

MSS Senior Project Summary
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Project Summary

Books at Birth (BAB) provided appropriate, high-quality literature to children to encourage parent-child bonding through engaged reading and enhance reading time to increase cognitive and language development. This project addressed the low literacy rate in Macon by encouraging parent-child pairs to develop reading comprehension. In Macon, poverty rates are high and the vast majority of the schools have a large population of low-income students. On average, these students have fewer books in the home, are read to less than their high-income peers, and face a greater risk of literacy problems. Therefore, BAB provided support to Macon families and the education system by providing literature to students and parents to help them gain a love for reading that will translate into higher literacy rates.

Project Context, Relevance, and Rationale

Books at Birth addresses the low literacy rates in Macon as well as the effects of low socioeconomic status and not reading aloud to children on literacy rates and cognitive development. Reading aloud to children has been proven to be vital in the development of their phonological awareness, alphabet knowledge, and language development (Augustyn, Duursma, & Zuckerman, 2008). A recent study showed that parental involvement in childhood development decreased the degree of negative correlation between poverty and achievement levels at the preschool level (Baker, Kainz, & Reynolds, 2018). Statistics have also shown that, by the age of 3, children from lower-income homes have heard 30 million words less than their wealthier peers (Garro, Gershun, Halfron, 2007). Socioeconomic status also plays a huge role. A study discussed by Hernandez found that children who have lived in poverty and are not reading proficiently by 3rd grade are about three times more likely to drop out or fail high school than those students who have never experienced poverty. Children in poverty lack the resources they need to succeed in school; books are a key component (Hernandez, 2011).

Organizations exist to meet this need, but successful and well-known organizations do not exist in Macon. Book Trust donates books to Title I schools, Kids Need to Read gives books to communities that lack funds, and Lisa Libraries donates new children's books to small organizations that work with low-income children. None of these organizations are currently working in Macon ("Reading Rockets Launching Young Readers," 2019). Due to a lack of funds and resources, these organizations are not able to serve every community. However, they do prove the need for similar organizations as well as the need to help the areas they cannot reach. Books at Birth partnered with book donor and organization United Way to improve upon the problems this group is able to solve. Books at Birth also hoped to establish a relationship with United Way that would allow for the project to continue in the future, but because of the stress surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic, this goal was difficult to achieve.

Target Community and Partner

BAB provided books for five (5) families. The partner for the project was United Way under the supervision of a faculty advisor, Dr. Luther, a professor in the Tift College of Education. The target partner was chosen for their ability to work with a student-led research project and their pre-existing contact with the Macon community. The target community is Georgia families who have participated in other United Way programs, such as First Steps. Selected families participating in the study must meet these eligibility requirements:

- 1) Be or have been a resident of the Macon-Bibb county within the past calendar year.
- 2) Have at least one child registered in school in the kindergarten through third-grade age group, but other children of different ages within the family are welcome to participate.
- 3) Have participated in other United Way programs within the six (6) months from the first day of pre-survey dissemination.

Project Goals and Potential Outcomes

A long-term goal of the project was to increase the understanding of the impact of literacy rates on cognitive development and SES in Macon. BAB also aimed to increase familial, parental, and guardian awareness and understanding of the importance of cognitive development through reading as well as how reading during childhood can help cognitive development. We would assess the efficacy of BAB through pre-intervention surveys and post-intervention surveys given to a legal guardian and use this collected data to explain why BAB should be a permanent continuous project under the direction of United Way.

Monitoring and Evaluation Plan

The principal investigators of BAB spoke at length with Dr. Morgan concerning the continuation of this project. All possible measures of monitoring were discussed but a reasonable conclusion could not be met. Therefore, BAB will not be up for renewal with a new principal investigator for the next Mercer Service Scholars cohort. For this reason, a monitoring and evaluation plan is not included in this project summary.

Project Analysis, Evaluation, and Recommendations

At the immediate conclusion of the project (December 2020), it is difficult to know whether the goals of the project were achieved. BAB was designed to focus on the long-term goals of increased parent-child bonding and increased literacy of the child, both of which are difficult to measure at the abrupt conclusion of the project. Additionally, the COVID-19 pandemic did not allow the principal investigators to have any contact with potential families, which further obscures the impact of BAB or evaluation of the outcomes of the project.

Overall, the principal investigators can not say that BAB reached a successful conclusion. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, we were unable to fully connect with our community partner, and thus were unable to collect the data necessary to produce a qualitative analysis. Additionally, we were unable to make contact with individual families to administer surveys or book packs.

Based on these two overarching issues, both directly tied to the COVID-19 pandemic, our project was unable to reach a successful conclusion in the months leading up to the graduation date of the principal investigators.

The project could be improved by cultivating a working relationship with the community partner. Communication was the primary issue, which led to misunderstandings on the part of the BAB principal investigators, the community partner, and Dr. Morgan (who agreed to act as a mediator in order to help alleviate the communication issues).

BAB has taught us that communication from the beginning is vital to a successful project. Without a strong line of communication, deadlines can not be met, expectations can not be set, and the project goals can not be reached. Specifically, we had to learn how to not let our frustrations show in our limited emails, texts, and phone calls with our community partner.

Ethical Issues

The cognitive stress that the legal guardian or child(ren) might encounter during the program had the potential to be an ethical issue. At any time during the program, the child's guardian could choose to remove their family from the project by alerting the principal investigators of BAB directly. This program was designed as a voluntary study to improve the literacy rate in Macon but the health and safety of the child is a priority.

Dissemination Plan

This project attempted to administer pre-intervention surveys composed of closed and open-ended items to the legal guardian to assess baseline knowledge of the importance of reading for cognitive development. Then, after implementing BAB, post-intervention surveys would have been administered to assess the knowledge and use of the reading materials and perceived improvements in the child's reading literacy skills. Post-intervention surveys would have also inquired about the participants' feedback on the perceived experience of the project.

This project's dissemination would have been through both Mercer University's organized events, such as Bear Day, but also through United Way's marketing team. The BAB project report would have been presented to United Way and other donor organizations in hopes of creating a sustained program. The organizations that sponsor the books will highlight the service done for the community.

In light of the COVID-19 pandemic, this dissemination plan was invalidated. We were unable to get in contact with families to administer pre- or post-intervention surveys; because of this, we have no data to disseminate or present to United Way. BAB was able to receive funding from an individual donor to purchase books for participating families. These books, purchased from Scholastic Books, were bundled into book-packs and presented to United Way. The team at United Way's First Steps program agreed to handle the dissemination of these book-packs to their participating families in order to limit possible exposure to COVID-19.

Bibliography

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