"The Even Start program promotes family literacy both in the narrow, technical sense of reading and writing skills and in the broader sense of political and social empowerment."

HOW INTEGRATION OF SERVICES FACILITATES FAMILY LITERACY
Testimony From Even Start Participants

JEFFREY ROTH
University of Florida
CORINE MYERS-JENNINGS
Valdosta State University
DANIEL W. STOWELL
University of Illinois at Springfield

Jeffrey Roth conducts evaluations of Early Head Start for the School Board of Alachua County, Florida, in addition to working with Even Start.

Corine Myers-Jennings is an associate professor in the Department of Special Education and Communication Disorders at Valdosta State University. She received her master's degree in 1976 from South Carolina State University and her doctorate in 1994 from the University of Florida. Her research, teaching, and clinical interests are in the area of child language and phonological development and disorders. She is particularly interested in issues concerning language and phonological treatment for culturally and linguistically diverse underserved populations. She has done extensive research and clinical work in rural areas.

Daniel W. Stowell assisted with the evaluation of early childhood programs for the Florida Department of Education as a doctoral candidate. He is now an assistant editor with the Lincoln Legal Papers: A Documentary History of the Law Practice of Abraham Lincoln, 1836-1861, in Springfield, Illinois.
This article describes how integration of services in one Even Start program facilitated family literacy. The authors highlight specific examples from the Even Start experience that changed parents' lives. The perceptions of the participants provide the reader with a valuable perspective on the problems and benefits of interagency collaboration for family literacy.

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this article is to share with researchers and evaluators working in the area of family-centered early intervention the perspectives of participants in an Even Start family literacy project. Although both family literacy and interagency collaboration have moved to the forefront of the nation's educational agenda, few studies have explored the effect that integrated services have had on the success of family literacy programs. In a recent U.S. Department of Education anthology dedicated to current research and practice in this area, Judith Alamprese (1996) noted that "few systematic studies of family literacy have addressed cross-agency collaboration." Although family intervention staff consider interagency collaboration to be essential to an effective family literacy program, Alamprese argues that "there is little evidence concerning the relationship of collaborative activities to the functioning of these programs and the attainment of client outcomes" (p. 17). Alamprese claimed that "the area of inquiry [in studies of family literacy programs] with perhaps the smallest knowledge base is that dealing with direct and indirect outcomes from collaboration" (p. 22). Furthermore, those studies of family literacy that do consider collaboration and integration, such as that by Quezada and Nickse (1993), frequently address the issue only from the perspectives of program staff.

Congress conceived of Even Start as a program that would integrate within a single continuum of service three formerly separate curricular components: adult education, early childhood education, and parent education (St. Pierre, Swartz, Murray, Deck, & Nickel, 1993). The underlying rationale for the program was to break the cycle of intergenerational illiteracy by educating parent and child simultaneously while facilitating access to a network of support through collaboration with other human services agencies, such as health, employment, and economic assistance services. How program participants at one Even Start site evaluated this effort to integrate services and what effects it had on their lives make up the body of this article. Their perceptions provide a valuable perspective on the problems and benefits of interagency collaboration for family literacy.
THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The work of Sharon Kagan (1991; Kagan & Neville, 1994) has clearly set forth the organizational paradigm shift toward collaboration in family-centered early intervention programs. Collaboration developed in part out of the marked emphasis on teamwork that modern organizations have had to adopt to respond to rapidly changing, highly complex problems arising out of a deeply interconnected political/economic/social global environment. Kagan also attributes the spread of collaboration to the widening acceptance of ecology as a social/psychological construct (Bronfenbrenner, 1986). The practical consequence of adopting an ecological orientation has been the intertwining of formerly discrete entities—parent and child (Powell, 1988); home and school (Christenson & Conoley, 1992); education and families (Kaplan, 1992). For human services professionals, this holistic approach has meant delivering early intervention services to adults and children simultaneously (Dryfoos, 1994). Intervention program staff then track the family unit and individual members as they move together through a continuum of identified and addressed needs.

As the quotations from Even Start participants in this study illustrate, family literacy must be understood as much more than the ability to decode written texts. In his influential theoretical work on literacy, Paulo Freire (1970; Freire & Macedo, 1987) insists that literacy is “a form of cultural politics,” or more fundamentally, “the relationship of learners to the world.” Freire views literacy as “a set of practices that functions to either empower or disempower people.” He advocates analyzing literacy “according to whether it serves to reproduce existing social formations or serves as a set of cultural practices that promotes democratic and emancipatory change” (Freire & Macedo, 1987, p. viii).

Drawing inspiration from the work of Freire but tempering his more radical conclusions, both Elsa Auerbach (1989, 1995) and Vivian Gadsden (1994) argue that family literacy should be conceived of as a threshold form of political engagement. Gadsden insists that “literacy may serve a liberating and empowering purpose for children and parents” (p. 62). She also found that parents “described literacy in relation to its socially enabling qualities, that is, to empower children and adults to build on both the school-like nature of literacy and the broad contexts for literacy learning and use to combat societal inequalities” (p. 73). Auerbach (1995) favors a participatory curriculum that focuses on “empowering participants to direct their own learning and use it for their own purposes” (p. 24). Family literacy in this view encompasses a broad range of sociocultural activities whose end-in-view is the creation and sustenance of proud, independent, assertive social actors, committed not only to improving their own lives but also to helping those still struggling within their communities.
METHODS AND DATA SOURCES

A female African American doctoral student in communication processes at the University of Florida conducted a series of case study interviews (Seidman, 1991) with 11 adult participants in the Even Start family literacy project administered by the School Board of Alachua County in Gainesville, Florida. The interviews took place at 6-month intervals over a 3-year period from 1991 to 1994. The interviewer talked with participants for 45 minutes to 2 hours, using an open-ended, 15-item questionnaire (see appendix). Sample questions from the initial, intermediate, and exit interview protocols included: What does it feel like to be going to school again? Has your child changed a great deal since we last talked? How has being in the program affected your everyday life? What do you think you’ll be doing two years from now? Five years from now? What suggestions would you have that might make Even Start more helpful to new families just beginning? Interviews were audiotaped, transcribed, and analyzed, using Strauss’s (1990) constant comparative method to isolate commonalities and divergences.

The interviewed participants ranged in age from 17 to 41 years, with an average age of 26. All 11 were female (100%). Nine were Black (82%), and two were White (18%). Nine were single parents (82%); two were married (18%). The interviewees had from 1 to 11 children, with an average of 4 children each (see Figure 1). Although this sample constitutes only 7% of the total number of program participants \( N = 163 \), it does reflect the clientele constellation by age and race of the Even Start program in Gainesville, Florida. Of all adult Even Start participants, 98% were female, 83% were Black, 16% were White, and 1% were Hispanic. Adult Even Start participants ranged in age from 16 to 43, with an average age of 26. They had from 1 to 11 children, with an average of 3 children each.

RESULTS

At this study site, Even Start was a constituent program of the Family Services Center (FSC), a facility jointly operated by the local school district and the Department of Health and Rehabilitative Services (HRS), Florida’s chief social welfare agency. As a result of joint budgeting and planning, including Full Service Schools and Supplemental School Health grants, the FSC was able to collocate a variety of programs at one site. In 1990, inter-agency funds supported the placement of seven interconnected portable buildings adjacent to an elementary and a middle school in the poorest quadrant of the city. The FSC initially housed the following programs: Economic Services
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Figure 1: Interviewed participants.

(Aid to Families with Dependent Children and food stamps); Adult Basic Education (ABE) and GED classes; First Start (a state early intervention program for infants and toddlers); mental health services; parenting education; employability training; child care services; and a primary health care screening clinic. In 1991, Even Start joined the other programs at the FSC. A study of this FSC by Jo Hendrickson and Donna Omer (1995) found that extensive interagency communication and collaboration at the site reduced or eliminated duplication and fragmentation of services. Hendrickson and Omer concluded that the “co-location of services . . . is particularly advantageous to at-risk children and families” (p. 148).

Even Start families attributed several benefits to the policy of integrating services and programs at one location. These advantages can be analyzed along two dimensions: (a) horizontally, as synergy among programs; and (b) vertically, as synergy within Even Start.

**SYNERGY AMONG PROGRAMS**

Participants favorably contrasted their help-seeking experiences at the FSC with previous experiences at the main facilities of agencies that now posted workers at the FSC. For Dawn, a 40-year-old married mother of three, the key was the smaller scale of the operation:

It was very difficult and the health department was like, by the time, if your baby isn’t sick when you get there, they could be from all the other kids, which is anywhere, but I means there is just so much more. And it might take you all day to get to see the doctor. Where you have a shorter length of time here, it’s really great.
Simplified access and assessment procedures also provided the combined client/student/patient with the opportunity to develop familiarity with the small cadre of professionals collocated at the site. Referrals among programs could be done face to face, resulting in quicker placement. With frustration from delays reduced, parents could begin to develop a sense of trust in and loyalty to the FSC site itself and to the professionals who were working together to expedite enrollment into needed services. In a relatively short amount of time, usually by the end of 3 months, participants came to view the FSC as a mediating institution, one that operated on the caring principles of a family. Dawn described the FSC as "just like a family." Twenty-five-year-old Garnet, who has three children, said that she enjoyed the "good open communication" with the teachers. Sonja, 21 years old and a single mother with one child, appreciated the fact that "they treated me like I was somebody." Molly, who is 29 years old and a single mother of four children, observed,

I just liked the closeness. Everybody was so caring. You don't find that in today's society, in any type of program or anything. It's like you're just there, get done what you have to do. But the people here just care. They make you feel, you know... It's like I've known them my whole life... I think the people here are great, very close-knit. It's good. It's a good thing because, like, any type of social service, the people just don't seem to care the way the people do here... And that's something that we need today. All these single mothers with children out here, they need somebody who really cares.

SYNERGY WITHIN EVEN START

Even Start requires that participants attend all three core components of the program: adult education, parent education, and early childhood education. For many participants, making the effort to comply with a schedule of classes and workshops had two rewards. First, it distanced them from a previous existence that was isolated and directionless. Second, it provided them with the opportunity to draw comfort and guidance from other women who were further along in their journey toward self-sufficiency. (Single-parent females headed 98% of the 163 families served.) Garnet appreciated how the program ended her sense of isolation:

I'm just glad I have somewhere. It makes me feel like I have a job I can come to now because I can get fixed up now, fix the kids up, and we don't have clothes that just sit there because we didn't have anywhere to go. Now I can get them dressed and myself, fix all of us up. So that is how it has changed.

Molly agreed that Even Start gave direction to her parenting:
What I really enjoy about the parenting classes, get with other mothers, and see their—how they are, you know what I’m saying. And I mean as far as how they—just be able to interact with other mothers, and talk to other mothers and say, “Well, this is what mine did, and this is what this one did.”

Perhaps the most important form of mutual reinforcement in Even Start was the synergy between adult education and early childhood education. When parents demonstrated dedication to completing their own education, they became positive role models to their children for doing academic work, and more generally, for persisting in the face of difficulties. Jonetta, a single, 22-year-old mother of four, found that “When I come here it helps motivate my kids for school. They feel like ‘Well Mama’s going to school so I’ll go to school.’ It helps them want to learn more.” Jackie, 20 years old and a single mother of two children, experienced this reciprocal encouragement with her son J.T.:

I want to go to school, but then, you know you have those days where, “I ain’t going today. I just don’t feel like it.” But I got to get up and make myself go out, get myself a kick in the butt and push. And then, J.T., he loves it. He knows he’s going to school. He say, “Mama, I go to school.” And that let me know he really want to go, so with that it’s time to go.

All three educational components of Even Start were organized around the principle of self-paced, exploratory learning. As both parent and child learned problem-solving skills in a setting that placed equal emphasis on social and academic competence, each acquired the readiness to succeed in school and community. Dawn especially liked the organized play for her child:

When she goes to a sitter where she has other kids to play with, then they never know what to do and they can never agree. Here, it’s more organized, where they colored all at the same time, and they didn’t get bored with none of it. They get to interact with each other, and they still have the guidance of an adult.

Sally, a single mother of three, found her interaction with other parents useful and reassuring:

I like being around older people. Like when my kid’s sick, I’m thinking about rushing to the hospital. “No, why don’t you try a sponge bath. Bathe him.” They teach me things that at 23, I would just think about rushing to the emergency room. . . . I have like this group in my neighborhood. Older people get together, and I say, “I have this problem. I just need some kind of support.” So then we all sit down, and we’ll talk about things, and it’s just off my mind.
DISCUSSION

Taken as a whole, the testimony of these 11 women describes a growth in self-respect that culminated in an enlarged sense of personal efficacy. Their responses to an interviewer’s questions over the 3-year period can be categorized as five stages in an evolution toward political awareness: regenerated self-esteem, self-confidence, speaking up, involvement, and governance. The final retrospective interviews conducted at the close of the third year elicited responses that illustrate each of these five stages.

REGENERATED SELF-ESTEEM

The basis for a new sense of self-worth lay in the consistency of caring that the staff displayed. They forgave and challenged the sometimes erratic efforts that these women undertook. The adult Even Start participants were painfully aware of their previous history of antagonism toward and failure with bureaucracies that claimed to have their best interests at heart. Jonetta reflected, “They never gave up on me; regardless of what, they never gave up. They helped me keep coming, helped motivate me a lot. . . . I can always fall back on them with certain things if I really need to.” Sally felt the same care and concern from the FSC staff:

She [the family liaison specialist] makes sure that I get all the help that I need. . . . She always remembers things that I told her later, always brings it up, lets me know that she really cares, and makes me feel very comfortable.

Sally became very close to the staff of the FSC. She recalled telling one staff member, “You know, I wish you was my mom,” and the staff member “looked at me and smiled.” Dawn was surprised that “there is state organizations that care.” Like other people she knew, Dawn assumed that the staff were “just doing it for a paycheck.” Instead, she found, “everybody here is not like that, they care and they really want to see you do it, not for their benefit but for yours.”

SELF-CONFIDENCE

Once these initially wary adults learned that, in this caring environment, making mistakes was not a punishable offense, they were willing to risk trying out some of the strategies recommended by program staff and guest speakers. Perhaps the most potent of these recommendations was to volunteer; volunteering was a way of demonstrating that a person had something worthwhile to offer, as Sally found when she volunteered at her son’s school.
I was going to the parenting class and they were saying: "Volunteer, volunteer." And then my son started asking me to come to the school, so I just started coming, and I really enjoy it. . . . I got a certificate volunteering at my son's school last year, at Prairie View, so that kinda like made him [a boyfriend] feel good. And I told him, you know he's a very shy person, and this woman was talking about volunteering, I told him, "It doesn't matter how you think other people feel or may look down on you, you're volunteering, you stay focused. Don't let other people intimidate you not to do what you want to do."

SPEAKING UP

The experiences that accompanied volunteering (dealing with outside people) and the ensuing recognition initiated important changes in several previously intimidated individuals. They expressed a renewed commitment to attain for themselves and their children equitable treatment that would improve their family's life chances. Sally learned the importance of speaking up:

I've learned there is a right way and a wrong way. If you have a situation that needs—you need help with, speak up. If you have a problem with someone, regardless of what their job is, what their color is, their race, anything about that person, speak up, in an OK manner, not so much fussing and shouting, and if you have to go to that person, and keep doing it, until you get whatever problem you have solved. So that's one of the main things that I have learned, is to speak up, and don't be so afraid. No one is no—any more different than I am.

Willie Mae, 41 years old and a single mother of 11 children, also learned the value of asking questions:

Most always they put us in touch with the right people when we need different things. I guess I'm still learning because sometimes when it's things that, like when we need and I didn't know that if you asked you can be put in with the right people.

IN卷IVEMENT

In addition to providing opportunities to learn and to express an opinion about the ways different organizations operate, volunteering had several other virtues. It enabled parents to get to know what was going on in their children's schools. It also encouraged adult participants to explore possibilities for future employment. Sally believed that involvement through volunteering was valuable both currently and for her family's future:
Every young Black single parent needs to get involved with their kids and their school. It’s very important. . . .

I’m going to take the first two weeks and volunteer at the school so I can get hands-on—meet his teacher and then maybe after that, I’ll volunteer one day each week. . . .

Since I have volunteer hours and since I enjoy working with kids, I'll work with the school board and see what they have available for me there. Definitely I want to get into nursing because when my mom gets to the age where she can’t take care of herself, I don’t want a nursing home. . . . One of my goals is planning, after I receive my GED, while I’m not in school or setting up for school, I hope to be volunteering, hopefully at Shands or at Alachua General [Hospitals].

GOVERNANCE

From volunteering at other sites to assuming responsibilities at the FSC was a natural progression, one which the staff promoted. The FSC created a parents’ organization that served two purposes. First, the organization acted as an advisory group that was willing to tackle behavioral problems that might at first best be mediated by peers (e.g., friction between mothers whose children had the same father; classroom disruptions by participants under the influence of drugs or alcohol). Second, the parents’ group functioned as an auxiliary in charge of sharing information through a newsletter and conferring recognition by staging graduation ceremonies. Jonetta took great pride in her participation as president in these responsibilities:

They be so busy doing this, that, and the other; then, we like “well, we can’t do it all. We gonna give y’all some type of responsibility.” And what they do is they get the group up together and they select different ones to be the president and the vice president, and secretary. And when they have a problem with anything, they will go to the president or the vice president, and they will sit down and talk it over with them and give them little suggestions, and we would bring it up to the rest of them when we get, like, in a pack, in a real group. It’s not the parenting group. It would be brought up and they would give their different opinions about it and things like that. It’s real nice.

They had this big celebration before the graduation, and we’d be like a little skit of them, how the Family Service Center is ran. We did a skit on that, and some of us said poems, and you know, we talked about the school and different ones for health, and you know, just talked about how good they, you know, help support this, that, and the other. And then we looked up different groups to come out and sing and stuff like that.

These 11 women poignantly expressed their emergence from a lonely, isolated, and directionless existence into goal-oriented, empowered individu-
als who are striving to improve their lives and those of their children. Faced
with poverty, medical problems, and family difficulties, these women found
in the interlocking programs of the FSC a caring staff, educational opportuni-
ties, and the encouragement they needed to become independent social actors.

CONCLUSION

The Even Start program promotes family literacy both in the narrow,
technical sense of reading and writing skills and in the broader sense of political
and social empowerment. Participants demonstrated a growing sense of self-
respect as they experienced five stages of personal and social development:
regenerated self-esteem, self-confidence, speaking up, involvement, and gov-
ernance. As they moved through these stages, participants gained new inter-
personal and organizational skills that could serve them far beyond the life of
the program.

The integration of services at sites like the FSC in Gainesville, Florida,
promotes family literacy by introducing stability and familiarity into the pro-
vision of services. Participants soon became familiar with the small profes-
sional staff at the FSC. They developed trusting relationships with these service
providers and often employed metaphors of kinship to describe their relations-
ships with staff and other participants. Rather than ferrying from site to site in
an attempt to obtain educational, health, and social services, participants in the
Even Start program could receive multiple services at one location, which
simplified access to needed services as well as interprogram referrals. This
economy of effort fostered a sense of loyalty to the FSC and its staff, loyalty
that translated into a greater commitment to achieve broad literacy goals.

Staff and investigators of programs like Even Start need to pay careful
attention to the perceptions of participants, who often have valuable insights
into how and why a program is or is not accomplishing its goals. Too frequently,
research has relied on administrators and policy makers to articulate standards
of program success without fully consulting the lived experience of program
participants. Often, this practice yields quantitative results that fail to capture
quantitative changes in participants’ lives. If Even Start and other family-
centered programs are genuinely committed to promoting literacy in the broad
sense of social and political empowerment, then participants have to be
regarded as major stakeholders who have important things to tell us about what
constitutes a program’s success or failure. Service providers and program
evaluators must listen.
APPENDIX

Questionnaire consolidating items asked at initial and follow-up interviews with Even Start participants [Starred items indicate questions asked at follow-up]

1. How did you first hear about Even Start?
2. Describe your child a little bit:
   - What things does s/he do really well?
   - Does s/he have trouble doing certain things?
   - How is s/he sleeping/eating/playing?
3. What do you like best so far about being in Even Start?
   - going back to school?
   - finding out about parenting?
   - getting a diploma? having free time when your child is in preschool?
   - learning to read?
   - making new friends?
4.* Has your child changed a great deal since we last talked?
5. How has being in the program affected your everyday life? Has it changed:
   - how you spend your time?
   - the way you play with your child?
   - making new friends?
How has it changed what you think about:
   - the school system?
   - your neighborhood?
   - your chances of becoming independent?
6. What things have you learned:
   - about your child?
   - about school?
   - about being a parent?
   - about yourself?
7. What does it feel like to be going to school again?
   - Were you afraid?
   - What was your biggest fear?
   - What’s the hardest part now?
   - How is it different from school before?
8. Have you run into any problems since you started:
   - in getting here?
   - in finding child care?
   - in working with your child?
   - in getting along with other parents?
   - How about the classes and the teachers?
9. What things do you most enjoy doing with your child?
10. What do you feel is the hardest part about being a parent?
11. Is there anything your child needs at home that might help her/him:
    - stay healthy?
    - feel happy?
    - learn more?
APPENDIX (Continued)

12.* How are your family’s health needs being met?
   What part has Even Start played in helping your family stay healthy?
13.* Do you know anyone who has ever been in Even Start?
   If yes, have you noticed any changes in their life?
   What seems to be different about them?
14. What do you think you’ll be doing:
   two years from now?
   five years from now?
15.* What do you hope your child will be doing when s/he grows up?
16. [Use the Faces Scale and ask parent to point to one of the five faces; the smiling
   face indicates Very Satisfied; the frowning face indicates Very Unsatisfied.]
   How would you rate your satisfaction with these parts of the Even Start
   program?
   parenting classes
   child’s preschool
   teacher conferences
   adult ed classes
   home visits
17. Are there things (services, information) you’d like to see added to the Even
   Start program?

EXIT INTERVIEW QUESTIONNAIRE

PART 1: UPDATE ON CIRCUMSTANCES

1. Has anything changed with you, your child, or family since our last interview?
   Possible areas:
   a. Marital status
   b. Living arrangements
   c. Children/people in household
   d. Births/deaths
   e. Employment
   f. Illness
   g. Other

PART 2: PROGRESS TOWARD GOALS

1. What goals did you set for yourself and your child when you began Even Start?
   Have they been accomplished?
2. How is your child doing compared to other children her/his age (including
   siblings)?
3a. Have you and your family received all the support services you feel you needed? Which one’s been most valuable?
3b. Do you have more information and knowledge now so that you can get your own needs met? Can you give me an example?

PART 3: IMPACT OF THE PROGRAM

1. As you look back over your time in the program, tell me how you think Even Start may have affected your life.
   Possible areas:
   New friends/relationships?
   New ways of acting?
   New ways of getting help?
2. Describe any ways you think you, your child, or your family may have changed since you’ve been in the program.
3. Which part of the program has been the most helpful to you?
4. What suggestions would you have that might make Even Start more helpful to new families just beginning?
5. Please describe one memorable event or experience you or your child had while you were in the program.

PART 4: FUTURE PLANS

1. Tell me about your plans for the immediate future.
2. What long range plans do you have for yourself, your child, your family?
3. What do you need to do for these plans to become a reality?

NOTE

1. Willie Mae’s 11 children skewed the average number of children for the interviewed participants. The other 10 women had an average of three children each.

REFERENCES


