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Urban Extension's New Nontraditional Offering: Parent-Child Reading Enhancement Program

Abstract

Urbanization is causing a major shift in Extension's programming throughout the United States. We present results of a nontraditional urban program (the Parent-Child Reading Enhancement Program) that is being implemented by Alabama Cooperative Extension System's Urban Affairs and New Nontraditional Programs unit. Findings suggest that this Extension program is successful in increasing urban parents' knowledge and skills related to enhancing their children's reading ability. Implications for urban Extension are discussed.

Keywords: [urban Extension](#), [literacy](#), [reading strategies](#), [nontraditional program](#), [urbanization](#)

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Introduction

Cooperative Extension, which has traditionally focused on the rural population, is now faced with the challenge of the nation's shift in population. According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2012), between 2000 and 2010 the urban population grew faster than the nation's overall growth rate (12.1% and 9.7%, respectively), and more than 80% of the United States' population lives in urban areas. More than three quarters (75.8%) of the South's population now lives in urban areas (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012). Urbanization brings with it many new and nontraditional problems Cooperative Extension must seek to address. One such problem in Alabama, as in many other states, is the low reading proficiency scores of youths.

Alabama, steeped in agricultural traditions, is no exception to increased urbanization. Two of the three fastest growing cities in Alabama are locations of the state's two land-grant institutions, Alabama Agricultural & Mechanical University (AAMU) (1890) and Auburn University (AU) (1862), as well as Alabama Cooperative Extension System (ACES). Due to the historical Alabama higher education desegregation lawsuit *Knight v. Alabama* (1995), which was in court for more than 25 years, Extension programs at AAMU and AU were unified to form ACES. This court case, which sought to eliminate the residues of racial discrimination against African Americans in Alabama's institutions of higher learning, decreed that the overall focus of AU Extension shall be on rural and traditional programs and that of AAMU Extension on new and nontraditional urban programs (Alabama Cooperative Extension System, 2010; *Knight v. Alabama*, 1995).

Urbanization has moved and continues to move Extension toward modification of its program offerings, teaching methodologies and strategies, and overall focus. Although urbanization, as noted by Young and Vavrina (2014), is posing a great challenge for Extension throughout the nation, ACES is continuously offering new and nontraditional programs geared toward limited-resource audiences. One such program being offered in one of the three fastest growing cities in Alabama (Huntsville) is the Parent-Child Reading Enhancement Program (PCREP). The program's overall purpose is to teach parents or guardians how to teach children to read.

Reading proficiency among fourth-grade youths across the United States has become a major concern. Approximately two thirds (66%) of all fourth-grade students and 80% of all low-income fourth-grade students in the United States are not reading at their grade level (U.S. Department of Education, 2013). Reading proficiency at an early age is not only vital to improving the quality of life for children in general and at-risk children specifically, it is crucial for sustaining the nation's workforce. The nation's workforce must be composed of literate citizens who have the skills and education required to function in society. However, according to Manyika, Lund, Auguste, and Ramaswamy (2012), the United States is expected to have a shortage of 1.5 million workers with college degrees yet a surplus of 6 million unemployed individuals without high school diplomas by the year 2020.

In 2011, only 18% of Alabama's low-income students in grade four performed at or above the National Assessment of Educational Progress reading proficiency level (National KIDS COUNT, 2015). In other words, 82% of low-income students in grade four in Alabama cannot read at their grade level. These standardized national and local data indicated a need to assist parents and children in improving reading skills.

To begin addressing the achievement gap among children in urban areas, the Urban Affairs and New Nontraditional Programs unit of ACES developed PCREP to be implemented in low-income urban areas in Huntsville, Alabama. PCREP focuses on developing parents' skill sets and knowledge regarding reading strategies and techniques so that they can influence the cognitive, emotional, and social development of children 4 to 9 years of age. The program was based on Bronfenbrenner's (1989) ecological systems theory and research-based literacy-skills-development strategies such as having a child discuss or retell a story, predict events, point out various things in a story, and so on (Berk, 2009; Marrow, 2001). The overall goal is to teach parents various reading strategies that will help them better assume responsibility for increasing their children's reading skills while indirectly affecting parents' overall attitude.

The quantitative study described herein was an evaluation of an implementation of PCREP. The specific and measurable objectives were as follows:

1. Determine differences in parents' perceptions regarding their knowledge of how to assist in improving their children's reading ability before and after attending PCREP.
2. Assess differences in the frequencies with which parents engaged in behaviors that assist in improving their children's reading ability before and after attending PCREP.

Methods

Participants

As of July 31, 2016, approximately 50 parents living in Huntsville, Alabama, had completed the 6-week PCREP course. Of the 50 parents who completed the course and the pretest and posttest administered as part of the

evaluation, nearly one quarter (24%) were fathers and 74% were either mothers or grandmothers. The average age of the group was 38 years, and the majority of the parents were non-Hispanic African Americans (88%). More than half of the parents (55%) had less than a college degree, and 37% had postsecondary technical training or some college. The majority of the parents were employed full-time (66%) or part-time (18%). Approximately 12% were unemployed, and 4% were retired (grandparents).

Procedure and Measures

PCREP participants met for 1.5 hr twice weekly for 6 weeks. The 50 participants were taught five basic research-based elements of reading (phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension) that are noted by Foorman and Torgesen (2001) while their children participated separately in activities related to the five elements. The parents were taught by trained educators, and the children were taught by university students majoring in education. At the end of each lesson, parents were required to demonstrate, with their children, at least two techniques that had been covered during the lesson. At the start and end of the 6 weeks, parents voluntarily completed a pretest and a posttest, which had been approved by the university's institutional review board. A panel of five experts assessed the face and content validity of the instruments. The pretest and posttest each consisted of three sections: demographics, knowledge of reading, and frequency of behavior. The knowledge of reading section was composed of a Likert-type scale comprising five statements and a response set that ranged from *strongly disagree* (1) to *strongly agree* (5). Two scales were used to assess participants' behaviors related to teaching their children to read. One, a Likert-type scale comprising nine statements and a response set that ranged from *never* (1) to *always* (4), measured the frequency with which parents performed target behaviors. The other, a ratio scale comprising four items and a response set that ranged from 0 to 7, measured the number of days in a week parents performed particular behaviors. Cronbach's alpha coefficients of .86 for the knowledge scale and .83 and .78, respectively, for the two behavior scales were obtained.

Results

Perceptions

We used an independent-samples *t*-test to determine parents' perceptions of their knowledge of how to improve their children's reading ability before and after participation in the program. Parents' levels of agreement regarding knowledge of how to help improve their children's reading ability were significantly higher for all statements in the posttest data as compared to the pretest data. As compared to parents who completed the pretest, parents who completed the posttest felt significantly more knowledgeable of their overall understanding of how reading is to be taught to their children, $t(99) = 5.04$, $p = .00$, and the need to regularly engage their children in reading-related activities, $t(99) = 4.42$, $p = .00$. Likewise, parents' levels of agreement regarding their knowledge of how to use games, activities, and materials in their children's environments to teach their children reading were significantly higher at posttest, $t(99) = 2.75$, $p = .01$ (games); $t(99) = 2.47$, $p = .02$ (activities); and $t(99) = 2.88$, $p = .01$ (materials).

Behavior

At the beginning and end of the program, participants were asked how often they performed various behaviors related to reading and their children. Results shown in Table 1 indicate that the frequencies of parents' behaviors, for many of the activities, were significantly higher after 6 weeks in the program. Statistically, the frequencies

with which parents asked their children to guess what would happen next in a story, $t(99) = 5.16, p = .00$, describe what happened in a story, $t(99) = 4.49, p = .00$, or retell a story, $t(99) = 3.62, p = .00$, were significantly higher at posttest. Also higher at posttest were the frequencies with which parents discussed the front cover of a book with their children, $t(99) = 4.62, p = .00$, pointed to new words as they read a book, $t(99) = 2.78, p = .05$, allowed their children to select which book to read, $t(99) = 2.50, p = .01$, and identified a specific time for reading, $t(99) = 2.79, p = .01$.

Table 1.

t-Test of Frequency Levels of Parent Behaviors Before and After Participation in the Parent-Child Reading Enhancement Program

How often do you do the following?	<i>N</i>	<i>M^a</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Ask child to guess what happens next in the story					
Pretest	50	2.13	.86	5.16	.00
Posttest	50	2.90	.65		
Ask child to describe what happened in the story					
Pretest	50	2.60	.98	4.49	.00
Posttest	50	3.32	.62		
Ask child to retell the story					
Pretest	50	2.34	1.00	3.62	.00
Posttest	50	3.02	.86		
Talk about the front cover of the book with child					
Pretest	50	2.28	.91	4.62	.00
Posttest	50	3.04	.75		
Point out new words					
Pretest	50	2.74	.94	2.78	.05
Posttest	50	3.18	.66		
Let child choose the book					
Pretest	50	3.09	.80	2.50	.01
Posttest	50	3.44	.58		
Have a specific time					
Pretest	50	2.11	1.10	2.79	.01
Posttest	50	2.65	.83		
Put expression in voice when reading					
Pretest	50	3.08	.90	1.90	.06

Posttest	50	3.38	.73		
Sit beside child when reading					
Pretest	50	3.23	.87	1.99	.05
Posttest	50	3.52	.61		

aData were coded as follows: 4 = always; 3 = often; 2 = seldom; 1 = never.

Similarly, parents were asked how many days per week they performed certain behaviors with their children. On average, parents read books together with their children fewer than 3 days per week before attending PCREP, $M = 2.63$, and approximately 4 days per week after participating in PCREP, $M = 3.82$; $t(99) = 3.05$, $p = .00$ (see Table 2). Likewise, the posttest data indicated that there were statistically significant improvements in the number of days per week parents read to their children, $t(99) = 2.39$, $p = .02$, and had their children read to them, $t(99) = 2.32$, $p = .02$. In other words, before attending PCREP, parents read to their children or had their children read to them on average 3 days per week, $M = 2.72$ and $M = 2.71$, respectively, but after the program, they performed each behavior approximately 4 days per week, $M = 3.63$ and $M = 3.59$, respectively. Moreover, the number of days parents took their children to a library was statistically significantly greater after participation in the program. Before participating in PCREP, parents took their children to a library on average once a week, $M = 1.19$; after participating in the program, they took their children to a library at least twice a week, $M = 2.42$; $t(99) = 3.03$, $p = .03$.

Table 2.

t-Test of Number of Days per Week Parents Engaged in Behaviors Before and After Participation in the Parent-Child Reading Enhancement Program

How often. . .	<i>N</i>	<i>M</i> ^a	<i>SD</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Do you and your child read books together					
Pretest	50	2.63	1.80	3.05	.00
Posttest	50	3.82	1.71		
Do you read to your child					
Pretest	50	2.72	1.79	2.39	.02
Posttest	50	3.63	1.63		
Does your child ask you to read to him					
Pretest	50	2.71	1.78	2.32	.02
Posttest	50	3.59	1.59		
Do you take your child to the library					
Pretest	50	1.19	1.59	3.03	.03
Posttest	50	2.42	2.02		

aData were coded as follows: 0 = no days; 1 = 1 day; 2 = 2 days; 3 = 3 days; 4 = 4

days; 5 = 5 days; 6 = 6 days; 7 = 7 days.

Conclusion and Implications

The continued population shift from rural to urban areas across the United States has serious implications for programming in Extension. In many of the urban areas of Alabama, children's reading scores lag behind those of their counterparts in nonurban areas. Extension's response to this problem led to the development of the new and nontraditional offering PCREP. This program focuses on helping parents understand how to assist their children with reading.

Findings of our research suggest that PCREP is helping increase urban parents' knowledge and skills related to enhancing their children's reading ability. We identified important preprogram-to-postprogram differences in parents' perceptions of their knowledge and frequencies of their behaviors relative to teaching their children how to read. Results indicated that parents felt significantly more knowledgeable about what they could do to improve their children's reading ability after participating in PCREP. Another interesting difference was that parents were significantly more knowledgeable about the need to regularly engage their children in reading-related activities.

As reading ability is known to be an important factor in determining an individual's success, continued gaps in reading scores may perpetuate ongoing academic and career failure among specific groups; therefore, it is important to consider how to improve reading scores of individuals. Findings from the research presented here support an argument for a systemic approach to programming in Extension. The findings suggest that Extension professionals and others working with parents in urban areas must go beyond efforts to increase the child's ability to read. They must also consider increasing parents' knowledge and skills with regard to research-supported effective educational strategies they can use with their children at home so as to offset the potentially devastating effects of children's poor reading skills. Long-term results for a systemic-type reading program also have implications for increased community capacity through sustainability. Efforts to ensure that PCREP continues to achieve desired outcomes beyond the grant period have involved ongoing collaboration with community partners. Because of this sustainability strategy, the project was incorporated into the existing summer program of one of those partners. Successes such as this must proliferate if Extension is to meet the challenges that accompany increased urbanization.

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