Parenting success : a learning program for parents of families at risk
by Carol Ann Korizek

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education
Montana State University
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Abstract:
How active learning occurs in the adult participating in a program for hard-to-reach, failure-cycled parents of families at risk was not known. As a result of societal issues such as addictions, crime, poverty and mental illness, most parents of families at risk develop lower self-esteem and a feeling of failure about their ability to parent. To meet the needs of this important population, an empowering program named Parenting Success was developed for parents of families at risk. Parenting Success is founded on a humanistic philosophical base and employs practices of adult learning principles. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to identify how adults learn through participation in Parenting Success and to know specifically what factors caused, sustained and contributed to the occurrence of learning and accomplishment in the parents participating in the Parenting Success program.

The qualitative research design chosen to describe how parents of families at risk learn through participation in Parenting Success was the descriptive case study which focuses on not one but many of the variables present within the boundaries of the study. The goal of this qualitative process was to focus on the many emerging variables which describe how and/or why adults learn in the social environment of the Parenting Success program. The research findings generated from observations, class discussions, evaluations, and interviews of participating parents revealed important information which may transform the manner in which crucial parenting skills and information are disseminated for effective adult learning to occur.

Reflecting the high retention and completion rate, parents overwhelmingly responded that they felt comfortable and accepted in the Parenting Success learning group. Participants of Parenting Success voiced responses which were consistently positive regarding their feelings about learner-centered humanistic adult education with many of the parents praising the learning experience that Parenting Success had offered them.

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This thesis has been read by each member of the graduate committee and has been found to be satisfactory regarding content, English usage, format, citations, bibliographic styles, and consistency, and is ready for submission to the College of Graduate Studies.

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Date _July 24, 1997_

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ABSTRACT

How active learning occurs in the adult participating in a program for hard-to-reach, failure-cycled parents of families at risk was not known. As a result of societal issues such as addictions, crime, poverty and mental illness, most parents of families at risk develop lower self-esteem and a feeling of failure about their ability to parent. To meet the needs of this important population, an empowering program named *Parenting Success* was developed for parents of families at risk. *Parenting Success* is founded on a humanistic philosophical base and employs practices of adult learning principles. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to identify how adults learn through participation in *Parenting Success* and to know specifically what factors caused, sustained and contributed to the occurrence of learning and accomplishment in the parents participating in the *Parenting Success* program.

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Reflecting the high retention and completion rate, parents overwhelmingly responded that they felt comfortable and accepted in the *Parenting Success* learning group. Participants of *Parenting Success* voiced responses which were consistently positive regarding their feelings about learner-centered humanistic adult education with many of the parents praising the learning experience that *Parenting Success* had offered them.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Societal challenges for today's American family have escalated drastically over the past four decades. Not only is the well-being of the family continually vulnerable to decline, the strength of the family structure is threatened and weakened. From their work entitled, *Running in Place: How American Families are Faring in a Changing Economy and an Individualistic Society*, Zill and Nord (1994) summarize that the apparent decline of the family is the result of weakened family values, poor parenting, detrimental behavior of parents and young people, and social and economic forces in the larger society that make it difficult for families to maintain functionality.

Family values were mutually established as an important topic of concern for both major parties in the 1996 national election year. During July and August of 1996, the national political conventions of Democrats and Republicans alike

featured numerous speakers, including President and Mrs.

Clinton and Senator and Mrs. Dole, who acknowledged and

echoed the nation's growing concern for the welfare of

American families and children. Although the term *family*

values implies that parents are totally the responsible

party for the welfare of the family unit, most families are

indeed trying to do their best within an ever-changing,

larger society that greatly impacts the family externally.

Family therapists Napier and Whitaker (1978) offer the

following word of caution for helpers who may be treating a

family for emotional disturbance:

> A systems approach to treating emotional
> disturbance cannot stop with the individual
> family. The family is often merely the scapegoat
> of a highly stressed, competitive, and finally
> rather cruel society. We cannot work with the
> family system without becoming aware of the power
> of the governmental system, the school system, and
> the work system in the life of the family; and
> though most of us see our expertise as being in
> work with individual families, we know that there
> is much in this larger family of humanity that
> must be altered. (pp. 290-291)

In his book, *Raising Children in a Socially Toxic*

Environment, James Garbarino (1995) places responsibility

upon the whole society. Through carefully documented

research, Garbarino verifies that the mere act of living in

today's society is dangerous to the health and well-being of children and adolescents. The concept of the socially toxic environment is offered as a parallel to the environmental movement's analysis of physical toxicity. Although the awareness and education levels are at conceptual stages, Garbarino offers information and help, while discouraging blame, for society to combat the social toxicity that is slowly destroying our children's development and futures. Garbarino believes that the basic needs of children are jeopardized and that many of the family values-related problems have been created by a society that is deteriorating because of a changing economy and the growing dependence of families on the community.

Problems within the individual family system, however, ultimately remain in the ownership of the parents. Nelson and Oles (1993) have identified determinants of parents and children which are related to the behaviors of families and youth at risk which include parent developmental history, parent maturity, parent mental health, socioeconomic status, sources of stress (parent involvement, marital conflict, and job satisfaction), and child characteristics. Thus, there is need for effective parent education which will enable the

learner to become aware of his or her own parenting style

and to develop skills in the following areas which will

fortify family functioning: Understanding human needs,

coping, problem-solving, decision-making, communication,

conflict-resolution, the change process, the paradigm shift

of transformed perspectives, achieving independence and hope

for the future and developing a sense of self and community.

<u>Parenting Programs</u>

During the past twenty years, numerous programs have

been developed which attempt to meet the needs of parents

who wish to address external and internal stressors upon the

functioning family unit. Most of these parenting programs

are based on various personality and learning theories.

Three major philosophical foundations are presented below

with examples of current authors and their publications on

parenting within each theoretical base.

Adlerian psychology is an adaptation or extension of

psychoanalytic theory (Corey, 1996). Parenting programs

that are based on Adlerian theory hypothesize that children

often attempt to meet their needs in a mistaken direction.

Their goal is to identify and examine the child's goals of

misbehavior and attempt to redirect the behavior to achieve more positive and satisfying results (Thompson & Rudolph, 1983). Two highly successful and well-known programs which are based on Adlerian psychology are *Systematic Training for Effective Training* (Dinkmeyer & McKay, 1982) and *Active Parenting Today* (Popkin, 1993).

Behavioral psychologists see behavior and academic problems as resulting from faulty previous learning (Skinner, 1953). Both parents and children have learned inappropriate ways of behaving, reacting, and responding through reinforcement of poor models. Behaviorists believe that inappropriate patterns of learning can be *extinguished* or unlearned and more appropriate behaviors can be learned to replace the earlier, faulty learning (Thompson & Rudolph, 1996). Three parenting programs which are based on behavioral psychology are *Assertive Discipline for Parents* (Canter, 1988), *SOS Help for Parents* (Clark, 1995) and *1-2-3 Magic* (Phelan, 1996).

Existential or humanistic psychologists reacted against psychoanalysis as a method of effective helping as follows: The humanistic approach, essentially, sees the individual as possessing free will, choice, purpose and, in this sense,

individual capacity for self-determination and self-actualization within a teleological perspective of human nature (Hanson & L'Abate, 1982, p. 6). Thus, humanistic psychology provided the theoretical emergence of placing emphasis upon the individual who possesses both the freedom and the responsibility to meet his or her needs. Of course, one of the most notable humanistic psychologists and developer of the *Human Hierarchy of Needs* was existentialist Abraham Maslow (1954) who professed that people strive for self-actualization. Another humanistic, Carl Rogers (1961), believed that humans are basically trustworthy. Thus, he developed the person-centered approach to counseling, teaching and learning. Examples of parenting programs which are based on the humanistic philosophy are *Self-Esteem: A Family Affair* (Clarke, 1978), *Parenting with Love and Logic* (Cline & Fay, 1990), and *Parent Effectiveness Training* (Gordon, 1970).

All of the above-mentioned commercial parenting programs are highly successful with groups of upper and middle-class parents with high cognitive abilities and who are intellectually curious to continue to learn how to be the best parents they can possibly become. For example,

Active Parenting Today (Popkin, 1993) is a very popular and effective program for parents of families who are not at risk.

<p align="center">Families At Risk</p>

Who are the at risk? Families and youth at risk include numerous and varied descriptions and are seen in great and growing numbers in our society. Families at risk broadly include a family member or members with one or more of the following characteristics: An identified, or unidentified medical or mental disorder diagnosis; low socioeconomic status and poorly educated; unemployed; a dropout from a previous educational experience; frequently distrustful of the system; compulsive/addictive behaviors; abusive behaviors; low self-esteem; and, a general feeling of failure or failure-cycled.

The most urgent cases are those children who are being physically, sexually, and emotionally abused and neglected. In Montana and across the United States, social welfare services are barely able to keep up with the reports of abuse. Caseworkers must make decisions through prioritizing the seriousness and danger elements of each case while

answering the calls with the youngest, most vulnerable

children first. Foster care for teens is almost non-

existent because of the reluctance of families to accept a

youngster with longer histories of problems into their

homes. Using preventative education to achieve learning,

integration, and application of parenting skills may help

break the chain of violence, abuse and neglect.

Another very large group of youngsters are afflicted

with medical or mental disorders which upset the balance, or

homeostasis (Ackerman, 1958; Satir, 1967), in their

families. Diagnosed mental disorders in teens are

especially difficult for a family to live with because of

the acting-out behaviors which often occur as a result of

the disorders (Ackerman, 1958; American Psychiatric

Association, 1994; Haley, 1963; 1976; L'Abate, 1976; Satir,

1972). Parenting skills can be taught which will

specifically lessen the impact of the trauma and imbalance

in the family. More importantly, however, is the group

support, sharing of information and resources, and problem-

solving which occurs in these adult learning groups to

heighten the self-esteem of the parents and lessen their

sense of failure at parenting.

Parenting Programs for Families At Risk

Unfortunately, there are few parenting programs available on the market for practitioners who are working with the at-risk population. Because of the terrific differences in these diverse categories of adult learners, there is a great need to have a flexible, adaptable program which can be designed to meet the needs of each parenting group. For example, when teaching and facilitating a group of court-ordered parents who have been found guilty of either child abuse or neglect and their small children have been taken away and placed outside their homes into foster care, a sophisticated, highly cognitive, and well-developed Adlerian-based program simply fails to be relevant to their experiences or situations which, in turn, means that this program fails to meet their needs as adult learners. Another problem which arises from the aforementioned parenting programs within court-ordered parenting classes comes with the assumption that these families have their children living with them. When asked to do homework or other family activities, the court-ordered parents feel alienated, ashamed, or out of place.

If the needs of parents of families at risk are unmet by the most popular parenting programs, what are the learning principles of parenting programs that are available? Basically, all of these prescribed programs have good, sound principles in common which are presented to the participants in a variety of ways. Usually, the teaching style for the most popular commercial programs responds to the cognitive learner who does not have emotional encumbrances or extreme family stress. Many programs demand passive learning with reading, writing, and a good deal of attention to the presented material. For many parents, these programs are meaningful, educational, and enjoyable.

There is, however, no commercial program that effectively addresses the needs of the hard-to-reach, failure-cycled parent of families at risk. When the needs of adult learners are not met, those adults either tend to discontinue or not initiate participation in parenting classes. Unfortunately, parents of families at risk are usually the persons with the greatest need for the learning, support, problem solving, and sharing of experiences which result from an excellent parenting program. At the Washington School Counseling Association Conference in 1988,

a workshop there addressed this very dilemma and the
unanswered question was asked, "How can we get the parents,
who would benefit from parenting classes the most, to
attend?" Eight years later, that same question continues to
be asked by adult educators of parenting classes.

Who are the hard-to-reach, failure-cycled parents of
families at risk? Hard-to-reach adult learners who are
underrepresented in continuing education parenting classes
may have one or more of the following characteristics: An
extreme acting-out child; low socioeconomic status; the
handicapped; developmentally-delayed mentally, socially,
emotionally, or physically; school dropouts or those having
a previous negative school experience; unemployed; being
involved with family services, the law, or welfare systems;
minimum wage earners; possessing low self esteem and a
general feeling of failure (Larson, 1980). Hard-to-reach
parents may encounter any number of real or imagined
"roadblocks" to continuing education such as transportation,
time, money, childcare, poor health, being unaware of the
learning opportunities, shyness or embarrassment,
restrictive locations, or other "red tape" and rigid
requirements (Larson, 1980, pp. 27-38).

In 1996, a parenting program was developed and entitled, *Parents of At Risk Teens*. Although many of the principles or main concepts are similar to many other parenting programs, the approach is different. The program goals are to do as much active communication, participation, and group problem-posing and problem-solving as possible in each and every one of the six sessions. The first *Parents of At Risk Teens* group was sponsored jointly by *The Parent Connection*, a parent resource center of Billings School District # 2, and Parents, Let's Unite for Kids (PLUK), a non-profit family advocacy group.

The original core group of *Parents of At Risk Teens* consisted of eight parents and two teachers from Billings School District # 2 who work with at-risk teens. Since *Parents of At Risk Teens* was written to address the needs of a group of parents with at-risk teenagers, the program centered on the needs of the parents. Only by coincidence, every one of the teenagers was a young woman who had the following experiences and characteristics: Living with both parents; identified and diagnosed with a bipolar mental disorder; experienced running away from home; experienced the use and abuse of alcohol and other drugs; interacted

with the police; and, excessive truancies from school.

Therefore, when parents enrolled in *Parents of At Risk Teens*, they had already tried many interventions with their at-risk children. These adult learners wanted support, resources, help, information, and answers immediately. Each week, the lessons, strategies, and activities were modified to meet the needs of this group of adult learners. This group worked on many of their parenting problems together through problem-posing and sharing of resources, failures, successes, fears, joys, confusion, and feelings. *The Parents of At Risk Teens* group became integrated as a working unit and the attendance was nearly one hundred percent with the exception of complications from parental participation in softball, school open houses, and school music concerts. One couple gave up their weekly choir practice to attend the classes. Every one of the group members felt valued during the parenting program, however, in each of their written evaluations it was unanimously stated that the group interaction and sharing made them feel as though they were really *not* failures as parents. With this feedback, it was decided to change the name of the program to *Parenting Success with Teens* and *Parenting*

Success with Kids to reflect the positive goals of problem solving and success rather than failure. Through a needs-based process, *Parenting Success for Teens* evolved into a humanistic, learner-centered parenting program which accomplished the process of adult learning because it met the needs of this parenting group by supplying peer support, relevant information, and problem-solving opportunities.

Parenting Success applies the humanistic philosophy which has strong roots in psychology (Frankel, 1963; Maslow, 1954; May, 1969; Perls, 1969; Rogers, 1961; Sarte, 1961), adult education (Brookfield, 1986; Kidd, 1973; Knowles, 1980; McKenzie, 1978; Rogers, 1969; Tough, 1971), and family therapy (Gordon, 1970; Satir, 1972, 1976). The humanistic foundation of *Parenting Success* is the belief that a healthy individual means a healthier society. Therefore, this democratic philosophy works well with families, when counseling or advising individuals and groups, and in the classroom or meeting room. Humanistic philosophy applies to the learning process, the learner, and the facilitator. Congruency in communication is an important humanistic factor in relationships (Satir, 1972, 1976), through which parents and educators can offer integrity and security to

children. Congruence is functional consistency and is

evident when one's actions match one's words which includes

all verbal and nonverbal communication (Hansen & L'Abate,

1982).

Humanistic philosophy is dedicated to the development

of human beings and involves a process and is not a

condition or product (Knowles, 1970, pp. 37-55). The key

concepts of humanistic adult education are freedom and

autonomy, trust, active cooperation and participation, and

self-directed learning (Elias & Merriam, 1995, p. 10).

Adult Learning

J. R. Kidd (1973, pp. 45-47) advises the teacher of

adults to tie learning to experience as a method to engage

participants and to create a stimulating environment. Kidd

believes in the learner-centered curriculum and upon the

development of the individual and the concept of self-

appraisal. According to Kidd, the three R's of adult

education are relevancy, relationship, and responsibility

(1973, pp. 121-122).

Malcolm Knowles (1980) outlined his four major

assumptions underlying andragogy as follows:

a) The importance of a positive self-concept to
successful learning by the adult; b) The
humanistic belief that all adults are individuals
and unique with a lifetime of valuable experiences
which can be used as resources for participatory
learning; c) Education of the adult needs to be
learner-centered because adults learn what is
relevant to their developmental stage of life in
order to fulfill social roles.; d) Adults desire
knowledge that has immediate application and are
more effectively met through problem-solving group
techniques. (pp. 59-62)

Knowles' outstanding contribution to adult education can be

summarized as follows:

Malcolm Knowles is indeed a humanistic adult
educator. For him, the learning process involves
the whole person, emotional, psychological, and
intellectual. It is the mission of adult
educators to assist adults in developing their
full potential in becoming self-actualized and
mature adults. Andragogy is a methodology for
bringing about these humanistic ideals. (Elias &
Merriam, 1995, p.133)

Adults are self-directed learners and usually do not

respond well to competition. Since they want active

cooperation in learning situations, the learning climate is

very important to the adult learner. Brookfield (1986),

Candy (1991), and Tough (1979) did comprehensive work to

understand the self-directed learner. Tough (1979) used an

extensive series of interviews and research through which he

found that people begin new learning projects for pleasure,

self-esteem, and other reasons which come at the end of a

chain of events. Brookfield (1986) clarifies the meaning of

the independent learner through his statement that follows:

> The key notion here is that of learner
> responsibility. . . this does not mean that
> independent learning occurs in an isolated social
> and intellectual vacuum. . . Independence,
> therefore, is signaled not by the physical context
> in which the student is working but by the degree
> of control exerted over the content and method of
> learning. (pp. 25-26)

In his book, *Self-Direction for Lifelong Learning,*

Candy (1991) speaks of constructivism, learners, and

learning. The constructivism theory in education is

concerned with the learner's interpretation of concepts and

how meaning is structured, built, or assembled. This

suggests not only a case for active learning but more

importantly that the learning must be relevant and have some

connection to the learner's experiential background (pp.

270-278).

Since learning for adults may involve reordering or

restructuring which effects a change in behavior or the way

a concept is perceived (Mezirow, 1991), the *transformative*

learning experience can often be unpleasant, painful, or

even cause a temporary decline in the learner's self-

concept. Brookfield (1992) concurs:

> Learning we would regard as transformative is
> often a bittersweet experience with the excitement
> inspired by sensing that we are on the verge of a
> redefinition of self-balanced by an awareness of
> the threat that such a change represents. Hence,
> while the long-run outcome of many learning
> episodes can be interpreted (with benefit of
> hindsight) as being positive, productive, and
> fulfilling, while people are immersed in them they
> are often experienced as deeply painful.
> Significant learning generally involves
> fluctuating episodes of anxiety-producing self-
> scrutiny and energy-inducing leaps forward in
> ability and understanding. (p.12)

A strong proponent of identifying and addressing the

needs of the client comes from the originator of the

Hierarchy of Human Needs, Abraham Maslow (1954). Maslow, as

well as many other humanistic educational psychologists,

believe that unless the basic needs of survival and safety

are met, then the progressively higher needs of love,

affection and belonging, esteem needs, and self-

actualization will not be met and the learner can not

develop to his or her full potential. Although this theory

is not often researched, it remains a basic theory of

prominence in the field of educational psychology. *Parenting

Success* uses Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs to begin

participatory and experiential learning in the very first

meeting. By relating their own experiences to the

hierarchy, the adult learners are able to immediately begin

to build an awareness of how *Parenting Success* is relevant

to their own unique situations.

Problem

We do not know how active learning occurs in the adult

participating in a program for hard-to-reach, failure-cycled

parents of families at risk. Parenting classes are taught

across the United States every night of the week. Who

attends most of these classes? The population that is

mostly attracted to parenting classes is usually the middle

or upper-class parent who wants to improve and enhance their

parenting skills which may already be adequate. These

parents have often not experienced some of the more serious

problems that society's parents of families at risk are

enduring today such as family involvement with alcohol and

other drug abuse, fear for their personal safety, poverty,

homelessness, gang or "wannabe" gang involvement, stealing

or shoplifting, involvement with the police, probation, and

youth court services, running away, mental or medical

disorders, suicide attempts, or a combination of some or all of the above risk factors. As a result of family system behaviors, actions, and reactions, most parents of families at risk develop lower self-esteem and a feeling of failure about their ability to parent. To meet the needs of this important population, an empowering program named *Parenting Success* was developed for parents of families at risk. At the end of six weeks of meetings, no one had dropped the program and the enthusiasm appeared to be present with all of the parents.

What were the factors which caused and sustained the occurrence of learning in these hard-to-reach, failure-cycled parents who continued in this adult learning project week after week until the completion? Although an evaluation was done which provided positive feedback, the answer to the above question was not researched. The parenting program was founded on a humanistic philosophical base. The goal of *Parenting Success* was to have involvement from the participants through active communication (Satir, 1976), active learning (Candy, 1991), group problem-solving through shared experiences (Kidd, 1973; Knowles, 1980), and awareness of and responsibility for satisfaction of their

own learning needs (Brookfield, 1986) which, in turn, would

demonstrate the need for healthy self-esteem (Knowles, 1980;

Maslow, 1954; Rogers, 1969). With this trial group, the

program worked. Now, the urgency has become even greater to

know specifically how learning occurred and what factors

contributed to the accomplishment of the adults

participating in the *Parenting Success* program.

<div align="center">Purpose</div>

The purpose of this study was to identify how adults

learned through participation in *Parenting Success*.

Parenting Success has been created for parents of families

at risk. With the world's rapid entry into the

technological information era comes society's equally urgent

need for subsistence of the American family's physical,

emotional, and social well-being. Through *Parenting*

Success, parents are discovering ways to meet the survival,

safety, belonging and esteem needs (Maslow, 1954) for

themselves and for their troubled families. This study

described the learning patterns of the adults who

participated in this parenting program.

How does the format of *Parenting Success* encourage or facilitate learning? After reviewing many parenting programs, it was found that the majority come in the form of books, videos, tapes and workbooks. Therefore, with most parenting programs today, the instruction is pre-packaged and the pace is determined by the curriculum and not the adult learner. In *Parenting Success*, humanistic adult learning principles are the foundation for the program, which means a learner-centered approach. Trust, communication, and discussion of experiences play an important role in determining, acknowledging and addressing the needs of the adult learner in *Parenting Success*. The research findings generated from evaluations, class discussions, interviews, field notes, observations, and comments of participating parents will reveal important information which may transform the manner in which crucial parenting skills and information are disseminated for effective adult learning to occur.

Why do the participants of *Parenting Success* return week after week until the program is complete? Adults demand to have their needs met with immediate and useful information or they will not return for more learning

sessions or classes. The research on *Parenting Success* determined how those needs are met and how learning is impacted by meeting those needs.

Significance of the Study

Discovering how learning occurs in the failure-cycled parents enrolled in *Parenting Success* can open a window of opportunity for a very large population of adult learners which previously has not been available but has been greatly needed. As noted earlier, a common frustration of organizations delivering parent education to families at risk has been a difficult task.

Parents with teenagers at high risk have usually tried many community resources and options available to them by the time they arrive for parenting classes. Many of these parents have experienced devastating times with their teens and they want answers immediately. The experience-sharing opportunities that *Parenting Success with Teens* offers is designed to meet the intense needs of these parents of families at risk through support, problem-solving, and hope for the future.

Parents of families at risk that have been ordered by a judge in a court of law to participate in parent education as a condition to regain custody of their children bring many issues and strong emotions to parenting class. Naturally, court-ordered parents feel angry, resentful, and hurt that their children have been removed from their homes and placed in foster care. Usually court-ordered parents carry these negative and hurt emotions with them to parenting classes which have been mandated. Many parent educators find this scenario an extremely difficult arena for the teaching and learning of parenting skills. Finding a learning program that will positively engage and empower the reluctant participant is wanted by parent educators and parents of families at risk. *Parenting Success with Kids* offers general parenting and relationship skills which are delivered in an atmosphere of empathy and mutual respect to create awareness, support, hope for the future, and motivation for positive change.

Research Questions

1. How do parents of families at risk react to a parenting program based on adult learning principles?

2. How does the philosophy of learner-centered humanistic adult education effect active learning when applied to *Parenting Success* learning groups of hard-to-reach, failure-cycled parents of families at risk?

3. What adult teaching and learning methods, techniques, and activities facilitated learning in *Parenting Success*?

4. How does the learning efficacy of the participants in *Parenting Success* compare to how effectively the needs of the participants are met?

5. During the six-week learning groups of *Parenting Success*, how do the participants' attitudes and behaviors change?

6. Why is it possible for a failure-cycled parent to feel more successful as a result of participating in an adult learning class for parents of families at risk?

Assumptions

The researcher made five major assumptions for the purpose of this study. The first assumption, which was made on an empirical basis, is that all parents, including those in families at risk, love their children and want to be successful parents. Each time a parenting learning group is begun, the participant has had to take a risk and make a

personal commitment to enter a new situation with strangers which could possibly be uncomfortable. With parents of at risk families, this task is especially noteworthy because of their lowered self-esteem. Through observation, the intense caring for their children is evident in parents of families at risk as they recount their experiences and express their needs right from the beginning of *Parenting Success* programs.

Another important assumption of this research is that the court-ordered parent is open and willing to learn how to improve the relationship with his or her child or children. This assumption is also founded on an empirical basis. During the sessions of *Parenting Success*, lively discussions and frequent problem-posing and problem-solving situations offer proof of each participant's focus, feelings, beliefs, and intellectual curiosity to become more comfortable with parenting issues. Additionally, Kidd (1973) offers valuable information in his in-depth discussions which differentiate between learning to meet needs and learning because of motivation. Through both observation and use of Kidd's work, the reflective parent educator is able to design

learning to meet the needs and motivations of the parent of

families at risk.

A third assumption is that if parenting education is

delivered with constructivist and adult learning principles,

then the participants' retention rate will be sustained and

improved over the duration of the parenting program.

Constructivism is deeply rooted in the humanistic philosophy

of learning. As Candy (1991) has noted, learning must be

relevant and have some connection to the learner's

experiential background. Sparks (1994) strongly recommends

that the group leader model experiential learning

opportunities rather than using common instructional methods

such as lecture, telling, or directing. Some researchers

(Candy, 1990; Mezirow, 1991) have named teaching and

learning a process of negotiation where meanings are

construed and constructed.

Assumption number four assumes that through active

participation in *Parenting Success*, the learner is able to

gain awareness, support, and hope for the future that will

effect new thinking, feelings, and behaviors which will

lessen the stress of feeling unsuccessful at parenting.

The fifth and final assumption is that parenting skills can be learned which will specifically empower the parent and lessen the impact of the trauma and imbalance in the family. (Ackerman, 1958, 1966; Molineux, 1985; Napier, 1978; Satir, 1972, 1983)

Limitations and Delimitations

Following are limitations which are factors in the availability of learning opportunities for *Parenting Success*: (1) Research on *Parenting Success with Kids* is limited to the court-ordered parents in families at risk; (2) The length of time for the learning groups of *Parenting Success* is six meetings. This is an unrealistic and short time to effect change. Therefore, the goal for *Parenting Success* is to create and instill awareness, support, empowerment, and hope for the future; (3) Transportation to class was a limitation for nearly all of the court-ordered participants during sub-zero January weather. Nearly all of the participants relied on walking, inconvenient bus schedules, or receiving a ride to class from another person for their transportation. (4) The availability of childcare was a limiting factor for the court-ordered parents.

Therefore, after the initial sessions, childcare was provided to the parents that have had their children returned to them by the court. (5) The cost of the parenting classes for court-ordered parents is not a factor because United Way and grant moneys provide scholarship assistance as needed. Without the scholarship assistance, cost of parent education would be limiting factor.

Definition of Terms

Adult learner refers to the adult who is participating in a learning project (i.e., parenting class).

Affective domain refers to the area of our psyche which relates to and influences emotions and feelings.

Children at risk refers to the child who is at risk of not moving through normal developmental stages because of physical, emotional, or social disabilities or trauma.

Cognitive (when referring to parenting programs) means to gain knowledge through observation or information rather than through emotions.

Cognitive domain refers to the area of our psyche which relates to and influences the perception of knowing or acquiring knowledge.

Constructivism has humanistic philosophical roots and

theorizes that humans learn new knowledge by

associating or connecting it with existing knowledge,

experiences and known concepts.

Court-ordered parent refers to the parent who has been

ordered by a judge and court of law to follow the

conditions of a treatment plan, which usually includes

parenting classes, in order to be reunited with his or

her child or children.

DFS refers to the former Department of Family Services for

the State of Montana or Child Protective Services.

Presently, the departments' name is Child and Human

Services.

Empowerment refers to the act of giving power to another.

Failure-cycled describes an individual who has experienced

multiple failures which continue to perpetuate other

failures and the individual actually believes that he

or she cannot succeed.

Families at risk refers to a family that is at risk of being

unable to function as a unit while human needs of the

family members are not being met.

Family values refers to the importance and value one places

upon the family as an integral part of child and

adolescent development.

Functionality (as it relates to families) refers to each

member of the family being able to maintain a strong

self-concept under conditions of separateness,

equality, freedom, individuality, negotiation of

differences, and unconditional love and acceptance.

Hard-to-reach parents refers to those parents who may be

difficult to reach with information about opportunities

for parent education.

Humanistic philosophy or psychology indicates that the

development of self-concept is central to this theory

with emphasis placed on freedom, responsibility, and

autonomy of the individual.

Learner-centered means that the teaching and learning

opportunities are determined by the needs of the

learner.

Learning groups is the name given to the collective members

of the *Parenting Success* parent education classes which

meet six times on a weekly basis.

Learning styles refers to individual methods of learning

which are expressed by behaviors which serve as

indicators of how a person learns from and expresses

himself while adapting to the environment.

Roadblocks are the barriers to learning or barriers to

opportunities for learning.

Self-actualization is Maslow's highest level of human needs

which means that the individual has a high degree of

need satisfaction in all areas of his or her life.

Self-esteem is the need to be respected as a worthwhile

individual and to build self-respect and self-

confidence.

The system refers to governmental agencies such as the

welfare system, the legal system, the Department of

Child and Human Services, Child Protective Services, or

schools.

Youth or teens at risk refers to pre-adolescent or

adolescent individuals who are having much trouble

moving through the stages of development necessary to

become autonomous individuals while gaining freedom and

responsibility.

Summary

The number of families at risk in the United States is growing at a staggering rate of acceleration. Parents of families at risk are overwhelmed by the task that leaves its members grasping for help and hope for the future. To meet the needs of this important population, an empowering program named *Parenting Success* was developed for parents of families at risk. *Parenting Success* was founded on a humanistic philosophical base. The goal of *Parenting Success* is to have involvement from participants through active communication, active learning, group leadership, group problem-posing and problem-solving through shared experiences, and an awareness of the responsibility for meeting their own learning needs which validates the need for a healthy self-esteem. For many of the parents, the group sessions mean support while they work through a loss of the "the ideal family". For others, the meetings give parents new insight and hope for the future. Now, the urgency has become even greater to know specifically how, why, and to what extent learning occurred and what factors

contributed to the accomplishment of the adults

participating in the *Parenting Success* program.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Introduction

A need for effective parenting education in today's
society with special emphasis on the importance of providing
help for parents of families at risk. In order to
accomplish the design of an effective learning program which
may prepare the parent of an at-risk family for the
possibilities of perspective transformation (Mezirow, 1991),
it is imperative that major conceptual areas be explored at
a level of understanding to assure the best possible design
for learning. Therefore, the following literature relevant
to this investigation is reviewed: (a) Parenting and family
issues; (b) learning theory; (c) educational philosophy; (d)
adult developmental theory; (e) adult learning theory; (f)
available parenting education programs; (g) global

influences affecting adult learning; and (h) external and internal factors influencing adult learning.

Parenting And Family Issues

What does the family of the 21st Century look like? Perhaps another way to answer the above question is to discuss the differences seen in today's family compared to the family of 1960. However, looking back to what was will not define the issues of the American family in the present and future. Countless resources discuss the belief that parenting today is indeed much different and more complex than it was 40 years ago (Elkind, 1994; Fine, 1989; Garbarino, 1995; Pipher, 1994; National Association of School Psychologists, 1990; Thompson & Rudolph, 1996). In their book, *Megatrends 2000: Ten New Directions for the 1990's*, noted futurists Naisbett and Aburdene asserted the following weighty predictions which have evolved and will continue to profoundly affect the American family into the next century:

> (1) technological growth will continue; (2) the
> United States will move further from the Industrial
> Age into the Information Era; "family" will be
> redefined to include many types of homes and
> relationships; (4) as more women enter the work

force, more mothers of preschoolers and school age
children will seek good child care; (5) although
the divorce rate has leveled off, over half of all
children will live in a single-parent household at
some time during their lives; (6) international
events will continue to have a strong influence on
the United States and the children will need to
learn about other cultures in order to live and
work with others effectively; (7) concern about
substance abuse and addiction will continue to
have high priority; and, (8) environmental issues
will bring abut changes in living patterns.
(Thompson and Rudolph, 1996, p. 5-6)

Although the above predictions in *Megatrends 2000* (1990)

have proven accurate, the centrality of human existence is

summarized by Naisbett and Aburdene (1990) as follows:

The most exciting breakthroughs of the 21st
century will occur not because of technology but
because of an expanding concept of what it means
to be human (p. xxiii).

With all of the revisions in the child's, parents', and

family's world, adjusting to change alone can be an

overwhelming, confusing, and stressful task. Carl Rogers

(1980), author of *A Way of Being*, offers the following

optimistic view of a rapidly changing world in the future:

The persons of tomorrow are the very ones who are
capable of understanding and absorbing that
paradigm shift. They will be the ones capable of
living in this new world, the outlines of which
are still only dimly visible. . .This new world
will be more human and humane. It will explore
and develop the richness and capacities of the
human mind and spirit. It will produce

individuals who are more integrated and whole. It
will be a world that prizes the individual person—
the greatest of our resources. (pp. 355-356)

Loss of the extended family in the 1990's is apparent.

A young family may consist of a father working long hours, a

mother who works during the day and must manage the needs of

the family home in the evenings, and two children who

require high quality and expensive daycare while their

parents are at work. Grandparents and other relatives who

might otherwise give the family time and emotional support

may live hundreds or thousands of miles away (Thompson &

Rudolph, 1996). In another family, a single parent may

serve as both mother and father to a child or children while

working, attending classes, and managing the home. More and

more prevalent, is the family that consists of two

grandparents who are raising a grandchild out of the

proximity of the child's parent. No matter what the family

structure looks like, how a family functions is crucial to

the wellness of the parents, children, and family (Zill &

Nord, 1994). Family functioning includes the principles of

parenting style, manner of communication, and time spent

together (Stinnett & DeFrain, 1985). Satir (1972)

summarizes the impact of families upon society as follows:

Put together all the current existing families and you have society. It is as simple as that. Whatever kind of training took place in the individual family will be reflected in the kind of society that is created. And institutions such as schools, churches, businesses, and government are, by and large, extensions of family forms to non-family forms. (p. 290)

Parenting Styles

The style in which parenting is done is often professed

to have great impact upon the development of the child

(Ackerman, 1958; Anderson, 1992; Dinkmeyer & McKay, 1982;

Fine, 1989; Gordon, 1970; Haley, 1976; Peck, 1978; Popkin,

1993; Satir, 1972). Fine (1989) reports numerous studies

which have yielded consistent findings between particular

parenting styles and the development of certain personality

characteristics of children.

Among the parenting styles studies cited (Elkind, 1994;

Fine,1989), are those of Baumrind (1967, 1971, 1972), which

identified three styles of parenting as authoritarian,

permissive, and authoritative. Authoritarian parents are

described as highly controlling, demonstrating less warmth,

and being more punitive toward their children. The children

of authoritarian parents are compliant but often emotionally

unaccepting of the parent, withdrawn, unhappy, and not able

to trust (Elkind, 1994; Fine, 1989; Smith; 1990).

Permissive parents are nurturing, warm, overprotective, and

supportive while failing to have consistent discipline.

Permissive parents tend to produce children who are lacking

in self-control, motivation, and independence.

Authoritative parents are warm while maturely exercising

parental control and using clear communications. The

children of authoritative parents are usually the most

autonomous, competent, mature, and have greater esteem

(Elkind, 1994; Fine, 1989, Litovsky & Dusek, 1985). Because

the research is so consistent on this issue, it appears that

most authors use parenting styles as an important

theoretical principle to be incorporated into their writing

on childrearing (Elkind, 1994; Fine, 1989, Peck, 1978;

Popkin, 1993). A extensive study involving 4,100

adolescents revealed by Lamborn (1991), also included

neglectful families along with authoritarian, indulgent, and

authoritative parenting styles. This study yielded the

following results: children of authoritarian parents scored

high on obedience but low on self-confidence; children of

indulgent or permissive parents had strong self-confidence

but a high frequency of behavior problems; children of

authoritative parents scored highest on psychosocial

competence and had the least behavioral problems; and, the

children from neglectful homes scored lowest on psychosocial

competence and highest on behavior dysfunction.

Parents in families at risk are often unaware of the

destructive relationship interactions which may be

contributing to unhealthy parenting patterns from one

generation to the next (Beattie, 1987; Bradshaw, 1988;

Bowen, 1978; Elkind, 1994). Manuel J. Smith, in *When I Say*

No, I Feel Guilty (1975), explains this incognizance as

believing that the following choice must be made between

parenting styles:

> Either being tyrannical bastards or indulgent
> jellyfishes with their kids. They see no
> meaningful middle ground between these two
> extremes. Faced with such a distasteful choice,
> they fall back upon the efficient, emotional
> manipulation taught them by their parents instead
> of assuming the frank, honest responsibility of
> taking authority: "*I want you to* . . . ." (p. 21)

Profile of the Strong, Healthy Family

Most family therapy theories hold a belief about what

distinguishes a healthy family from an unhealthy or at-risk

family. The Family Group Therapy theory of John Bell (1975)

asserts that the healthy family had complementarily aims,
various problem solving methods to meet varying individual
demands, continual evaluation of consequences of family
decisions, and flexibility so that new methods of
accommodation might be found. Conversely, Satir (1972,
1976; 1983) stresses the following four most important
ingredients for a healthy functioning family: (1) Self-
esteem, (2) communication, (3) rules, (4) taking risks.
Each of the four parts is interdependent on the other three;
if one part such as communication is changed, the other
three also change.

Parenting educators also have defined the healthy
family. Glenn and Nelson (1989), listed the following
predictors for a child's success as being a by product of
the healthy family: Having a positive perception of their
parent's image of them; family closeness; problem-solving
ability; a parenting style labeled, "loving freedom"; the
family's link to the community; and rules. Based upon their
extensive research of 3,000 families over a decade, Stinnett
and DeFrain (1989) found that understanding American
families was difficult. The results and conclusions from
that research determined that the following six major

qualities of strong families in the Western industrial

societies and the more technologically oriented nations of

the globe: (a) Commitment, (b) appreciation, (c)

communication, (d) time together, (e) spiritual wellness,

and (f) the ability to cope with stress and crisis (Stinnett

& DeFrain, 1989, p. 56). Olson, Russell, and Sprenkle

(1980), found the following three main ingredients to be

present in the healthy family: Cohesion which is the force

holding the family together but distinguishing that

relationship from enmeshment or disengagement; Communication

involving open, clear messages; and, Adaptability and the

family's ability to be flexible in meeting newly changed

circumstances.

Concluding, through comparison of the works among the

researchers and practitioners above, one can note the

similarities and like conclusions about what constitutes the

healthy family. In her 1972 book, *Peoplemaking*, humanist and

family therapist Virginia Satir wrote that all families are

on a continuum somewhere between very nurturing to very

troubled (p. 9). Healthy functioning families would fall

somewhere on the nurturing half of the continuum, while

families at risk would fall somewhere on the troubled half

of the continuum. It is important to remember that all
families have strengths and it is important to not view
parents of families at risk as being failures but to
recognize and value those strengths (Bouie-Scott, 1990;
Krasnow, 1990). Buri (1991) presented an interesting study
involving 784 people aged between seventh grade through
young adulthood. The importance of parental nurturance
proved to be as important with children in early adulthood
as it is to adolescents. Continuing parental nurturance
into a young adult's life improves self-concept and the
ability to cope with and better endure the stresses of
change during that important developmental stage.

Families at Risk

Who are the families at risk and what do they look
like? Although the term at risk is used frequently, it is
important to present a word of caution to professionals
about the possible ramifications of using at risk as a label
for families and children. Labeling a child or family at
risk by societal intervention specialists and educators may
actually be problematic for success of the students with
this label. When a family is designated as being at risk,

it is possible, if not probable, that their child's

academic, social, and behavioral expectations may be lowered

from the school's perspectives. Following the school's

labeling process and the resultant changed perspectives

about the student and his or her family, the family and

child will then begin the internalization process of lowered

expectations and failure (National Association of School

Psychologists, 1990). Thus, labeling a family or its

members at risk may facilitate that family's internalization

of the failure-cycled process.

When discussing the issues below, it is important for

the reader to keep in mind that not all families at risk own

all of these issues but that the presence of the issues or

problems will usually create families at risk. Every family

at risk is not consistently designated by a particular

socioeconomic level, ethnicity, or level of education.

However, families at risk may be created by the following

external or societal issues: Socioeconomic factors such a

poverty, homelessness, or minority status; non-completion of

high school or unsuccessful experiences in school; teen

pregnancy and teen parenting; and community trauma. In

Children at Risk: Poverty, Minority Status, and Other

Issues in Educational Equity (National Association of School

Psychologists, 1990), there are important factors which

differentiate today's society from that of yesteryear as

follows:

- Eleven million children under the age of 15
  live in poverty (one in five children currently
  live in poverty).
- One-third of these children are non-white. By
  the year 2000, 40% of all children in the
  United States under six years of age will be
  non-white, with half of them speaking a
  different language.
- Eighteen of the children born in 1986 were born
  out of wedlock. It is estimated that 21% of
  today's 14-year-olds will become pregnant
  teens.
- Children under 15 spend, and will spend, more
  time watching television than participating in
  classrooms; television also will consume
  valuable socialization time.
- Nearly 50 percent of today's children under 18
  will be raised by a single parent and
  experience one or more "family" break-ups.
- Seventy percent of mothers work outside the
  home with most of them being employed full-
  time. (p. xiv)

Through a highly diversified geographical study of poor

and minority parents, Reeves (1988), stresses that most of

them really do care about their children and that successful

programs must acknowledge and affirm this. Additionally,

most parents of families at risk care deeply about their

children's education but *often do not know how to help*.

Furthermore, the at-risk family may be created by

internal issues such as abuse, stress, emotional

disturbance, mental illness, physical illness, or trauma.

When internal issues contained within the family unit are

problematic to the well-being of even one individual of the

familial relationship, then the whole family is at risk

(Beattie, 1987; Bradshaw, 1988; Satir, 1972). In her

important book, *Reviving Ophelia* (1994), therapist Mary

Pipher shares the following concerns about the family:

> There are many families in which the adults cannot
> or do not protect their children. Adults who are
> struggling with their own problems such as
> depression, drug or alcohol addiction, or
> crippling poverty often have no energy to parent.
> There are families in which parents are abusive or
> neglectful. Many children are homeless or in
> foster care or institutions. Still the majority
> of parents are motivated to do their best for
> their children. (p. 65)

Societal and Equity Issues

Parenting children once was done within extended

families and often in rural communities where there were no

strangers. Stinnett and DeFrain (1985) found community and

family ties to be one of the characteristics of strong

families. "It takes a village to raise a child," was the

theme for Hillary Clinton's (1996) recent book where she

wrote the following regarding the impact of the family and

its environment upon an individual's development:

> For good or ill, our families and the environments
> in which we live are the backdrop against which we
> play out our entire lives. Families shape our
> futures; our early family experiences heavily
> influence, and to a degree determine, how we
> forever after think and behave. At the same time
> our families are shaped by the forces at work in
> the larger society—and by the village, whether it
> is a suburb or ghetto, in which the family lives.
> That is why it is important for us to try to
> understand the personal and social forces that
> formed our own families, and how they shaped—and
> continue to shape—both our lives and the village
> around us (p. 28).

Many authors (Krasnow, 1990; NASP, 1990; Ziegler, 1987)

concur that successful partnerships between parents of

families at risk and their children's schools are not

possible without the collaborative efforts of many community

agencies and organizations to provide all services that are

needed such as parenting education, counseling, health care,

and housing. Nationwide, communities appear to be moving to

replace extinct extended families through volunteer

organizations which are reaching out to assist families at

risk such as United Way, Big Brothers and Big Sisters, The