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Effectiveness of parent education classes: Phenomenological approach

Lavonna Lucille Downing

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EFFECTIVENESS OF PARENT EDUCATION CLASSES

A PHENOMENOLOGICAL APPROACH

A Project
Presented to the
Faculty of
California State University,
San Bernardino

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Social Work

by
Lavonna Lucille Downing
June 2003
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ABSTRACT

A review of the literature on parent education produces a trove of effectiveness studies that indicate these classes should change parenting behaviors. First and Way (1995) find no one particular program is more effective than another (Anchor & Thomason, 1977; Frazier & Matthews, 1975; Freeman, 1975; Goodson & Hess, 1975; Kessen, Fein, Clark-Stewart & Starr, 1975; Pinsker & Geoffrey, 1981; Schofield, 1979).

While research has documented that the materials taught in the various programs effectively address appropriate parenting, the individual experiences of participants is rarely considered. This study sought to examine outcomes for participants that accrued from parent education classes.

Using a phenomenological approach, the nature of outcomes for eight female participants who took parent education classes in San Bernardino County during the past year were examined. Their stories were coded and nine categories emerged from their experiences, giving insight into participants’ experience and suggesting that transformative learning had occurred.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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DEDICATION

To Lisa, David and Andrew Dettelbach for their encouragement and support.
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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

A review of the most popular approaches to parent education suggests that the child whose parent has received parent education is the best measure of program success. Each method has both strengths and weaknesses that must be considered when attempting to determine the effectiveness of parent education. The goals of society are constantly changing. Parent education classes are deemed of great importance in protecting children, since DCS and the courts refer clients to these classes. A review of the literature shows that the effectiveness of parenting classes is widely studied from a program perspective. In order to understand effectiveness at a personal level, participants must be given a voice in assessing the impact the classes have had on their thinking and their lives.

Problem Statement

Parenting skills have been the focus of many studies in the past years as we attempt to determine cause behind behavior that society deems unacceptable. Family structure has changed, with blended, migrant, refugee,
dual worker and single parent families being terms that are now used for family types, and traditional, two-parent households less common. These new terms bring with them different connotations of parenting. Additionally, our society is a blend of cultures and ethnicities that may have views of parenting that differ from mainstream thinking.

Three approaches to parent education predominate the literature, i.e. Behavioral, Client-centered and Adlerian. For the most part, the measurements that determine the success of a parent education program model do not measure changes in the parent so much as in the child.

A behavioral approach program is said to be successful if the child’s behavior has changed in some manner. In most instances, the parent has been viewed as the tool through which a change in the child is accomplished, primarily through teaching the parent to use behavioral modification methods. A pre and post-test of the child’s behavior can be used to determine that the skill was learned and used by the parent. This model lends itself well to empirical evaluations, without attention to parents’ strengths, struggles or needs and
ignores social context, neighborhood, racism and classism.

Parent Effectiveness Training (PET) is client centered, teaching parents to provide a facilitating environment that encourages their child's development. Enhanced parent-child relationships, improved communication and mutual respect are goals - not behavior modification. This model sees a child as master of his/her own destiny. It accepts imperfection in parents and children, but does not provide tools to address the varied capacity of parents, nor does it take into account the context of conflict.

Adlerian parent education, such as STEP, teaches that children misbehave due to feelings of inadequacy or discouragement. Punishment is rejected; democracy in family relationships is promoted. This model requires the parent to diagnose the misbehavior and determine how to interrupt the parent-child interaction that sustains it. Consequences are natural and logical and require no parental intervention. This model is the least evaluated, most effective with older children, and places little emphasis on social context.
The nature of the parent-child relationship reflects changing social concerns and attitudes. Society's goals for parent education reflect the need to manage or minimize the parent-child conflict, encourage and sustain family communication, decision-making skills for managing the minutia of life, as well as many and varied issues such as tantrums, lack of academic achievement, discipline, etc.

State intervention for child protection purposes inevitably requires parent education classes for abusive and neglectful parents, as well as for parents seeking to reunify with their children. These parent education programs, however, generally contain a mixture of models with different goals, methods of instruction, philosophies and assumptions about children, as well as the role a parent is to play. Furthermore, there is a mixture of parenting types, ages and ethnicities in any given parent education program. The commonality is the need for parenting skills. While the literature is clear that parent education is effective, from a program perspective, there is a need to determine effectiveness from the perspective of the individual client.
Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to examine the nature of the parent education experience. Using a qualitative approach, eight participants of a parent education program will be interviewed from a phenomenological perspective.

Research indicates that no particular parenting program is more effective than another and that participation in a program to improve parenting is more important than the type of program attended. This study will probe the learning experiences of eight parent education participants in a qualitative format, examining the nature and meaning of the experience for the participants, along with outcomes that accrue from the experience. The study will not attempt to evaluate or judge the merits of the parent education program the participants attended, but to gain insight into how the learners experienced the program and conceptualize the nature of the learning outcomes from the perspective of the learner.
Significance of the Project in Social Work Practice

Parent education programs have the potential for facilitating the development of new ways of thinking, and for enhancing specific parenting skills. Large numbers of referrals to parenting classes by the courts and DCS suggest that society wants to see parents acquire needed skills. Are parent education classes effective? This research will assist social workers in understanding the value of the experience from the client's perspective.

The goal of DCS and the courts is to reunite dysfunctional families and/or provide necessary skills to keep families intact. Social Workers, as handmaidens of DCS and the courts, must understand the impact of this educational process on the client in order to effectively do their job. Furthermore, this study has the potential of providing information to guide policy decisions by giving insight into the learning that takes place in the classes. These in-depth interviews with participants can broaden our understanding of the effectiveness of parent education.
CHAPTER TWO
LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

This chapter reviews the changes in family structure that are taking place in our society, along with the major theories guiding parent education. It further outlines effectiveness studies of parent education programs and the effects of child abuse and neglect. An overview of parenting education and socioeconomic status are given, together with cultural factors involved in parent education.

Changes in Family Structure

Dore and Lee (1999) note that large numbers of parents engage in parenting behaviors determined by society to be harmful to their children. Good (1997) recognizes the increased number of dysfunctional families and the lack of good role models as impacting the problem. A major change in family structure has taken place over the past three decades. Henderson (1987) describes a variety of terms that refer to today's families: traditional, blended, migrant, refugee, dual worker and single parent. Martin (2001) notes that the
increase in single-parent families represents a major change in family structure. Two-parent families continue to decline. The U.S. Census Bureau reported 4 million children living with grandparents, with one third of those grandparents raising grandchildren in households without the biological parent present (as cited in Casper & Bryson, 1998). According to a 12-year study by the Urban Institute that began in 1983, African American children are most likely to live in "kinship care" arrangements (U.S. Department of Education, 1995). Harden, Clark and Maguire (1997) added Hispanic children to this phenomenon. McBride (1990) reported that single-father families are growing rapidly, with fathers having little exposure to paternal role models and few social opportunities to prepare for fatherhood.

Theories Guiding Parent Education

Wolfe (2000) outlines the predominant approaches to parenting education. Behavioral Parent Training based on social learning theory, teaches parents to use praise and rewards, punish by withdrawal of rewards, withhold attention to extinguish inappropriate behavior and ignore negative behavior. Client-centered parent effectiveness
(PET) uses the theoretical framework of Carl Rogers, with the goal of enhancing parent-child relationships, improving communication and developing mutual respect. The Adlerian approach, implemented by Dreikurs and Dinkmeher, developed programs from the concept of understanding the individual in their social context, with issues of equality highly important, (First & Way 1995).

Nicholson, Anderson, Fox, and Brenner (2002) researching the literature, find the goal of many psychoeducational parenting programs is to break the cycle of negative parent-child interactions that lead to behavior problems by teaching parents specific skills to positively nurture their children. The most effective interventions for working with behavior problems in children are cognitive-behavioral methods (Rogers-Wiese, 1992). Problems such as child noncompliance (Rotto & Kratochwill, 1994); conduct disorder (Webster-Stratton, 1994); behavioral and emotional problems (Strayhorn & Weidman, 1991); and difficult temperaments (Sheeber & Johnson, 1994) have been successfully changed by addressing parenting practices. These programs provide parents and other primary caregivers with specific
knowledge and childrearing skills. The goals are generally specific and based on outcomes that can be measured through the child’s response.

The STAR Parenting Program integrates cognitive-behavioral, developmental, and social-learning theories in teaching parents to respond rather than react to a child’s challenging behavior.

An overview of parent management training notes that it is one of the more investigated treatments in child and adolescent therapy in general. Based on B. F. Skinner’s work, operant conditioning, it serves as a foundation of the techniques that comprise PMT.

Effectiveness Studies of Parent Education Programs

Marchant and Young (2001) used a parent coach to assist parents in acquiring and implementing positive parenting skills. Parents of children with behavioral needs were taught the skills and coached through implementation. The research showed a positive correlation between the parent’s behavior and improvement in their children’s data.

Loeber and Schmaling, (1985) indicate in their meta analysis that the most prevalent of childhood behavior
problems is antisocial behavior, affecting 3% to 9% of America’s school-aged children (Bourne, 1993; Hester & Kaiser, 1998; Loeber & Schmaling, 1985; Sprague & Walker, 2000; Walker, Colvin & Ramsey, 1995). Noncompliance has been called the “keystone” behavior that leads to antisocial acts, according to Webster-Stratton, (1998) who studied the effect that strengthening parenting competencies had on preventing conduct problems. Observations revealed that participants with competencies used significantly fewer commands and critical remarks, less harsh discipline and showed more positive and competent parenting.

Dore and Lee (1999) found that research from longitudinal studies has established severe behavior problems in the preschool years is predictive of a negative life course including the development of oppositional behavior in the early school years, conduct problems in early adolescence and delinquency by middle to late adolescence (Loeber, 1988; Loeber et al., 1993; Moffit, 1993; Sroufe, 1979). Early behavior problems are often associated with parental maltreatment that begins when the child is an infant (Greenber, Speltz, & DeKlyen, 1993; Lyons-Ruth, 1996; Lyons-Ruth, Easterbrooks, &
Whipple (1999) evaluated a community-based parent education and support program to determine effectiveness in improving risk factors associated with child physical abuse. The program allowed families to determine their own level of involvement based on need. The four programs most frequently attended during a fifteen-month period were a support group, stress management classes, the parent nuturance program, and the early childhood development program. Targeted recipients included parents from violent households such as CPS-referred, battered women, single and/or young parents, and community mental health center clients. Parents who participated in the more intensive programs made the strongest gains.

Iwaniec (1997), reports that physical and sexual abuse have received attention in terms of policy and practice, whereas emotional abuse and neglect have been grossly underestimated by those who legislate and protect. Emotional abuse generally refers to hostile or indifferent parental behavior, whereas emotional neglect refers to parental inability to provide the necessary nuturance.
Drawing on the work of Webster-Stratton (1991), Iwaniec (1997) studied 20 emotionally abusive and neglectful parents, referred from various community agencies. Parents who received additional training groups and whose wider needs were addressed substantially reduced abusive behavior while lowering anxiety.

Effects of Child Abuse and Neglect

Heifer (1987) reported that child abuse and neglect contribute to significant developmental delays. Children who experience abuse or neglect are more likely to engage in social and physical risk behaviors including unprotected sexual activity or alcohol and drug use (Mullen, Martin, Anderson, Romans, & Herbison, 1996). Studies by Murry, Baker and Lewin, (2000) and Fagin and Reid-Dove (1991) indicate that as many as 90% of adults who were abused and/or neglected as children abuse or neglect their own children.

In 1974 the Federal Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (PL 93-247) provided funds for prevention and treatment programs and established the National Center on Child Abuse and Neglect. Other laws followed, including the 1980 Adoption Assistance and Child Welfare
Act (PL 96-272), and, in 1997, The Adoption and Safe Families Act, (PL 105-89).

The Federal Government, in establishing public laws, has created guidelines for the States to follow. States, in turn, have created laws based on the federal guidelines. The California Welfare and Institution Code delineate these laws that are further interpreted by individual County statutes. Due to potential harm to the child in abuse and neglect situations, courts have sustained placement of children in protective custody without prior hearing or even prior notice, as long as there will be notice and a prompt opportunity to be heard after the removal of the child. However, Federal and State statutes require that reasonable efforts be made to reunify the child and parent whenever possible.

The Administration for Children and Families report that in 2000, three million referrals were made to Child Protection agencies in the United States. Almost one-third of the referrals resulted in a finding that the child was either maltreated or at risk of maltreatment. The victimization rate of children in the year 2000 was 12.2 per 1,000 children in the United States. The California Department of Social Services, Children and
Family Services Division, (DCS) is responsible for the oversight of programs and services for at-risk children and families. One aspect of this responsibility is for programs and services intended to prevent abuse or strengthen families. Another group of programs and services are intended to remedy the effects of abuse or neglect. San Bernardino County DCS organizes and operates its own program of child protection based on local needs, under federal and state regulations. Parent education is one of an array of services provided to families as part of family maintenance and reunification efforts. San Bernardino contracts with local agencies to provide these classes, without specifications of particular type or modules.

Parenting Education and Socioeconomic Status

Corby, Sanders, Skehill, Darlington, McDonald, and Dickens, (2001) in a longitudinal study of maltreated children and a control group assessed as preschoolers and again at school age points to a difference in the developmental stage at which different features of harsh child rearing influence behavior. SES has been found to relate directly to severe early child rearing (McLoyd,
1998; National Research Council, 1993). Results of the study indicate that the relationship between the negative quality of maternal preschool interaction and the child's level of school age aggression are significant.

Belsky, (1990) found that poverty is a risk factor for both negative parenting practices and poor child outcomes. Younger, single, less-educated and lower income mothers tend to use relatively high levels of verbal and corporal punishment when parenting their young children, according to Fox, Platz, and Bentley (1995). Poverty has been shown to contribute to harsh and inconsistent parenting, lack of nurturing and warmth and a greater potential for child abuse (Dodge, Pettit, & Bates, 1994). The stress of living in poverty may negatively influence a parent’s ability to spend the additional time and energy necessary to positively interact with their child (McLeod & Shanahan, 1993).

In a study conducted by Nicholson, Brenner, and Fox (1999), a group of 143 low-income parents participated in the 10-week parenting program with a statistically significant decrease in levels of verbal and corporal punishment and in child behavior problems. However, the dropout rate was almost 50%. Adaptations were made to the
program that took into account the limited educational background and inconsistent schedules of the participants. Nicholson, Anderson, Fox, and Brenner (2002) found that parents showed significant reductions in verbal and corporal punishment, stress, anger, and child behavior problems in the program that respected their unique circumstances.

Kazdin (1997) In a literature review, found parents at risk often have several factors, including children with conduct disorders, which may exacerbate their high dropout rate. He found that in child and adolescent therapy in general, 40% to 60% of families that begin treatment terminate prematurely. PMT requires mastering key concepts and implementing treatment procedures that may raise the stress level of participants, whereas supplementing PMT with discussion of the parental stressors decreases dropout rates (Prinz & Miller, 1994). One of the stressors involves problems of logistics. Making classes available in their community settings lowers stress (Cunningham et al., 1995).

While behavioral parent training has been shown to be effective for a variety of behavioral problem children in middle and upper-middle-class families (Berkowitz &
Graiano, 1971; Gordon & Davidson, 1981; Johnson & Katz, 1973), the effectiveness has been questioned with lower SES families (Patterson, 1974; Patterson, Cobb, & Ray, 1973). Forehand and McMahon, (1981) tested a parent-training course that emphasized modeling and role playing. Discussion and written material were minimized for the program, since studies have shown lack of success for lower SES families that have used that format (Dumas, 1984; Dumans & Wahler, 1983; Wahler, 1980).

Dore and Lee (1999) determined that parent characteristics associated with child maltreatment include poverty (Gelics, 1992); depression (Whipple & Webster-Stratton, 1991); single parenthood (Gelles, 1989; Testa, 1992); poor problem solving skills (Azar et al, 1984; Hanson, Pallotta, Tishelman, Conaway, and McMillan, 1989); and social isolation (Crittenden, 1985a; Corse, Schmid, & Trickett, 1990; Polansky, Ammons, & Gaudia, 1985; Wahler, 1980). These studies further reveal that the same characteristics are found to predict poorer outcomes in parent training (Clark & Baker, 1983; Dumas & Wahler, 1983; McMahon, Forehand, Griest, & Wells, 1981; Wahler, 1980; Webster-Stratton, 1985; Webster-Stratton & Hammond, 1990). Parenting programs aimed at maltreating
parents must include more than teaching the use of

Wolfe, Sandler, and Kaufman (1981) studied a competency based parent-training program for child abusers. The treatment component consisted of instruction in human development and child management, problem solving and modeling of appropriate child management, and self-control. The control group was monitored by the referral agency and given needed community resources. Results of competencies were assessed by independent observation in the home. The study resulted in improvements in parent effectiveness, as measured by observation, self report and caseworker reports. A 1-year follow-up of agency records revealed no further suspected or reported incidents of abuse for the treatment families.

Cultural Factors in Parent Education

Mahoney, Kaiser, Girolametto, MacDonald, Robinson, Safford, and Spiker (1999) note that to be effective, intervention needs to be imbedded into daily routines (Robinson et al., 1988). Training parents to be more
effective teachers of their young children is a primary intervention strategy. Educational failure among children of poor families reflects socio cultural disadvantages (e.g., Deutsch & Brown, 1964; John, 1963). In the past 20 years, there have been a number of criticisms of parent education, including the potential cultural bias of parent education (Hanson & Lynch, 1995). Although this concern is noted in the early intervention literature, there have been few empirical studies of the extent to which parents actually experience parent education as culturally biased. Further, little empirical information exists about the manner in which parent education is delivered, relationship between parents and professionals, or the value that parents perceive in the skills taught them. Parent education strategies and content must fit the cultural values of families.

Oyserman, Bybee, Mowbray, and MacFarlane (2002) studied African American mothers diagnosed with depression, bipolar disorder or schizophrenia. One element of the study examined the direct and indirect effects of poverty on positive parenting. The study provides a sense of the extent to which parenting among mothers with a serious mental illness is influenced by
factors similar to those of other mothers. It also shows poverty as a potential starting point for many difficulties that mothers’ face, particularly greater financial and social stress associated with lower levels of functioning.

In a study by Ho, Chow, Fung, Leung, Chiu, Yu, Au, and Lieh-Mak (1999), a group of Chinese children, referred for aggressive and defiant behaviors to a parent-management training were studied. Results suggests that parent management training is consonant with Chinese cultural norms, making the treatment approach applicable for Chinese families. They note, however, one of the recurrent issues in cross-cultural psychiatry is the question of cultural compatibility (Tharp, 1991). If a form of therapy is developed within a socio cultural group, can it be equally applicable to other cultures or should some variations be required to better accommodate the clients. The researcher notes the need for examining the parent-child dyads, critically, to determine how they perceive and receive training.

Gross, Julion, and Fogg (2001) report that particularly apparent in research that uses low-income families of color is the high attrition rate and poor
participation. In a study of the effectiveness of one such program for inner city African-American families, participation rates were as low as 13% and attendance rates at parent group meetings as low as 33% (Myers et al, 1992). A study was designed to understand what motivated one sample of low-income parents of color to participate in a parent training program as well as what led some to drop out (Morse, Simon, Besch, & Walker, 1995; Motzer et al., 1997). Gross, Julion, and Fogg (2001) studied 155 families, 97% of which were from minority racial-ethnic backgrounds. A combination of incentives was used to encourage participation. Results showed that those choosing to participate most frequently cited wanting to learn about children at this age, share experiences with other parents, or get help for dealing with difficult behaviors. Of those who dropped out, only one identified learning to discipline their children more effectively as a reason for participating. The most common reasons for dropping out were lack of time, changes in job and school schedules and too much stress to add additional commitments.

caretakers, investigating the effects of two dimensions of parental behavior. One dimension was the extent to which caregivers rely upon corporal punishment when disciplining their child, with child conduct problems as the outcome variable. The other, the extent to which caregivers set behavioral standards, monitor behavior of the child, reinforce successes and discipline noncompliance. Results showed caretakers saw themselves as quite conscientious in the way they explained rules, monitored their child’s behavior and applied consequences. Other results, however, showed that parental supervisory and disciplinary strategies that are effective in conventional neighborhoods may not prevent child antisocial behavior in high-risk areas. When deviant behavior is widely prevalent within a community, pressures from peers and delinquency opportunities overwhelm a parents’ ability to prevent their child from participating in antisocial behavior.

Julian, McKenry, and McKelvey (1994) studied cultural diversity in the United States, (McGoldrick, 1982) noted a variety of beliefs and values exist about raising children. Parents develop their parenting theories based on their cultural and reference group
association, personality style, individual and family experiences (Belsky, 1984; Brooks, 1991; Coleman, Ganong, Clark & Madsen, 1989). There is a tendency in research on culturally diverse parenting to compare only one ethnic group at a time with Caucasian families (Taylor, Chatters, Tucker, & Lewis, 1990; Vega, 1990).

Kazdin (1997) notes that PMT has neglected to consider ethnic and cultural issues (Forehand & Kotchick, 1996). Variation in parenting practices and family values among ethnic groups may influence receptivity to changes in the parent-child interactions. Corporal punishment, extended family members raising children and expectations for self-control on the part of the child may influence the effectiveness or even the application of PMT.

According to Rueter, Conger, and Ramisetty-Mikler, (1999) a number of researchers have studied assessment of parenting skills training programs and parenting classes. Both educators and evaluators, however, have long recognized that no two individuals benefit from a learning experience in the same way (c.f., Beutler, 1991; Cronbach & Snow, 1977; Dance & Neufeld, 1988; Smith & Sechrest, 1991; Snow, 1991; Spoth & Redmond, 1996; Webster-Stratton, 1977). It is noted that various
factors, ranging from individual characteristics to life circumstances, can moderate one’s ability to learn in a given setting. The role of personal characteristics and life contexts is often ignored in the evaluation of parent training programs. However, if conditions that either facilitate or interfere with a parent’s ability to learn are identified, training programs can be optimally tailored to the needs of the participants.

Matthews and Hudson (2001) discuss appropriateness and acceptability of objectives, noting that there may be cultural differences in the extent to which parents are willing to accept behavior techniques such as ignoring, praise, and negotiation. Further, some problematic behaviors must be targeted for change early and the intervention done during the developmentally appropriate stage.

The manner in which parents are instructed influences whether they acquire the skills intended. Researchers examining the interaction of socioeconomic status with parent training methods discovered that mothers of low SES were more successful when training included modeling and role-playing, rather than written
materials, short quizzes and discussions (Knapp and Deluty, 1989).

An alternative mode of evaluation is warranted, according to First and Way (1995). Their study is based on the philosophical research tradition of Phenomenology, which focuses on how people interpret their experiences and suggests there is no separate reality for persons, only what they know their experience means to them (Patton, 1990). Qualitative methods are used with the intent of gaining a deeper understanding of the nature and meaning of everyday experiences (van Manen, 1990).

Summary

The effectiveness of most parent education classes is measured by changes in the child. While all programs are developed from psychological theory, and have been evaluated by research, SES and cultural aspects of the individual have been given little attention. Since public law has recognized the incidence of child abuse and neglect, large numbers of families are required to attend parent education classes. At the same time, research indicates no particular program is more effective than another. SES is a factor in the participant’s success due
to poor education and life stressors consistent with SES. Learning styles can also impact learning if participant and program are not matched successfully. Culture may play a role in program success since norms for one group may not apply to another. Consequently, a different method of evaluating the effectiveness of parent education is needed that allows parents to elaborate on their learning experience and how, or if, their learning experience affects their lives.
CHAPTER THREE

METHODS

Introduction

This chapter contains the study design and the sampling method for the study. It further describes how data was collected and the instrument used. Explanations are given regarding procedures followed that include a consent form and a debriefing statement. The procedure for protection of human subjects is set out, along with the methods used for data analysis.

Study Design

The purpose of the proposed study is to investigate the nature and experience of learning that takes place after a participant attends parent education classes. Using a qualitative research design, the researcher asked probing questions of participants to elicit communication of the parenting class experience in a narrative, storytelling, manner to shed light on the human experience that cannot be measured using quantitative methods.

The interview guide was a questionnaire developed for a First and Way (1995) study.
Sampling

Eight volunteer participants who attended parent education classes were interviewed. A list of vendors who provide Parent Education classes for San Bernardino County was consulted and flyers requesting participants for the study were distributed in the areas where classes are held. Participants in the parent education classes came from churches, schools, advertisement, word of mouth, and through court referrals, according to the vendors surveyed. The researcher attended classes in the area to observe interactions of participants and facilitators and to overview the materials and methods of presentation. The flyers requested volunteers from any parent education class that took place in the last year. Participants in the interviews were given a monetary incentive.

In order to insure confidentiality of participants, some of whom may have attended classes through court order, an alias was given to each participant.

Data Collection and Instruments

The researcher conducted interviews with participants of parent education classes who responded to
a flyer that was distributed for the purpose of requesting volunteers for the study. An incentive of $25 was paid to each participant. Interviews took approximately one hour each and were tape-recorded. The interview questions allowed a collection of stories to describe the learning experience, such as, "Can you give me an example of a time when you talked about the class? Think of another woman you know who does not go to the class and who is one of the best parents you have ever known. What story would you tell her about the class? Can you tell me about any experiences that show how the class has affected your life - either your parenting or in other ways?"

The questions probed the nature of the participant's experience of the parenting classes. A personal history was collected from the participant, i.e., "When was the last time you thought about the class? Did you think about it yesterday? What did you think about? What caused you to think about it? What were you doing at the time? What was your child doing? Did you act any differently with your child because you thought about the class?"

Demographic information collected was: age, ethnicity, number of children, marital status and
education level. Participants were given a pseudonym that was used for presentation of results, rather than identifying information. No personal information was included with the data.

Procedures

Each participant was read the consent form (Appendix B) that described the study and the nature of her participation. She was informed that the interview would be tape-recorded. She was told she could refuse to answer any question and could stop the interview at any time. Each participant was asked to place a mark on the form, indicating her consent to participate. Each participant was assured of confidentiality, that her name would never be used, and that a pseudonym would be given to the information provided. After the interview, a debriefing statement was read (Appendix C) explaining the purpose of the research and giving the participant the name and telephone of the person to contact if participant felt physical, psychological or sociological harm had occurred as a result of the interview. She was also told that the research project would be available after June 2003, from the researcher’s supervisor, if she wished a copy.
Protection of Human Subjects

To protect the human subjects involved in this study, the researcher performed the following actions: first, flyers were distributed in the community and participants volunteered to be interviewed. After the tape-recorded interview was completed, the researcher safeguarded the confidentiality of the collected data by locking it in a file cabinet in the researcher’s home during the study. Once the data was transcribed and pseudonyms given the participants, the data was destroyed.

Data Analysis

Eight interviews, approximately one hour each, were conducted in February 2003, with participants from parent education classes. The interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed verbatim, then read and re-read to become familiar with the content.

A journal was kept to record various aspects of the project, i.e., notes on the method used in the study, an analytical memo regarding identification of meaning units or categories, rules guiding definition of categories and assignment of codes to those units, and notes regarding
what transpired in the interviews and how research participants were obtained.

A code was developed to identify meaning units to fit into categories. Codes were then assigned to the categories. To increase reliability, two individuals were asked to independently code the transcripts. The researcher then identified similarities and differences between categories to detect relationships.

A matrix was created to count the number of times each category appeared, and a frequency distribution prepared. A second matrix sorted the demographic information and a frequency distribution was prepared. The data was interpreted with a goal of describing major categories or themes that emerged or relationships between major themes that reflected parent education outcomes.

Summary

An intensive interview process was followed with eight participants of parent education classes to investigate the nature and experience of learning that takes place after a participant attends parent education classes. Volunteers were obtained from the community by
distributing flyers inviting participation. An incentive of $25 was paid to each participant. Informed consent was read and presented to each participant. Each participant placed a mark on the form to indicate her consent. Interviews took approximately one hour each and were tape-recorded, then transcribed verbatim by the researcher. A debriefing statement was read and a copy given to the participant. Protection of human subjects procedures were implemented to assure confidentiality of participants. Data was transcribed verbatim, then hand coded into categories. Similarities and differences between the categories were identified to detect relationships. Data was interpreted to reflect the outcomes.
CHAPTER FOUR

RESULTS

Introduction

This chapter describes the demographics for the study group. Nine major categories of learning emerged from the interviews. Phrases used by the participants are given to describe their experiences and illustrate the categories.

Presentation of the Findings

Demographics for the group of eight included 100% female participants, with no males represented. All were parenting one child. The ages of the women ranged from 18-61 with representation in four of the five arbitrary age categories. Four women were between the ages of 18-21, two women were between 29-39 years of age, one was between 40-50 years of age and one was in the 51-61 years old group. Ethnicity of the women included five Hispanics, one African American and two Caucasians. Four, or 50%, of the women were married; four, or 50%, were single. Four of the women reported they had not completed High School, while two said they had a High School
diploma. Two of the women had either graduated college or had some college education.

An alias was given to each woman to simplify the presentation of the data.

Each woman was asked the same questions, in the same order. Nine categories emerged from the data. Participant’s verbatim responses are given to illustrate the nature of the experience as they described it.

The first question, "When was the last time you thought about the class?" is followed by the prompts, "Did you think about it yesterday? What did you think about? What caused you to think about it? What were you doing at the time? What was your child doing?" All eight women responded. Three of the women were able to identify precisely when they thought about the class. Janice thought about it last week as she tried to settle her child down, "I thought I had to get patient with him because he’s young and doesn’t understand.” Sally said, "maybe it was yesterday when I realized my son is getting a "mouth" on him...I thought about the different stages they go through...” Marsha said, “I thought about it this morning because my daughter was being fussy, hitting and crying...I just followed what they said and it worked
really good." Five of the women recognized thinking about the class because of something they learned that affected their interaction with the child. Julia said, "I think about it every day because there is always something I learned that I need to know to care for my baby." Gloria remembered thinking about it because, "David was crying and crying and I couldn't get him to stop. I remembered..." Maria remembered when "my son was crying a lot and was out of control, I remembered that I should calm down, take a deep breath and calm down...if I hadn't learned that I wouldn't have known what to do." Betty said, "actually, I think about it quite often. I am raising my granddaughter. I think I am always comparing the old ways with the new ones..." Audra said she remembered when, "my little one was being noisy and making me crazy...I remembered how to settle her down." An interaction with the child, particularly a stressful one, caused them to draw from the learning experience. This category of learning is identified as: Learning to think critically about how to respond to their children in order to solve problems in a positive manner.

The following question was actually a prompt for the first question: "Did you act any differently with your
child because you thought about the class?” All eight of the women responded. Gloria said, “yes, I calmed down - I was getting so tense, but I thought about it and calmed down,” Sally said, “I think so...it made me aware of some basic ideas that I wouldn’t have thought of otherwise.” Audra shared, “I used to get mad and hit, but now I know how to calm down.” Betty admitted, “If I had not learned some new ways to deal with her, I probably would have smacked her.” This indication of a positive change in their interactions with their children is categorized as: Changes in patterns of behavior to respond in a more positive way.

The next question has a number of prompts, as well. “About how many times last week did you talk about the class, or anything you had discussed at the class with friends or relatives? Can you give me an example of a time when you talked about the class? Were they supportive of what you had to say about the class? Did they offer any useful ideas or advise on parenting? Did they seem interested in the class, like they might enjoy coming sometime?” All eight women responded. Five of the women spoke of sharing the information with the child’s father, with three of them identifying his need for the
information. Audra used an example of her child hitting and explaining to the child's father, "I have to tell him...my boyfriend doesn't understand this...so I have to let him know." Julia talks about the class, "to my boyfriend, every weekend...he thinks he knows all about babies...I have to tell him what I learned...I have to have my way about the way the baby is raised." The women seemed to be establishing with the male the rules regarding childrearing. This category is described as: Learning to be a protective parent.

The following group of questions was meant to illicit reflective thought. "Do you talk to friends or relatives about any changes in your parenting as a result of the class? Can you tell me a story about those changes like you might tell a friend or relative? Think of another young mother you know, who does not go to the class, and who you think needs help in becoming a better parent. What story would you tell her about the class? Think of another woman you know who does not go to the class and who is one of the best parents you have ever known. What story would you tell her about the class? Think of your own mother. What story would you tell her
about the class?” All of the women responded with stories.

Gloria speaks of her mother saying, “She wants to do everything like she did before, so for me not to hurt her feelings, I tell her that the best way to do it is how they taught me in parenting class...this is my child and I want to raise it as I have been taught...” Julia, also, spoke of a cultural difference saying, “...I have to because - like in Mexico - they give out teas and things...she would rather give him some teas like she learned in Mexico. I tell her...and she feels alright about that, about me using what I learned in class.” Marsha reflected a similar story, “My family supports what I’m learning, but my mother-in-law likes to give my daughter honey. I tell her no, but I feel embarrassed, you know, so I say “it’s new technology...” Janice responds, “My mother-in-law thinks I can’t do anything right. She doesn’t like it that I tell her that I know...” Marsha said, “I grew up with hitting. I had to learn about taking things away and dealing with behaviors differently...I learned a lot of interesting things and I learned a lot that will benefit me and my child.” Six of the eight women had stories that suggested the learning
had created a cultural gap. This category is described as: **Being a responsible parent when others disagree with your methods.**

Gloria spoke of sharing information with other young mothers saying, "I tell them I am a first time Mom and I really don't know anything, so the classes help me know what to do and how to do it and to understand the things he is doing and stuff." Maria said, "I tell my husband the things I have learned because I want him to treat my son the same way I learned...I am much calmer because I have learned things about raising my child." Sally thinks, "awareness helps...in a moment of decision one might not recognize the perfect thing to do all the time, but having that source of knowledge helps."

The theme continues when four women responded to the question of "another young mother who needs parenting help." Audra replied, "...if she came to class, she could be a better mother and not yell so much and hit her son." Marsha would say, "you really need the class...you are young and need it! I would give her a number to call to get the help she needs." Julia said, "I would tell them that when they come to Day Care to pick up their kids and the kids raise up their hands, they need to get them,
because the kids need to feel loved." In each of the above instances, the theme, or category of learning, indicates: Gaining confidence in their own abilities.

Reflecting on the "best mother" portion of the question, six of the eight women responded, showing confidence in what they had learned. Gloria says, "My Mom is a good Mother, but she doesn't know the modern ways, but I talk to her about what I learned." Marsha also reflects on her mother, "If she had the classes she could have done better, even though she is very patient." Maria says, "My Mom would do things differently - like stay with the baby, instead of leave him and go to work. She supports the way I have learned...but we really don't talk about it much..." Betty thinks, "everyone could benefit from learning new things...my own Mother would not be open to the ideas that I learned in class...she believed in control..." These stories further demonstrate the confidence these participants gained.

The next group of questions dealt with feelings. "What are the most important things you feel you learned by going to the class? Can you remember any feelings you had when you were at the class? What were they? What
feelings do you have about the class now? How do those feelings affect the way you interact with your child?

Gloria’s was, “calming down so I don’t do something that I don’t want to do...I can calm down and take good care of my baby.” Julia said, “loving, caring, respecting my child.” Audra, felt “giving wise discipline,” and Sally, “giving choices and the stages as my son grows up.” Janice said, “to make my child feel secure and loved.” Marsha spoke of “giving choices...stages, and loving them through it all.” All eight women described loving and nurturing as the most important thing they learned and can be categorized as: Becoming a more loving and nurturing parent.

Four of the women described how feelings about the classes affect their interaction with the child. Betty said, “I have been practicing communicating with Lucy like I learned in class...one day when I used an “I” statement with her, she complimented me saying, “Grams, I really like it that you want to hear what I really mean, ‘cause sometimes I don’t say it right.” Audra said, “At first, I didn’t see why I needed to work so hard at listening and understanding the child - don’t I ever get to be boss? Then, I came to understand that the effort
pays off!” Maria said she learned “how to talk with my
cchild about sharing.” Sally said, “Communicating choices,
like homework. I always tell him it’s a choice I can’t
make for him, but let him know there are
consequences...we constantly communicate.” This category
is described as: Learning and using active listening
skills with their children.

The next group of questions is about the way the
class affected her life. “Has attending the class made
parenting any easier? Has it made it more difficult? How?
Can you tell me about any experiences that show how the
class has affected your life - either your parenting or
in other ways?”

Sally said, “...when I realized my son is getting a
“mouth” on him at this time of his life...I thought about
the different stages they go through and that he is
supposed to be challenging me at this point in his life.”
Audra learned “how to respond to behaviors, give choices
and the stages as my son grows up.” Maria said, “It was a
great experience for me. All the information has been
good for me to know, especially the stages and how they
act.” Gloria “remembers to calm down and learned to
expect kids to be messy.” Asked if the class has made
parenting more difficult, seven of the women quickly said no. Only Sally said, “Possibly - it is always more difficult to know the ways that are best and then make a decision whether to do what is right or what is easiest. If you don’t know, then you don’t have to make that decision.” Often referred to as “stages,” child development was reflected repeatedly: Learning child development timelines and expectations.

Regarding ways the class affected their lives, five of the women responded with the following examples of change. Gloria said, “I feel more responsible...it made me think.” Julia said, “I am more patient...I take the time to be with my baby.” Audra declared, “It changed me - like how a mother is supposed to be - responsible. It changed me completely...I got interested in what I heard and started using it to raise my daughter.” Sally reflected on standing up for her son, saying “I’m sorry if this offends you, but you may not do that to my child...I am the Mom and I’ll decide.” Betty spoke, again, about “practicing communicating.” These important changes appear to be a reiteration of the categories already described.
The last group of questions regards experiences of the class. “What is your best experience from the class? What is your worst experience from the class?”

Gloria said, “Sharing how we deal with our emotions.” Janice said, “We learned how to do things from each other and by sharing our experiences, we learned how to be a good mother.” Maria said, “It was all good, I think because I wanted to know how to raise my child better. Learning in a group is good.” Sally spoke of how “some of the best lessons come from other people... calling attention to what you need to question.” Julia felt “it helped me and I think it would help anyone, we are sort of in this thing together.” Learning and sharing with others was mentioned often. This category is described as: Sharing parenting skills and tips and feelings of community.

Six of the ladies said there was nothing bad about the classes, when asked about the “worst experience,” while Julia reflected on herself saying, “just remembering the bad things I used to do.” Maria said, “Having different opinions from other people in the class, like, it is hard to deal with Mom’s who think it is ok to hit, instead of talking to the child.” Sally
said the worst experience “was the instructor. She had a tendency to talk down to us...I had to be careful not to let her attitude and tone and the way she spoke to us make me shut her down.”

Summary

The demographics for the eight women participants showed representation in four age categories, and three ethnic groups. Half were married, the other half single, the group having varied educational levels. All were parenting one child. Nine themes, or categories of learning, were determined from the data and presented with illustrations of phrases from the participants.
CHAPTER FIVE

DISCUSSION

Introduction

Included in this chapter is a discussion of the learning that appeared to take place for the participants, along with limitations of the study. Recommendations for social work practice, policy and research are given, together with conclusions.

Discussion

The learning that took place in parenting classes for the women in this study seems to have motivated them to question or reinterpret the wisdom of child rearing as they had experienced it, themselves, or as they observed it in others around them. This phenomenological study helped reveal the personal experience of taking a parenting class, as opposed to the quantitative evaluation described in most studies. By hearing their stories, it became possible to recognize the skills they learned and how they use those skills, as well as the personal empowerment that resulted.

A critical examination of their current living patterns appeared to have been undertaken, while
confidence developed. Several of the women voiced appreciation for the changes in themselves they had observed, as well as a newfound ability to use their learning to protect their children. Sally, a young Caucasian woman stated, “It all just came together.”

Half of the mothers who participated in this study were single, either living alone, with her family of origin or a male friend. Casper and Bryson, (1998) reported 4 million children being raised by grandparents. This study included one such grandparent. Five of the eight participants were Hispanic, with at least two women having mothers that were foreign born and speaking no English. The Hispanic women told stories that reflected a different connotation of child rearing from mainstream thinking, as did the African-American mother who said, “I had a hard time with not spanking 'cause that’s what everyone in my family does.” Julian, McKenry, and McKelvey (1994) noted that parents develop their parenting theories based, in part, on their cultural and reference group association.

More than half of the study group reflected risk factors for negative parenting practices, since they were younger, single, less educated and lower income mothers.
Kazdin (1997) found that one of the stressors for such families, who often drops out of parenting classes, involves problems of logistics. Making the classes available in their neighborhood could help alleviate the problem, if the program is culturally compatible.

A large number of parents are referred to Parent Education classes by the courts or Department of Children's Services in San Bernardino County each year with the goal of teaching adults good parenting skills and appropriate interactions with their children. The programs have the potential for facilitating the development of new ways of thinking. The present study appears to illustrate the probability that the learning that takes place in a parent education program can change not only parent-child interactions, but create change in the individual, as reflected by this small but diverse group. The ladies in this study represented a variety of parent education programs; mirroring the conclusion of First and Way (1995) that research indicates no one particular program is more effective than another.

Attending a parenting class is more important than which class is attended or what learning modules are used.
The participants in this study demonstrated by their stories that they learned to think critically. In a dynamic situation, often involving stress, they were able to respond to their children and solve problems in a positive manner. Many found the need to change their own patterns of behavior, in order to interact with their child. Some were simply able to learn how to react or interact with a child.

Some of the ladies told stories that suggested they had learned to be responsible for their child and had developed the confidence to disagree with elders who have different methods. This appeared to be done with sensitivity toward the elder, but outside the norm for the culture. These same ladies were protective toward her child within the small family network of boyfriend/husband in a culture that recognizes male superiority. They learned to be protective parents.

These women have developed confidence in the skill of learning, while becoming more loving and nurturing. They are learning and using active listening skills, as well as attuning themselves to child development timelines and expectations. The confidences they have gained in their abilities make them eager to share their
skills and knowledge with other parents. For these eight women, parent education was a transformative inner experience.

Limitations

Limitations of the study included a small, convenience sample. Only females participated in the study. Flyers were distributed in the community and participants taken on a first come/first served basis. Therefore, it was not possible to obtain a cross-cultural sample, a mix of gender, SES, number of children each woman parents, or variety in training programs. Since each participant was aware she would receive $25.00, it is possible that only those in need of the money took the time to respond. This may have impacted the quality or focus of responses. Or, for some, their level of education may have impacted their ability to formulate thoughtful answers to the questions. The study was further limited by choosing not to ask their reasons for taking a parent education class, given the possibility a court-referred individual may have given insight into the experience when one is forced to take a class.
Recommendations for Social Work Practice, Policy and Research

The practice of Social Work in the Department of Children’s Services setting yields countless opportunities to recommend Parent Education as an integral part of a treatment plan. Since programs rarely use only one method, but borrow freely from a variety of training modules, it would be beneficial for the Social Worker to familiarize herself with the resources available, checking to see that models emphasize critical thinking skills, as well as the usual behavior modification. Further, the learner needs to learn, and often change, developmental expectations. In order to learn reflective judgment, a variety of critical child-incidents help the learner explore her assumptions. It is vital that the Social Worker matches the program to the client needs, being particularly aware of the importance of logistics to the client, language and cultural barriers that may exist and assessing whether the client has integrated the materials. A good assessment distinguishes between participation in a parenting class and the client’s internalization of the subject matter. One mother in the study said it best,
"...when I take a class, I guess I incorporate it into my life, since it is part of what I do." The statement properly demonstrates the gain that should take place for a participant.

Policy makers interested in improving the lives of children must give attention to parent education issues. Lower SES, disempowered parents will parent as they have been parented, unless the cycle is broken by education. The literature shows that family types are changing in this society. Further, cultural norms and ethnic issues move many of these parents farther away from the norms of mainstream culture. Cultural sensitivity is vital to creating programs that can benefit this group. Further, attention should be given to the ethnic/language mix of an area and neighborhood outreach programs developed. Neighborhood programs would allow for community friendships and relations that foster sharing and concerns. In addition, social support groups could be arranged that would allow parenting class friendships and sharing to continue.

When a parent takes classes as a response to a child’s negative behavior or when the parent education classes are mandated, further research is needed to
determine participant outcomes. In such instances, behaviors requiring change have been integrated into daily life and require reworking assumptions on the part of both child and parent. If the learning is transformative for the parent, then research is needed to determine if such empowerment can assist the parent in creating change in an out-of-control child. Further, research is needed to determine what information is retained and used when a participant is required to take a parenting class.

Conclusions

Parent Education has the potential of transforming lives. When the information is integrated into the daily thoughts of the individual, the personal empowerment gain for the individual is enormous as antidotal evidence from program participant’s show. The confidence one gains from being responsible for a child - and knowing that one has incorporated the critical skills needed to parent well, creates an empowering dynamic in the individual. That self-assurance provides the groundwork for transformation in other areas of life; i.e., the ability to challenge the status quo of her life can be triggered. Not only
does the child thrive in an atmosphere of love and respect, but also the parent is likely to share her knowledge with others.
APPENDIX A

QUESTIONNAIRE
Interview Questions

When was the last time you thought about the class? Did you think about it yesterday? What did you think about? What caused you to think about it? What were you doing at the time? What was your child doing? Did you act any differently with your child because you thought about the class?

About how many times last week did you talk about the class, or anything you had discussed at the class with friends or relatives? Can you give me an example of a time when you talked about the class? Were they supportive of what you had to say about the class? Did they offer any useful ideas or advice on parenting? Did they seem interested in the class, like they might enjoy coming sometime?

Do you talk to friends or relatives about any changes in your parenting as a result of the class? Can you tell me a story about those changes like you might tell a friend or relative? Think of another young mother you know, who does not go to the class, and who you think needs help in becoming a better parent. What story would you tell her about the class? Think of another woman you know who does not go to the class and who is one of the best parents you have ever known. What story would you tell her about the class? Think of your own mother. What story would you tell her about the class?

What are the most important things you feel you learned by going to the class? Can you remember any feelings you had when you were at the class? What were they? What feelings do you have about the class now? How do those feelings affect the way you interact with your child?

Has attending the class made parenting any easier? Has it made it more difficult? How? Can you tell me about any experiences that show how the class has affected your life — either your parenting or in other ways?

What is your best experience from the class? What is your worst experience from the class?
APPENDIX B

INFORMED CONSENT
INFORMED CONSENT

Study of Personal Histories in Relation to Parenting Classes

The study in which you are about to participate is designed to investigate your personal experience of Parenting Classes. The study is conducted by Lavonna Downing under the supervision of Dr. Janet Chang, Assistant Professor at California State University, San Bernardino. The interview will be tape-recorded. The study has been approved by the Social Work Institutional Review Board, California State University, San Bernardino. The university requires that you give your consent before participating in the study.

You will be asked a number of questions that have been designed to allow you the freedom to express your opinions and tell the story of your Parenting Classes experience. The task should take about one hour to complete. All of your responses will be held in the strictest of confidence by the researcher. Your name will not be reported with your responses. In fact, an alias will be used for all information presented and data will be reported in group form. You may receive the results of this study upon completion of the project in the Spring Quarter of 2003.

Your participation in this study is totally voluntary. You are free to withdraw at any time during the study without penalty. When you complete the task, you will receive a debriefing statement describing the study in more detail.

If you have any questions about the study, please feel free to contact Lavonna Downing or Professor Janet Chang at (909) 880-5501.

By placing a check mark in the box below, I acknowledge that I have been informed of, and that I understand, the nature and purpose of this study, that I am at least 18 years of age, and I freely consent to participate.

Place a check mark here ______ Today's date __________
APPENDIX C

DEBRIEFING STATEMENT
DEBRIEFING STATEMENT

Study of Personal Histories in Relation to Parenting Classes Debriefing Statement

The study you have just completed was designed to investigate the effects of the parenting class on your own parenting experience. The idea is to determine how you interpret your experience. Personal characteristics, life contexts, learning styles and cultural aspects all shape the manner in which an individual learns. This study focuses on understanding the deeper meaning of everyday experiences. Parent education has the potential of creating a transformative experience that positively affects all areas of your life.

Thank you for your participation. If you have any questions about the study, please feel free to contact Lavonna Downing or Professor Janet Chang at (909) 880-5501. If you should feel physical, psychological or sociological harm has occurred as a result of the interview, please contact Myron Lilley at Boy's and Girl's Clubs, (909) 388-4295. If you would like to obtain a copy of the group results of this study, please contact Dr. Janet Chang, Social Work Department, and (909) 880-5501 at the end of Spring Quarter, June, 2003.
APPENDIX D

DEMOGRAPHICS
DEMOGRAPHICS


Ethnicity: African American _ Asian _ Caucasian _ Hispanic _
Native American _ Other _

Number of children you parent _

Marital Status: Divorced _ Single _ Married _ Widowed _

Education Level: Less than High School _ High School _ College _
REFERENCES


Quici, F. (1996). Does training parents with defiant children really work? Seven years of data. Paper presented at annual convention of the National Association of School Psychologists, Atlanta, GA.


