because they had family support, a strong sense of self, and teachers who believed in their academic success.

### **Promoting Reading Achievement**

Williams, Greenleaf, Albert, and Barnes (2014) found that school personnel play a critical role in the development of educational resilience among students labeled at-risk for school failure. Furthermore, the researchers mentioned that principals, support staff, and teachers should strive to do the following:

1. Bring together families, schools, and communities through collaborative efforts such as strength-based partnership programs.
2. Advocate for students in and out of school.
3. Learn more about the students' lives outside of school.
4. Assist parents in understanding and navigating the politics of schools.
5. Assist parents in accessing social capital.
6. Integrate an ethic of care in school policies and practices.
7. Teach African American students about resiliency.
8. Integrate resiliency into daily duties.
9. Identify diverse forms of parent/caregiver involvement.
10. Provide different outlets for family participation.

Flynt and Brozo (2009) implied that ongoing mentoring and professional development should be offered to teachers by literacy coaches and others who have demonstrated knowledge and skills in connecting with students to help them achieve higher levels of reading. Jay (2011) explored the principal's role in high-poverty schools with high literacy achievement, and found that collaboration, reflective practice, progress monitoring, literacy experts, and maintaining a climate that promotes trust and respect were all recurring themes that promoted literacy. Harris (2011) reported that organized structures that consisted of effective collaboration, data driven instruction, and effective decision making contributed to high reading scores.

The Internet is certainly a way to reach out to all children, Flynt and Brozo (2009) indicated that the Internet is ultimately a major way to promote literacy and should be utilized in classrooms. The authors noted that teachers who do not have experience with social networking or YouTube are missing opportunities to connect to their students' lives and interests. If teachers can make this personal connection with their students in the classroom, it will enhance all students' literacy knowledge. The Annie E. Casey Foundation (2010) reported that all children are owed a fair and equal opportunity to succeed, and the nation's workforce, employers, and universities would benefit from a larger population of high school graduates who are prepared to compete in a globally competitive society.

According to research, it is suggested that school personnel strive to develop trusting relationships with their students and make personal connections during instruction to their students' lives and personal interests (Davis, Gableman, & Wingfield, 2011; Flynt & Brozo, 2009). Davis et al., (2011) studied first graders' relationship with teachers as a means for promoting achievement. Through an interview protocol they were able to determine that low-income children felt more confident when they trusted their teachers. It is imperative that educators show students that they believe in them by forming positive relationships so that achievement gains can happen for all children.

Research found that when students participated in cooperative learning, their academic achievement revealed significant growth (Wilson-Jones & Caston, 2004). According to McNair (2006), cooperative learning implemented in many schools has shown a positive influence on students' academic achievement. Zarei and Keshavarz (2011) reported that cooperative learning had statistically significant effects on both vocabulary and reading comprehension. The researchers further voiced that cooperative learning is imperative to the school curriculum and the academic success of children.

### **Method**

This study used a qualitative design. Obtaining qualitative data allowed the researcher to capture rich data from the participants on their perceptions of the factors that promoted or inhibited reading achievement in elementary Title I schools. Bellenger, Bernhardt, and Golstucker (2011) stated that choosing a qualitative design allows a researcher to understand how individuals feel and think. Therefore, this approach allowed the researchers to focus on the administrators' feelings, experiences, and thoughts. The qualitative approach also enabled the researchers to better understand administrators' perceptions of the factors that they perceived contributed to reading achievement. Creswell (2013) reported that qualitative research steps consist of organizing the data, conducting a preliminary read-through of the database, coding and organizing themes, representing the data, and forming an interpretation of them.

### **Selection Criteria**

The school sites were selected based on their Title I designation. After permission to conduct the study was obtained, the superintendent of each school district was contacted to gain

permission to begin the study. Next, administrators of the purposely-selected school sites were contacted by forwarding the approval consent to conduct the study, along with the consent letter requesting their participation. The participants were males and females over the age of 18 and were employed and certified as educators in the state of North Carolina. After participation was accepted, the most convenient time for the phone interview was discussed and scheduled. The phone interviews were recorded for clarity purposes. Each interview was conducted at one session and took approximately 45 minutes each. All interviews were kept confidential, and the data were reported without violating the confidentiality of the participants. An interview protocol was created to gather rich and meaningful data from the participants.

## Results

### Lack of Early Literacy Exposure

Lack of early literacy exposure was a recurring theme in the study. Participants shared that when students are not exposed to literacy in their early years, their reading achievement would be inhibited. The participants' beliefs are consistent with Ferguson (2014), who conveyed that toddlers should experience early literacy activities with parents. The Annie E. Casey Foundation (2014) report supports findings, noting that the earlier years of life are the time span when the most brain growth occurs, which lays the foundation for later learning and achievement. The findings from this study also support Shue, Shore and Lambert (2012), who stated that the types of experiences children have in the early years would have a lifelong impact on them. Therefore, children need that early literacy exposure to succeed in the area of reading. One administrator stated:

I think the leading academic challenge for students living in low socioeconomic homes is the lack of language exposure. This is evident on their [low socioeconomic students] first day of kindergarten.

Another remarked:

One of the challenges is that they [low socioeconomic students] are just not prepared when they enter public education. These [low socioeconomic] parents don't have the same resources: money and computers. They [low socioeconomic students] are not able to engage in that early needed exposure to develop a positive literacy base at home.

Another administrator summed up by stating:

It all goes back to what the research says about them [low socioeconomic students] being exposed to vocabulary terms. These [low socioeconomic] students already come into the setting knowing thousands of fewer words than students who are above the poverty line. I think the leading academic challenges facing students from low socioeconomic homes is lack of access and opportunity. These students [low socioeconomic students] also lack exposure to many online resources.

### Lack of Family Support

The administrators conveyed that lack of family support inhibited a child's reading ability, and that family support is imperative for a child to experience reading success. Chansa-Kabali and Westerholm (2014) finding are consistent with the perceptions of the participants in this study, as they implied that the family is an important component to the child's reading process. Their remarks also mirrored Ishak's et al. (2012) study that found parents who show high involvement in their child's education tend to produce high academic performance in children.

An administrator stated:

A big piece of it [academic challenge] goes back to these [low socioeconomic] students not being read to. Also, there seems to be a difference in the value of education at home for these [low socioeconomic] children.

Another commented:

A lot of it [academic challenge] is due to their [low socioeconomic students] instability at home. These [low socioeconomic] children have to live in very poor houses; they have to live with other people often, and their parents are working long hours. Often you see these [low socioeconomic] children taking care of their siblings and themselves. I feel that all of these factors inhibit reading progress for low socioeconomic children.

Another administrator added:

Some of these [low socioeconomic] families don't have a car to get to school and this hinders the parents from being able to attend conferences. Often, we have to send a social worker to go and pick up these [low socioeconomic] parents for conferences.

### **Lack of Teacher and Parental Expectations**

Administrators discussed how some children from low socioeconomic homes do not have the expectations at home or school to enable them to succeed academically. Administrators mentioned that it is necessary to continuously push and motivate children in order to help them be successful in their academic path.

One stated:

I feel that sometimes it is we as educators who are academic challenge, when we know that students come from low socioeconomic homes, we lower the standards. I think we should keep the same level of expectations for all students. As educators, we sometimes are the enemies, because we lower the expectations for these students coming from low socioeconomic homes. We have to continuously push students forward and have high expectations for students to move them forward.

Another mentioned:

I think a lot of these [low socioeconomic] children cannot see themselves as being successful because they are not around a lot of successful people. To these children, not achieving seems to be the norm.

### **Family Support**

The administrators perceived family support to be one of the major contributing factors to reading achievement and implied that an early learning experience was essential to read proficiently. Participants also voiced that family support is a predictor of reading success.

These findings are consistent with Chansa-Kabali and Westerholm (2014), who reported, through a regression analysis of pre-and post-testing, that family support was an important component to the child's reading process. Ferguson (2014) implied that caregivers should praise children's efforts if they want their children to succeed when tasks are difficult. Williams et al. (2014) findings support the administrators' perceptions that students are successful because they have families that were nurturing and respectful. These perceptions also echo Dexter and Stacks (2014), who reported that the parent-child relationship was a major factor that influenced reading achievement.

An administrator responded:

Having the support of the parents helps an at-risk child be successful. If the parents support what is going on in the school, the child will be successful.

Another expressed:

The parental support these [at risk] children are getting at home makes a difference. Parents who let their children know that education is first helps students develop self-confidence and fosters academic success for at-risk children. It might be someone at home that allows them [at risk students] to see that they can succeed at whatever they aspire to.

### **Early Literacy Exposure**

When asked why some children are better readers than others, many administrators identified early literacy exposure as being a major contributing factor to reading achievement. The administrators expressed their belief that families should expose their children to literacy as early as possible. They communicated that students come to school with a higher vocabulary and reading ability when they have had that experience with literacy in their early childhood.

These findings are consistent with Shue, Shore, and Lambert (2012), who reported that childhood experiences in the early years have a lasting impact on the child.

Schippers (2014) echoed the administrators' perceptions, that the only way to close the achievement gap is to equalize the system for low-income children by offering high quality early intervention programs, before the age of three years old. These findings from this study also support the Annie E. Casey Foundation (2014), that it is imperative that children learn the initial skills of reading at an early age, as the earlier years of life are the time span when the most brain development occurs, which lays the foundation for later learning and success.

An administrator expressed:

It [reading proficiency] is due to the level of early exposure to reading at home. It goes back to the early level of reading that they [students] had prior to starting school. Students come to school as good readers when they have had an early exposure and experience with texts.

Another stated:

It [reading proficiency] has to do with the early exposure to reading and all things literate. I think it [reading proficiency] depends on their [students'] early literacy skills and the effectiveness of their Pre-K and kindergarten programs.

### **Teacher Effectiveness**

Several administrators believed that teacher effectiveness was a major factor that promoted a child's reading ability. These findings are consistent with the study of Guarnino, Brown, and Wyse (2011), which implied that in order to improve the quality of education for low-income and minority students, the first step of action is to provide them with effective teaching in the classrooms. According to Li and Hasan (2010), in order to promote student achievement, as well as academic, social and personal success, teachers must develop positive personal traits such as teaching confidence, responsibility, and resiliency. Also mentioned in Flynt and Brozo (2009), effective teachers of reading seek out innovative ways to reach their students, which in return encourages student involvement and success in literacy activities. The findings from this study are also consistent with Harri (2011), which reported that effective collaboration, data driven instruction, and effective decision making all contributed to higher reading scores. The findings also mirror LaHuffman-Jackson's (2009) research implying that teacher quality in the classroom has significant consequences for students' academic achievement.

One administrator stated:

To me, it is [reading proficiency] all about teacher quality. Teacher quality is always going to make the difference. Part of that is due to training, skills, knowledge, how you deliver instruction, and the love of what you are doing. I think the teacher in the classroom is the number one factor in learning. Whoever the students' teacher is has the biggest impact on their reading skills and academic growth. I would say teacher effectiveness is the number one factor as to why some children are better readers than others.

Another responded:

I think teacher effectiveness is extremely important, if not one of the most important things in making a difference and enhancing student reading performance. A great teacher who sets goals for students, uses data to drive instruction, lets the students know where they are, where they need to get to, and what they are going to do together as a team to get there, makes a great teacher. A great teacher will make all the difference, and that is why we are so selective in our hiring process. We want to make sure that we are recruiting those highly qualified individuals who will make the difference for the students and understand that students come from different backgrounds. Having a great teacher in the classroom is of the utmost importance.

Another added:

Teacher effectiveness is very important to a child's reading ability, but it goes beyond the teacher having degrees. An effective teacher to me is a teacher who engages in professional development to learn new strategies that they need for their individual class or school, implements those strategies, reflects, adjusts, and looks at the data to reflect on themselves and not just the students. Teacher effectiveness and quality makes a difference in a child's reading performance. I have dismissed teachers because they wouldn't give me instruction the way I wanted it. Teachers have got to know their data, and they've got to do something with it. If a teacher can't give quality instruction to the kids and follow through, then honestly I can't use them. I don't need anybody just to be here. I need someone who's highly qualified and effective.

Another remarked:

A teacher can make or break a child, so the teacher makes the biggest difference in student reading achievement. The number one factor is the effectiveness of the teacher in the classroom. Teachers are the key that really drives student performance and can really make the difference between the student who is perpetually at-risk and a child who is bridging the gap. Teachers are able to bridge the gap, so I think teacher quality is the number one factor. My biggest focus as a principal is on retaining and recruiting good teachers. It is incredibly important to have high quality teachers in the classrooms. Then you know teachers are making those connections, developing that love for learning, and developing that sense of 'I can do this.' All this comes from the person in front of the classroom, and quality teachers can never be replaced by technology or apps; there is just no substitute for it.

### **Teacher and Parental Expectations**

Teacher and parental expectations were recurring themes throughout the study. The administrators expressed that expectations enable at-risk students to succeed despite their prediction of academic failure, and their perceptions were that students need high expectations for reading achievement to be enhanced. The administrators' perceptions mirrored Williams et

al. (2014) that a home environment characterized by high expectations for youth could serve as a protective deterrent to some of the risk factors that children encounter. The findings from this study lend support to Ferguson (2014) also noting that when caregivers praise children's efforts, children tend to persist in the face of difficulty and are more likely to succeed when a task is difficult. The administrators shared that when high expectations are in place for children they will persevere and succeed despite outside barriers. According to the administrators' perceptions, teachers and parents must hold high expectations for children if they want them to be academically successful.

One stated:

As long as you hold high expectations for children, they are going to meet those expectations. I feel this is why a lot of the children do well at my school and why we have exceeded growth every year. My children come to school every day wanting to learn, and they work really hard because of our high expectations. As long as the expectations are there, children will rise to those expectations. These [resilient] children could have intrinsic motivation, meaning that they are determined to break out of the cycle of poverty.

Another mentioned:

I think high expectations help at-risk students to be successful academically. We have a lot of students who look surprised when we tell them, "I know you can do this" or "I expect better of you" that seems to really hit home to be honest. Students will do exactly what you ask of them. If you ask a lot out of them, that is what you get. I think holding students to high expectations and building them up in a positive way makes a difference. It is about building these children up and letting them know they can be successful, and seeing it through with them. We have a culture at our school that builds students up; we make them think they are the greatest in the world. Our expectations are the same for every single student in every single classroom. We are not worried about the status quo. We are not worried about comparing students to each other. We just want students to reach their fullest potential.

### **Conclusion**

Findings support that administrators perceive that family support, early literacy exposure, and teacher effectiveness and expectations all contribute to reading achievement. In addition, the administrators felt that lack of early literacy exposure, lack of family support, and low teacher and parental expectations are all factors contributing to reading failure. Therefore, it is suggested that public schools seek innovative ways to foster early literacy exposure and family support. Implementing more research based strategies and programs in elementary schools that involve families would support reading success. Perhaps, more professional development and more research studies to assist in providing strategies on how to meet the needs of reading achievement would also help to foster reading proficiency. In conclusion, educators should hold high expectations for all students, regardless of their socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds.

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