

Intergenerational Transfer of Cognitive Skills: A Two-Way Street for Adults and Their Children in California Library Literacy Programs

Findings from the FULFILL (Families Utilizing the Library For Improving Literacy and Learning) Study

Study conducted by
Drs. Barbara McDonald and Patricia A. Scollay
San Diego State University

This study is supported by the U.S. Institute of Museum of Library Services under the provisions of the Library Services and Technology Act, administered in California by the State Librarian.

This study looked at experiences of people whose literacy use and literacy skills had undergone transition as adults when they decided to learn to read or to improve their reading in library-based adult and family literacy programs. The work comes out of a longitudinal interview study in which adult literacy learners in California public library programs and their volunteer tutors were interviewed once every year over a three year period.

While the public may be somewhat aware that many adults have low literacy skills, adult learning and tutoring processes are private experiences that don't arouse much interest in the casual observer. Even research into the learning experience focuses on observable cause and effect variables leaving the process itself somewhat of a mystery. So, while there is a considerable amount of correlational evidence that increasing educational attainments of adults will have positive effects on their children's literacy, there are few studies that have interviewed these individuals in an in-depth and open-ended way. This study provides a deeper view of the adult learners, the impact their involvement in a literacy program has on their lives, and the impact their literacy experiences are having on their children.

One reason the public knows so little about adults who don't know how to read is that people in this situation do not make it widely known. Because can be a stigma associated with low literacy, these adults are often, in fact, quite adept at hiding their low literacy. Many of their friends and family never know they have a problem. Brandt (2001) asserts that while knowing how to read enhances economic and political opportunities, not knowing decreases them. And in fact, literacy is more than a set of processes to take in and communicate information. Formal literacy skills are related to distribution of social power (Gee, 1999). This could make people feel inferior if they had lower than average literacy skills. Gee says that in fact people use discourse to display membership in particular groups. He calls literacy abilities "identity kits" describing them as ways in which we identify ourselves to others like us.

Traditionally, parents and family are viewed as the central institutions to offer initial discourse tools and expertise to their children. According to Gee (1996), primary

discourse is learned in the home and more formal tools of literacy, or secondary discourse, are learned in school. Children who live in homes that exhibit similar forms of discourse as those used in school will come to school better prepared to participate and learn. Awareness of these connections has encouraged literacy programs to educate parents in order to help them help their children.

The California State legislature funded the California State Library in 1988 to develop a program in local public libraries throughout the state to address these connections. Families for Literacy (FFL) was created with these connections in mind: to serve low-literacy parents/caregivers with children four years or younger. The goal was to assist them in improving their own literacy skills while providing early learning experiences for their children to help them become familiarized and comfortable with school-like tasks. 77 public library jurisdictions in California currently provide FFL services in their communities.

Much attention has been focused on the importance of parental involvement in the child's learning (Christian, Morrison & Bryant, 1998; Leseman and de Jong, 1998; Senechal and Lefevre, 2002). High correlations have been shown between increased parental involvement and children's academic records (Eccles & Harold, 1996; Epstein, 1986; Hoover-Dempsey, Bassler & Burrow, 1995). To fully participate in school activities with their children is often challenging and sometimes intimidating for parents who have low literacy skills. Indeed, Behrman (2002) says literacy skills are social as well as personal activities that are affected by parental skills and abilities.

A recent comprehensive evaluation by public libraries (Public Library Association, 2004) showed that when parents were given explicit training on how to participate with their children in educational activities, parents were able to do so at a much higher rate than they had previously. This evaluation was conducted with a number of libraries nationwide and involved all parents of young children, not necessarily just parents with low literacy skills.

LeVine, LeVine and Schnell (2001) consider the effects of education on lives of women and their children to be especially profound. Evidence is accumulating that shows overall effects globally as well as within this country. Educating women results in changes in society. The authors argue that in school, girls develop identities as literate citizens as well as goals about how to fit into society. Interestingly they also say girls learn the official language of bureaucracies such as health and educational institutions.

Clearly, there are effects on population growth once girls are educated. The authors show evidence of drop in birthrate once educational programs are extended to girls. Other effects relate to properties of schooling itself. For example, peer groups are formed and influence ideas about marriage and childrearing. Also, empowerment results from exposing girls to formal education. This appears to be supported by research into schooling in Mexico and Nepal. Finally, girls who go to school internalize information about how to learn and how to teach. This, in turn, affects their children, thus confirming Gee's statements about similarity between primary and secondary discourse.

Why do parents become involved in their children's education? According to Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1997), there are three reasons.

- Parental involvement is used to define the self in terms of role played
- Sense of accomplishment a parent feels when the child is successful
- Belief that both the school and the child want them involved.

Expectations for parental involvement are at an all time high. Parents can help at home by helping with homework, checking the work, keeping the child on track, discussing school events, and talking on the phone to the teacher or school office. Parents can also get involved directly at the school by going on field trips, volunteering in the classrooms or for special events, attending parent teacher meetings and serving on advisory committees.

According to Lopez, Scribner and Mahitivanichcha (2001) immigrant families are among the most marginalized groups in the country. The authors state that these groups are constantly faced with economic and social discrimination and this can happen within educational institutions as well as in the larger society. This appears to be true for native-born people with lower literacy skills as well.

Yet even immigrants to the U.S. need to find ways to connect to their children's education. While such activities may not have been part of their own upbringing or part of the cultural expectations where they grew up, it is expected here and there are programs to help the assimilation process. Parent involvement programs have attracted immigrant parents by many means, from giving away desirable items to presenting topics of particular interest to them or just by providing a welcoming environment for them. California's FFL programs do all of the above. A core component of all California's FFL programs is providing quality, free children's books so that families in the programs can develop their own home libraries in the hope that the children will come to love books and reading even before entering school. These library FFL programs give away over 30,000 new, quality children's books annually.

And how do children benefit from the involvement of their parents in education and by their parents' improved literacy skills? There is a strong association between parental involvement and academic achievement of the children (Chavkin, 1993; Scribner, Young & Pedroza, 1999). Furthermore, research shows that parent involvement improves student self-esteem and can improve parent-child relationships as well (Brown, 1989). Schools also benefit since parents have better attitudes toward schools and teachers once they are involved with them and comfortable with their ability to contribute in the school setting.

This report provides a look inside the adult's learning sessions and how the activities and skills built there affects the lives of the participants and their children. We are able to provide this by qualitatively analyzing the responses to several questions in the interviews. The interview questions used for these analyses were :

- Why did you join the FFL program?

- Could you describe yourself to me?
- Social Convoy questions
- How is your child doing in school? (for school-age children)
- How do you help your child with school (for school-age children)
- Can you tell a story about your child so we understand him/her better?

METHOD

Participants and Procedure

In the present research, over 125 adult literacy learners in a statewide family literacy program were interviewed by telephone and asked open-ended in-depth questions about themselves, their children and their literacy activities. Predominately, participants were women (89%) with a mean age of 35. Several ethnic groups were represented with 63% identifying themselves as Latino, 10% as African American, and 5% as Caucasian. Learners all had at least one child four years of age or younger in order to participate in the library's family literacy program and reported a mean number of 2.7 children, almost all of who were under 10 years of age. Because of the presence of these older children, we were also able to find out how parents were helping their kids in school. The telephone interview lasted approximately an hour and was tape-recorded. The audiotapes were transcribed and entered into a qualitative data program. Data were also rated quantitatively where possible and entered into a quantitative database for analyses.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

First, we would like to address the issue of whether or not adult literacy learners feel inferior due to their lower literacy. We have no direct evidence of this because no questions were asked about their literacy level (i.e., "how well do you read") or their feelings about their literacy skills. Any comments made about their literacy levels were completely spontaneous and not prompted.

While our learners did not all speak about feeling embarrassed of their low literacy, such comments popped up randomly and fairly frequently. Some people said that they didn't want their children to go through what they had been through, suggesting it was not easy for them. Another source of information about this topic came indirectly from the tutors who when asked how they themselves had changed said in great numbers that they had learned not to take their literacy for granted because they never realized how hard it would be to acquire literacy as an adult. When asked about how they help their children, most adult learners were happy to report they were able to help.

Many of the learners came to the literacy program in the first place to help their children. In fact, over half of the learners interviewed reported that helping their children was the motivating force in their decision to seek help themselves. Over half also mentioned that they wanted to improve their English and 59% wanted to improve literacy. A smaller percentage wanted to feel better about themselves and some were trying to get a job.

In one analysis, 18 men in the study were matched with women of similar demographic characteristics like ethnicity, age, number of children. The idea was to see whether men had different reasons for joining the program. Since men didn't join the family literacy program as much as women, it was speculated that men typically go to community college where they can learn a job related skill as the same time they are learning literacy skills and improving their English. The men in this program, however, said they were there to help their children. Overall in the state, the number of men in the library adult literacy programs is about equal to the number of women. However, in the FFL programs, women adult learners/participants are a majority.

Although this paper is not specifically about the tutors and their efforts on behalf of the learners, it must be noted that the amount of individualized help given to the learners was staggering. Tutors worked with their learners regularly for two hours at a time, once or twice a week, or at least twice a month.

Interviews with the tutors revealed several striking facts. First, the tutors knew the learner's literacy needs well. Tutors took great care to report which methods worked with particular learners and which did not. They spent a great deal of time investigating methods that might work and came up with strategies that were personalized and innovative. The list is long and is not germane to this report, but here we can say that the strategies developed and used by the one-on-one tutors were clearly meant to engage the learner and move her/him forward and appeared to do so successfully.

One example is from a tutor who tape-recorded the learner reading so she could hear herself read as she read along in a book later. Another tutor made a special booklet with the learner's vocabulary list for when the learner was at work, trying to find a new location, or in a situation where he needed to write down some information. A common technique was having the learners practice reading a children's book aloud so they could do it at home. They practiced writing so they could do the necessary correspondence with various bureaucracies. All of these techniques were used to familiarize the learner with formal literacy skills and to help them help their children. And all of the tutoring was done in a positive manner. As one tutor explained, "we are taught never to criticize but to say "good", "try again" and "you can do it."

Results showed that adult literacy learners in these library programs felt they were able to help their children with homework, using a number of methods. When asked how they helped their children with school assignments, 25% reported they helped them with literacy skills and 23% said they supervised their children while they completed their homework. 14% reported that they used outside resources to help their kids. Only 14% said they were unable to help. Still, some parents reported that they had to refer their children to someone else for help, sometimes their spouse, another relative, or even their tutor. Regarding the tutors, it was clear that adult learners used many of the same techniques their tutors used with them to help their children. This is a powerful endorsement of the process and methods that the tutors used.

Nearly 100% of adult literacy learners responded that they did read in their daily lives. They reported reading newspapers, books, the Bible, and magazines. Frequently they mentioned reading children's books. They were incorporating literacy into their everyday experience; modeling so that their children were able to see them engaged in literacy activities.

Adult learners reported going to the library frequently to check out books. It is unclear, however, whether they perceived this as evidence of their increasing literacy skills. In one case study, an adult literacy learner went out of her way to create a literacy environment at home that would match a school literacy approach, yet she continued to perceive herself as having low literacy skills based on her low test scores (Rogers, 2002). She had a small homework room; she hung credentials and awards on the wall; she had a dictionary in the homework room. So, while she defined herself according to her test score (reading grade level) she actually did a lot of the literacy work for her family at home. Even when a person cannot demonstrate high-level literacy skills in a testing situation, it does not necessarily mean they do not use literacy in their lives.

When interviewed in the second year (approximately one year after the first interview), most of the parents reported taking their children to the library and over half reported attending children's literacy programs. Because the library was the location for the literacy tutoring in most cases, the learners became comfortable going to the library for other events geared toward their children. Story time was one of the most popular activities listed, but parents also went to help their children use computers and to attend puppet shows, science presentations and arts and crafts activities. A few parents reported going to the library to attend special workshops, such as one about civil rights. All of these activities promoted and supported secondary discourse and are the sort of activities highly educated parents would want to involve themselves and their children.

When asked how their school age children were doing in school, over 70% reported that they were doing good to excellent. Only 19% said their children were below average in school. 6% of the children were reported to be having problems in school and 4% said their children had special needs. These parent reports show that overall the children were doing pretty well in school and if they are having problems, the parent knew it. These parents were well informed about their children's educational success.

When asked how they would describe themselves, learners responded by saying how they had changed and what it meant to them. We coded their very interesting answers into three categories: trait descriptions ("I am short with brown hair"), agency descriptions (self mastery statements such as "I can do anything I set my mind to do") or community statements ("I want to do more to help not just my child but other children too"). The agency and community coding scheme came from Mansfield and McAdams (1996).

In order to have some reference point, we compared the learners self-statements to the tutors. While there were no striking differences in numbers of community statements, both groups wanted to make a contribution to their families and communities and expressed feelings of love and connection to others, there were differences in trait

statements and agency statements. Tutors made significantly more trait statements, especially those we counted as elaborated such as “I am quiet but if you ask my husband or children they will tell you there are times when I’ve heard enough and I then I am quite talkative.”

For agency statements, however, it was the learners who made significantly more statements related to mastery, achievement and empowerment. Actually they made three times the number of agency statements than did the tutors.

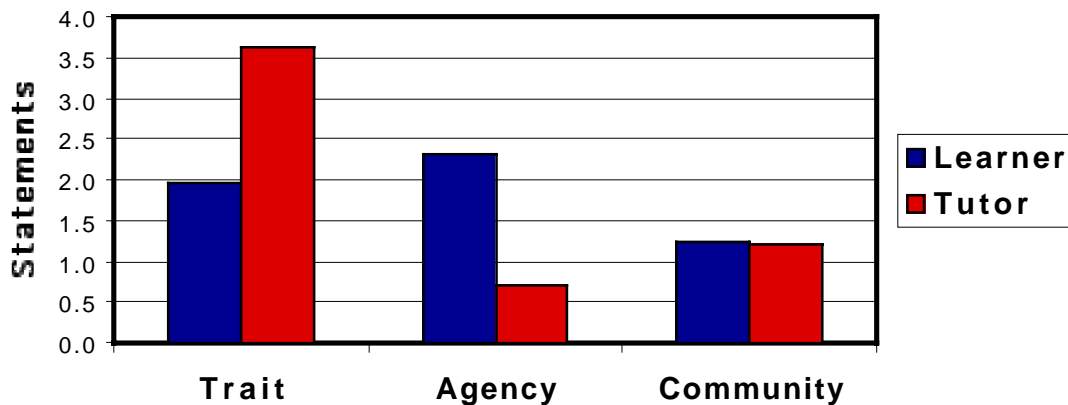


Figure 1: Identity Statements for Learners and Tutors

Figure 1 shows the mean number of statements for both learners and tutors. Since the learners were in the program to try to help their children, their community statements were about their children. The tutors comments were about helping in the community, probably reflecting the age difference between most learners in the study and their tutors as well.

In order to better understand the social context of literacy learning, measures of the child’s place in the parent’s social network were taken using the social convoy method of Kahn and Antonucci (1986). When learners were asked to name the people they would include in their center circle, indicating they would have a hard time without that person in their life, learners either placed their children in the inner circle or in none at all. 86%, a large percentage of learners, included their children in this circle. What is unusual about this was that for many learners the children were the only people in their inner circle who lived geographically close to them making interaction easy and frequent.

Other important variables pursued were native language, language of the interview and years lived in the geographical area. We compared social networks and years in geographical location for four different language groups in the sample. The categories included: English speakers interviewed in English (EE), Spanish speakers interviewed in English (SE), Other language speakers interviewed in English (OE) and Spanish speakers interviewed in Spanish (SS). Table 1 presents these data.

	English/English	Spanish/English	Other/English	Spanish/Spanish
Years in area	16.47	10.20	6.10	5.25
Network size (Yr1)	12.29	12.08	8.43	16.66
Network size (Yr2)	17.25	24.04	28.95	27.63

Table 1: Years in area and Network size for Years 1 and 2 for Learners

These data are interesting for several reasons. For one thing, the data show that all four groups were in the geographical location for quite some time before joining the literacy program at the library. And from one year to the next they show an increase in numbers in their social convoys. All four groups show increased social networks, but especially those learners who have been learning a second language along with literacy skills. Especially noteworthy is the Other/English group whose average social network almost triples. Both the Spanish groups double and the English speakers go up an average of 5 people.

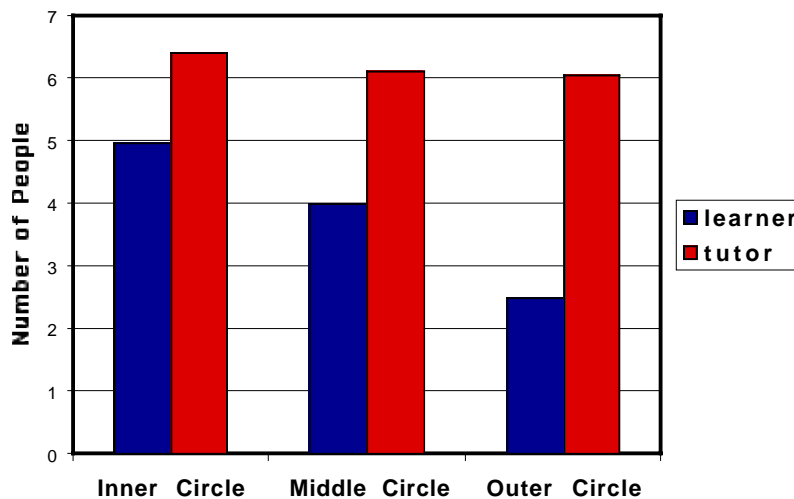


Figure 2: Social Convoys of learners compared to Tutors

Figure 2 presents the social convoys of both learners and tutors from Year 1 to show that the social networks for learners were considerably smaller than those for tutors. Average number in the tutor networks was 18.6. Since all the learner groups had an fairly high average number of years in geographical area the difference cannot be due to lack of opportunity to meet people. One possibility is that it may be isolating to live in a literate society when one is not at the literacy level desired. Other analyses are ongoing to try to understand this better.

A significant number of participants joined the literacy program to improve their ability to speak English. Over half of the participants mentioned this as a reason and some of

these learners were interviewed in Spanish because they felt more comfortable speaking in their native language. With the increasing influx of non-English speaking immigrants entering communities, some parents lack communication skills in English.

In first generation families, it is the children who are usually the first members to attend school in the United States. Researchers who have studied immigrant children report that these children often interpret or act as language brokers for their parents. This presents a change in traditional intergenerational authority relationships (Buriel, Perez, de Ment, Chavez & Moran (1998). In these settings, it becomes the youngest generations that lead the way toward literacy. While children continue to learn from their parents, in many of these families, the parents also learn from their children.

Answers to one interview question revealed interesting perceptions of their children's roles in their lives. The question was "tell a story about your child so we can better understand him/her?" A majority of the parents, 73%, had a story to tell about their children while a smaller percentage, 27%, did not. This was still somewhat surprising as most of these adults reported going to literacy programs in order to help their children, so our expectations were that they would have stories to tell about their children that might relate to this theme.

Another expectation probably came from our own experiences hearing friends talk about their children – always a big topic. But one interviewer who also listened to many of the tapes while doing a check on the transcriptions said her observation was that many of the learners wanted to talk about themselves. They seemed (to her) to not have had a lot of opportunities to talk about themselves and they were anxious to do so in this case. She thought they would rather talk about themselves than their children, at least during these interviews relating to their work in the literacy program and their families.

Another possibility is that telling stories about other people requires a frame of reference that people who are highly literate have and those whose literacy skills are lower may not have. And, this may relate to the scripts that go with storytelling. It is also possible that one reason typical parents tell stories about their children is to show their own competence in parenting. This may be a foreign idea to someone who has not been in the literate world, whose "identity kit" does not yet contain literacy.

For those parents/learners who did talk about their children, 65% told stories about their children's successes, their trials and victories, and developmental descriptions of activities of their children. Most interestingly, 20% of the stories concerned instances where the child served as a mentor for the parent. One story included a mild chastisement of the parent for having difficulty with an assignment. According to the parent, the child said, "I don't want to hear that, mother. You can do anything you put your mind to." More common were stories in which the children helped the parents understand some written communication or translated words for them. Of the remaining stories most were those in which the parents talked about themselves and how they were helping the child succeed.

In summary, when considering the impact of a library family literacy program on adult literacy learners and their children, there are many issues to include. From our study, we can see that the learners are being given intensive one-on-one tutoring which gives them specific strategies to use when working with their children. Their literacy levels are being changed as well as their understanding about literacy tasks in school. They say they are participating in this program in order to help their children but clearly the path is complex.

From their interviews it is clear that these parents/learners are benefiting from all the attention they are receiving (especially in the one-on-one tutoring setting the library provides) and so the changes in themselves are rich. Not only do their literacy competences change but their views of themselves change too. The effect on the children, therefore, may include not only improved literacy parenting but also improved sense of self-mastery and work ethic. In addition, the fact that they are learning literacy skills later in life, in fact at the same time their children are learning, makes it a different parent-child relationship than typically seen. In these cases, the children can help the parent in many situations thus making it a two way street. But traveling on this street with the families as they change are these trained volunteer tutors who model literacy assistance, who provide extensive personal attention, and who help give parents more strategies to use with their own children.

REFERENCES

- Behrman, E.H. (2002). Community based literacy learning. *Reading: Literacy and Language*, 36 (1), 26-32.
- Brandt, D. (2001). *Literacy in American Lives*. Cambridge University Press.
- Brown, P. (1989). *Involving parents in the education of their children*. Urbana, IL: ERIC Clearinghouse on Elementary and Early childhood Education (ERIC Document Reproduction Service Number: ED 308 988).
- Buriel, R., Perez, W., De Ment, T., Chavez, D. & Moran, V. (1998). The relationship of language brokering to academic performance, biculturalism and self-efficacy among Latino adolescents. *Hispanic Journal of Behavioral Sciences*, 20, 3, 283-297.
- Chavkin, N.F. (Ed.) (1993). *Families and schools in a pluralistic society*. Albany, NY, State University of New York Press.
- Christian, K., Morrison, F.J., & Brant, F.B. (1998). Predicting kindergarten academic skills: Interactions among child care, maternal education, and family literacy environments. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 13, 501-521.
- Eccles, J.S., & Harold, R.D. (1996). Family involvement in children's and adolescents' schooling. In A. Booth & J.F. Dunn (Eds), *Family school links: How do they affect educational outcomes?* (pp3-34). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Epstein, J.L. (1986). Parents' reactions to teacher practices of parent involvement. *The Elementary School Journal*, 86, 277-294.
- Gee, J. (1996). *Social linguistics and literacies: Ideology in discourses*. London: Falmer Press.
- Gee, J. (1999). *An introduction to discourse analysis: theory and method*. New York: Routledge.
- Goldenberg, C., Gallimore, R., Reese, L. & Garnier, H. (2001). Cause or effect? A longitudinal study of immigrant Latino parents' aspirations and expectations and their children's school performance. *American Educational Research Journal*, 38, (3), 547-582.
- Hoover-Dempsey, K., Bassler, O.C. & Burrow, R. (1995). Parents' reported involvement in students' homework: Strategies and practices. *The Elementary School Journal*, 95, 435-450.
- Hoover-Dempsey, K. & Sandler, H. (1997). Why do parents become involved in their children's education? *Review of Educational Research*, 67, 3-42.

- Kahn, R.L. & Antonucci, T.C. (1980). Convoys over the life course: Attachment, roles and social support. *Life span development and behavior*. In P. Baltes & O. Brim (Eds), Vol 3, 253-286. San Diego Ca: Academic Press.
- Leseman, P.M. & de Jong, P.F. (1998). Home Literacy: Opportunity, instruction, cooperation and social emotional quality predicting early reading achievement. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 33, 404-424.
- LeVine, R., LeVine, S. & Schnell, B. (2001). Improve the women: Mass schooling, female literacy, and worldwide social change. *Harvard Educational Review*, 71 (1), 1-50.
- Lopez, G., Scribner, J. & Mahitivanichcha, K. (2001). Redefining parental involvement: Lessons from high-performing migrant-impacted schools. *American Educational Research Journal*, 38, (2), 253-288.
- Mansfield, E. & McAdams, D. (1996). Generativity and themes of agency and communion in adult autobiography, *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 22 (7), 721-723.
- PLAALSC Early Literacy Initiative: 2003 Evaluation, report published by Public Library Association, Spring 2004.
- Rogers, R. (2002). Between contexts: A critical discourse analysis of family literacy, discursive practices and literate subjectivities. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 37 (3), 248-277.
- Scribner, J.D., Young, M.D., & Pedroza, A. (1999). Building collaborative relationships with parents. In P. Reyes, J.D., Scribner, & A. Paredes Scribner (Eds). *Lessons from high-performing Hispanic schools. Creating learning communities*. (pp. 36-60). New York: Teachers college Press.
- Senechal, M. & LeFevre, J. (2002). Parental involvement in the development of children's reading skills: A five year longitudinal study. *Child Development*, 73, 2, 445-460.
- St. Pierre, R., Swartz, J., Gamse, B., Murray, S., Deck, D. & Nickel, P. (1995). National evaluation of the Even Start Family Literacy Program: Report on effectiveness. Washington, D.C. : U.S. Department of Education, Office of Policy and Planning.
- Sticht, T. & McDonald, B. (1989). Making the National Smarter: The intergenerational transfer of cognitive abilities. Paper prepared for the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation.