



Community Partners for Early Literacy

Transcript for the [Video](#):

Inspiring Lessons What We Learned from the Community Partners for Early Literacy Project

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Narrator: Learning to read and write is critical for every child’s success in school and beyond. Research shows that children’s ability to read is shaped during their first five years of life. Young children learn early literacy skills through the commitment, support, and expertise of many people: families; teachers and paraprofessionals; program directors, principals, and superintendents; and policy makers. As a society, we are directing more attention to importance of teaching children to read. Despite this, many children struggle with learning to read and write. Children from low-income families are especially at-risk for reading difficulties.

Maureen Ruby, Co-Principal Investigator: We have a crisis in our country. We’re in Connecticut, and Connecticut has the largest gap in achievement in students between what we refer to as the “haves” and the “have-nots.” And this gap exists when 5-year-olds show up at the schoolroom door. There’s already a difference.

Narrator: In 2008, Eastern Connecticut State University’s Center for Early Childhood Education set out to change this with the support of a U.S. Department of Education Early Reading First grant.

Julia DeLapp, Center for Early Childhood Education: Early Reading First was designed to improve the school readiness of young children—especially children from low-income families. So for our project in Windham, Connecticut, we worked in 14 classrooms, including 3 where the instruction was done primarily in Spanish. We called the project Community Partners for Early Literacy, and the partners were the Windham Early Childhood Center, which is part of the Windham Public Schools, and the Child and Family Development Resource Center. The primary goal of our project was to improve the language and early literacy skills of the children in those two centers. And over the course of the three-year project, we worked with over 500 preschoolers and impacted their early literacy.

Ann Anderberg, Co-Principal Investigator: The whole project from its inception was designed around the fact that we have a very diverse community here in Windham. Windham has a large Latino community— Puerto Rican, Mexican, South American, Central American. And so the grant was really conceived around: How do we address the issues of early childhood

education and early literacy development for both English-speaking students and English learners in the community?

Julia DeLapp: We had a lot of successes, and we also learned a lot of lessons—lessons that I think will be useful for other programs and districts wanting to improve early literacy.

Lesson #1: Provide Ongoing, Differentiated Professional Development

Wally de Sousa, Teacher: I was thrilled with the idea that I could be studying during my working hours, and I did not need to go home and go back to school at night tired and not motivated because of the hundreds of things that we have to do being a teacher.

Maureen: We want to first describe what the structure of oral language is.

Narrator: Every two weeks, teachers and paraprofessionals attended professional development trainings held at their own schools, while substitute teachers covered the classrooms.

Julia DeLapp: The very first thing we did was to assess the early literacy knowledge of all of the teaching staff who were going to be involved in the project. And then that information about their strengths and their areas of need was used to design the professional development. The principal investigators divided the teaching staff into four groups based on their knowledge. And then they were able to provide professional development that was very targeted in its content and its delivery method to each of those groups.

Maureen Ruby: We had the PD couched or embedded in credit-bearing classes, so in that way, we could give assignments that had to be done in the classroom.

Beth: This one is: “We’re Going on a...Lion Hunt.”

Elisabeth Martin, Teacher: The professional development was a very, very positive experience for me. The assignments that they asked us to do really were meaningful for my profession and my classroom and helping my children grow. I feel like I learned a lot. I feel like an expert now.

Beth: And take a guess at what room those girls are in...

Narrator: To help staff implement what they learned in professional development sessions, a highly trained literacy coach was assigned to each classroom. Literacy coach Sandy Granchelli worked closely with teacher Claudia Ahern over the course of the grant.

Maureen Ruby: The reason the literacy coach is important is because when you do professional development, when you stand up and talk to—talk AT people basically—that doesn’t mean it’s going to be translated into classroom practice. And so the literacy coach is like that guide by the side. Somebody who can support the teacher in that clinical implementation of what they’ve learned in the classroom.

Claudia Ahern, Teacher: When the CPEL project was first introduced to us and we were told we were going to have a literacy coach, it was very intimidating. Preschool teachers like their classroom; they like things set in a certain way. It just seemed very overwhelming that someone was going to come in, and would they judge me? How would I work with this person? Would we get along?

Audrey Cadarette, Literacy Coach: Coaching is non-evaluative. You are in the classroom working side by side with the teacher helping them to find their best teaching methods to improve what they do in their classrooms.

Audrey: Say it with me: lair.

Children: Lair!

Audrey: The next word I want you to ...

Wally de Sousa: It was an extraordinary opportunity because I didn't feel alone. And when I didn't know, when I had my ideas all over the place thinking, "How am I going to do this?" I had my literacy coach coming and modeling to me, calming me down, sharing her experiences with me.

Sandra Granchelli, Literacy Coach: I think that when you're working with adults, as with kids too, you really have to tailor what you're doing to that person's strengths and particular needs. You really have to differentiate for everybody.

Sandy: It's an A.

John: Could be, yeah.

John Fortunato, Teacher: I had a literacy coach that I had a good rapport with. She was able to give me ideas and I was able to frankly say, yeah, give me all the ideas, and I'll ignore them. But I never ignored them. I always tried to figure out how they worked with my personality, with the children in my room, with the structure in my room.

Sandy: It's all part of a structure

John: Yeah, it's part of a whole thing, and the structure is something that I can handle.

Maureen Ruby: What our teachers and our coaches did was have a coaching conference. And they would talk about the students in the class and what was just learned in PD and how the teacher feels about his or her ability to implement that in the classroom. And then they would come to some understanding of what would happen next. Did the teacher want to see the coach model a certain strategy in the classroom? Or did the teacher want the coach to come in to observe the teacher implementing that strategy?

John Fortunato: When you want change, you have to support the person who you want to change. And I feel like I've changed a whole bunch.

Lesson #2: Invest In The Professional Development Of Paraprofessionals

Ann Anderberg: The work of the grant that's been so powerful and so meaningful to me is having the opportunity to provide the differentiated professional development that we provided to teachers and to paraprofessionals. And one of the ways that we differentiated it was to offer the paraprofessionals the opportunity to take the training in either English or Spanish.

(Natural sound of PD in Spanish)

Emden Jiménez-Sifontes, Literacy Coach: It was very nice to be able to guide them and to work with them and to challenge their fears and take them out of their comfort zones to accomplish some tasks. And once that was done, it was very rewarding.

Maria Rojas, Paraprofessional: The most important thing was that it was in my language. I think it was a way for me to grow because even though I did it, I had never HEARD about phonological awareness, or about the importance of narrative. I said I have to learn it; I have to pay attention in class to know how I can put this into practice in the classroom.

Maureen Ruby: When we worked with the paraprofessionals, we gave them the exact same instruction in terms of the content that we gave to teachers who had bachelors and master's degrees and some of them beyond. But we delivered the instruction in ways that was meaningful dependent on their background and experience. So what happened over time was that the teachers and the paraprofessionals had the same knowledge base. They had the same vocabulary. They could communicate with each other.

(Song in Spanish)

Wally de Sousa: We could feel the difference in the room because I didn't feel alone anymore, just having a person to help me. I felt like if I had another teacher in the room.

Glenda Borgos, Paraprofessional: When I used to read to the children, I used to just read along and read along, and just finish the book and maybe ask questions at the end of the book. Now I focus on ways to read that book.

Glenda: Swishy, swashy...

Glenda Borgos: We ask questions; we say beginning, middle, end; we talk about the characters, the setting, all that. And I learned all that through the program. It's simple things that we didn't do before, but now we're like aware of it.

Glenda: We're going on a bear hunt; we're going to catch a big one!

Audrey Cadaratte: I think that really opened the classroom teacher's eyes, too, about what they could do in the classroom that really would take the load off of the classroom teacher. And also enhance the whole classroom in every way.

Maureen Ruby: Children were getting more attention because there were more knowledgeable people in the classroom. You could see how children were improving based upon this type of differentiated small group instruction that they were getting. And it was painless, it was really painless.

Osiris Quintana, Paraprofessional: Everything that I learned in this process I have been able to incorporate with the children. The first thing we do when we sit down during the time to read a book, is in the beginning, we teach what I learned with CPEL. We show them the cover, the parts of the book: the cover, the back cover, then the book so the child can see how it will be read, which is from left to right, that he knows that letters have sounds. All this material was learned at the beginning [of the project].

Ann Anderberg: We were really able to democratize the knowledge of the most recent research in early literacy for this community.

Lesson #3: Use assessment to inspire change

Maureen Ruby: When the teachers started seeing positive outcomes and change in their students, that's when they became believers.

Blair: Instructions for PALS

Narrator: Assessment of the children was another essential aspect. They were tested for a variety of language and early literacy skills. Testing was conducted in Spanish for Spanish-speaking children. The results helped identify the greatest areas of need.

Maureen Ruby: We need to know where kids are, where they begin, so that we can estimate how far off the mark they are in terms of what is typical development. And then we need to be able to provide different tiers of instruction and extra instruction to children who aren't progressing the way we would like them to progress.

Wally: Now you need your "I". But here, look.

Ann: What does it mean to screen children?

Narrator: Dr. Anderberg and Dr. Ruby trained teachers and paraprofessionals to gather data about how children were doing in their classrooms. For example, *Get it Got it Go*, a progress monitoring tool, provided immediate feedback to teachers about how their instruction was impacting children's learning.

Elisabeth Martin: When we first started *Get it, Got it, Go*, I remember thinking, "Oh, this is just crazy, there's just no way they're going to be able to do all this, and why bother?" But from the information that we gathered together, I really see the value in using the progress monitoring tool to help with the next steps of planning and instruction. Because we need that information.

Narrator: Each classroom's literacy environment was assessed three times a year. This gave teachers information they could use to improve their teaching practices and classroom set-up, and helped literacy coaches target their support to each teacher's greatest need.

Maureen Ruby: We did an environmental assessment. It's called the ELLCO: the Early Language and Literacy Classroom Observation tool.

Narrator: The ELLCO measures how well a classroom environment exhibits factors known to contribute to developing young children's early literacy skills. For example, it measures how much teachers support vocabulary development, complex conversations, and phonological awareness. It measures the quality and frequency of book reading, the kinds of books available, how books are organized, and the availability of materials that support print awareness and early writing.

John: I'm going to give you a word that starts with B. /b/ /b/ /b/

John Fortunato: I think that if you look at my class now and you looked at it two years ago, the amount of literacy, the amount of print, where it's located, the way print is addressed, the way books are read, the effort made to try to integrate whatever book, whatever story, whatever happens at circle into several other parts of the room... I mean I think all of that has changed positively.

Lesson #4: Involve Families

Narrator: Engaging families to support children's literacy learning at home was a critical component of the CPEL project.

Ann Anderberg: The children and their families come with tremendous resources. In large part we're talking about a community of low socioeconomic status and low educational attainment. However, they certainly have life experiences; they certainly have cultural experiences that go beyond our borders. They have language; they have stories; and when we tap into their skills and amplify their ability to engage with our school system, they're more than ready and willing partners.

Maureen Ruby: When children are seeing that they're getting the same message about what's important and they're seeing the same strategies and hearing some of the same language at home and in school, it's synergistic.

Sandra Granchelli: This is the ideal time to get parents on board, to get parents more involved regularly in classrooms in the preschool years and help them to understand how to navigate the system, so that they're more comfortable with that when kids get into the upper grades.

Narrator: One successful strategy was to send home literacy lending kits with each child every week.

Julia DeLapp: We put together literacy kits in a variety of languages—English, Spanish, Russian, Arabic—to meet the needs of the children who spoke a variety of languages at home. The literacy kits included books, but they also included suggestions to parents about questions they could ask about what they were reading of their child to foster more oral language and greater comprehension.

Vanna Colón, Parent: The books that she received, she loved them, and she talked about them. She wanted to read them as soon as she took it out of her cubby.

Julia DeLapp: The kits also included a journal where children could write or draw a response to the book and for parents could also write a comment about what their child got out of the book.

Yolanda Valadez, Parent: We write every weekend, because I let him do it on the weekend so he can practice well what we saw in the book. And I tell him later to write what he liked.

Wally de Sousa: The literacy kits worked really well in my class to the point that some kids that I thought that they couldn't retell a story, I noticed that they could do it when I read the feedback from their parents.

Vanna Colón: Now I find myself asking more questions, not just 2 or 3, thanks to the kit and its questions inside. And we reflect more on the stories. We say, “Oh, what if something happened just like the book?” Or when we’re driving around town or out of town and we see something that’s similar to a book, we bring up the book.

Julia DeLapp: We knew that children needed to have books in their home that they could keep and call their own, and so the first two years we bought a lot of books. And we let every child pick a few books that really spoke to them, and that was great. But the third year, we tried something different that I think was really powerful. Every month, each child got a copy of the book that was being read to them in class.

Claudia Ahern: I loved that the children got ten books to take home. I think it was great that their name was inside the front cover of each book. It really gave the child ownership that it was their book and they got to keep it. Whether or not someone read to them at home, they could hold the book; they could take a picture walk; they could pretend read. I knew each child was going to have ten books at home.

Julia DeLapp: If the child spoke Spanish at home, we gave her two books: one in English and one in Spanish. Sending home the book that they were reading in class meant that children were really excited to share that book at home. They knew what the book was about; they knew that they liked it; so they were highly motivated to try to get someone in their family to read it to them. And then that reinforced what was being learned in the classroom.

Wally de Sousa: The parents having the book and reading to them again and listening to what they brought from school—it was a real way to connect families and the school. And this is very important, because they are little, they spend only 2 hours and a half with us. So we don’t teach them alone—we need the families. And when we have this together, it’s amazing how they grow.

Narrator: Another successful strategy for involving families was parent workshops and family nights. At these events, the literacy coaches shared techniques to help parents support their children’s emerging literacy. One technique that was shared is called Dialogic Reading.

Yolanda Valadez: The parent workshops have helped me to pause when I read with my son, to better answer his questions, and to stop when I have to stop to listen to him when he’s describing something that is happening or that he sees in the book.

Maureen Ruby: We want the child to be interacting with the reader and interacting with the book and developing a language. It’s all about language.

Yolanda Valadez: We sit down, the three of us—my daughter, my son, and I—and she would also read books to her brother. And this has improved more because we have created a routine where we can sit down, the three of us, and it’s the best time for us to talk and share with each other.

Lesson #5: Inspire Teachers to Believe in Children's Potential

Julia DeLapp: I think one of the biggest take-aways for this project was really about believing in children's potential regardless of their home environment. If you provide teachers and paraprofessionals with the tools, the knowledge, and the support, they can really challenge children to learn and grow in ways we might not have expected.

Audrey Cadarette: When we began the project, the teachers definitely felt like the children were limited in what they could learn. I was really nervous that sometimes what your expectations are is exactly what you get. But because most of the teachers were open to what we brought to the project, they started to get feedback from parents; they started to see results from the Get it Got it Go and the other assessments that were done; that pretty soon they were realizing that age, family, was not necessarily a boundary.

Elisabeth Martin: I'm pleasantly surprised that the children can understand the books. Last year I felt like the books were not available to the children's language and ability, and now this year I'm looking at them in a different way, and I think that the kids can handle that more sophisticated language. And I'm really pleased by that experience, because it helps me to have higher expectations for my students.

Emden Jiménez-Sifontes: It wasn't until these kids started really rhyming and manipulating language that I realized that it could be done. And it can be done in their first language, to keep the first language, to be competent in it and fluent and be able to transfer those skills to learn the second language.

(Spanish song)

Emden Jiménez-Sifontes: You learn to read only once, so if you learn to read in your native language and you are solid on that, what you have to do is just transfer those skills.

(John speaking in Spanish)

John Fortunato: I'm sort of beginning to get the idea that teaching children who come from other language backgrounds is not really rocket science. It's understanding where the child is, figuring out what kind of supports they need, and offering that. And it makes it a little more complex, but, you know, that's what's fun at this job.

Elisabeth Martin: I loved the work that we did together with oral language development. That was an area that I had to learn more about. I feel like I wasn't helping my children grow the way that I would want them to grow. So having help with the oral language development, with the story telling—all in very child friendly ways that made it really fun and really engaging—helped me to develop my language as well. And then I saw such wonderful growth in the children's language development.

Martha: Nose. So you're going to touch your nose, and you're going to touch your toes. Are you ready?

Audrey Cadarette: We used to hear at the beginning of the project that we wouldn't even do rhyming with the 3-year-olds, that they just weren't ready for it. And then we found that some of the scores for the 3-year-olds were even higher than the 4-year-olds. And then they started pulling out all the plugs and they started realizing that, "I'm going to present this to these children, and they are all going to learn, and they are going to reach bounds that that I never even knew existed before." And that has been such a rewarding thing to see in this project.

Sandra Granchelli: I'm totally surprised about how much kids can learn and how exciting they are at this age and how much change can happen and the potential at in preschool for dramatic change.

Ann Anderberg: Young children can be assessed; they can receive direct instruction; and they can make tremendous progress when they do. We certainly saw some real closing, we think, of the academic achievement gap through this program.

Maureen Ruby: That typical gap we see with the higher kids being up here and the lower kids being down here—we're talking about language. That's going to impact everything that they do in school. And so by addressing these emergent literacy skills in a very planful and informed manner, and keeping track of how kids are progressing, we have a chance to close or lessen that gap before children get to kindergarten.

Julia DeLapp: Through this project, we learned that to be successful with preschool-aged children, you need to provide professional development that is embedded in what's going on in the classroom. You need to invest in paraprofessionals and believe that they can be true partners in the instructional team. You have to involve families in meaningful ways. You need to use assessment data to drive your instruction. And most important, you have to believe that if you challenge children in developmentally appropriate ways, they are capable of doing amazing things.