

## Teaching Strategies to Develop a Family-School Literacy Partnership

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**Does Reading Homework Inform or *Misinform* Home Literacy Practices?**

**Abstract**

This article explores a first-grade team's efforts to develop a family- school literacy partnership. The first-grade teachers wrote and developed the "*Family at Home Literacy Questionnaire*" to understand how their first graders selected texts and read with family members at home. The findings identified a number of unexpected at-home literacy practices. Of particular interest, the teachers' reading homework may have *misinformed* the families' at-home literacy practices. Families were not clear on texts intended for children's independent reading versus texts appropriate to read aloud. Accordingly, the authors recommend that teachers enhance their knowledge base of families' at-home practices and the personal tools and resources that drive them. The onus should not be placed on families to decipher how literacy homework should be completed; instead, teachers must listen to students' families and redesign literacy assignments that may conflict with families' at-home literacy practices or result in families' confusion or inappropriate application.

**Key words:** family-school partnership; text-purpose; text-confusion; literacy; at-home shared reading

## **Introduction**

In recent years, there has been an increased focus on parental involvement in children's academic lives, with a good deal of research examining the relationship between parental involvement and academic achievement. It is widely accepted that families' participation in their children's intellectual development positively affects students' learning and achievement and research has supported this notion (Jeynes, 2005, 2012). When families are involved in children's schooling, students tend to demonstrate higher levels of engagement in various aspects of school life, have better grades and higher test scores, have higher graduation rates, and a greater likelihood to enroll in post-secondary schools (Henderson & Mapp, 2002). However, there are some differences of opinion, for example between teachers and parents, about what constitutes family-school engagement (Lawson, 2003) with distinctions made between "at school" and "at home" involvement. While much of the research has taken the approach of examining the extent to which parent involvement improves children's outcomes (Hill & Taylor, 2004) less attention has focused on the "how" and "why" of families' engagement in school related activities (Mapp, 2003; Pomerantz, Moorman & Litwack, 2007). Limited research describes how teachers influence parents' at-home involvement, such as their reading with and to children. The purpose of the current study was to learn how adults choose books to read aloud with their young children at home. Results might inform teachers about how to guide families in choosing books to share that might best support children's literacy growth.

Homework Help

The most common type of family school involvement is parental help with homework. It is estimated that at least 70% of families offer some type of homework help, ranging from providing a quiet space to work and needed materials, to more significant contributions such as checking over homework or helping with project topic selection (Pomerantz et al., 2007). While common, homework help evokes controversy because the research results are mixed as to whether or not helping children with their homework enhances their homework behavior or academic success (Patall, Cooper, & Robinson, 2008). It appears that with homework, more is not necessarily better, and instead the ways in which parents become involved in their children's homework seems to have more influence. When parents' help is developmentally inappropriate or confusing, when it is perceived as controlling or intrusive, or when they are not well versed on a subject, the associations tend to be negative (Dumont et al., 2012). A focus of the current study was to examine how teachers' assignment of reading homework, including guidelines for independent reading, might shape or misinform families' child-adult shared reading practices.

How do teachers learn about what support parents need in order to effectively help their children with reading and other homework? Specialized professional standards for elementary teacher preparation (Association of Childhood Education International [ACEI], 2007) do not include guidelines for what constitutes suitable homework, and it is therefore unlikely that pre-service teachers receive training on how to support families or ensure that homework will be appropriate. Accordingly, teachers need guidance and support in the development of at-home activities. Some research suggests that experienced teachers seem to gain sensitivity to home needs and might tailor homework assignments and provide materials to help ensure children's success (Brock, Lapp, Flood, Fischer, & Han, 2007).

More strategies and protocols need to be established to make the process of developing meaningful homework more explicit for *all* teachers. The more teachers understand about home-based literacy practices, parents' knowledge of school-based literacy practices, and how those areas do or do not overlap, the more likely that parents will have the ability to reinforce the literacy growth valued by schools (Torres & Hurtado-Vivas, 2011) and teachers will be able to reinforce home-based literacy practices (Cairney & Ruge, 1998). In some cases, homework can be a source of stress for children and families and teachers need to understand family and work pressures, or a lack of clarity in homework assignments that can make it difficult for parents to support children's homework completion (Corno & Xu, 2004). A goal of the current study was to discover what shapes participating parents' involvement in their children's reading homework (Brock et al., 2007), and to help teachers find ways to support parents as they guided their children's reading practice.

#### Home Based Literacy and Adult-Child Shared Reading

Home based or family literacy has multiple meanings as a recent review of the literature shows (Anderson, Anderson, Friedrich & Kim, 2010). For example, although family literacy is usually framed as parents leading their children, older and younger siblings often influence each other's language development, and other family members such as grandparents also play a role. A range of activities, from song singing and bible reading to multiliteracies such as emailing and searching the Internet fall under the umbrella of family literacy. However, family literacy still tends to be defined conservatively by the public and in policy, with family literacy events at schools and other public institutions advocating school-based literacy practices such as shared storybook reading (Anderson et al., 2010).

Reading to children has been identified as one of the principal early literacy behaviors that parents can engage in to advance their children's literacy development (Trelease, 2013). Reading to and with children has been widely researched, yielding evidence for the positive support at-home reading can provide (Sénéchal & Young, 2008; Silinskas, et al., 2012). Some researchers point to differing effects depending on *how* parents read with their children and *what types of books* are selected for shared reading (i.e. Pillinger & Wood, 2014), which was of interest in the current study. In the National Academy of Education report, *Becoming a Nation of Readers* (Anderson, Hiebert, Scott, & Wilkinson, 1985), adults reading aloud to children was called "the single most important activity for building the knowledge required for eventual success in reading" (p. 23). Several studies have reported positive correlations between reading aloud to children and growth in components of children's literacy development.

Prior to entering school, a child's access to text and exposure to shared reading with an adult, shapes his or her reading by expanding word recognition skills and syntactic development (Lane & Wright, 2007), enhancing vocabulary (Beck & McKeown, 2001), and increasing listening comprehension (Morrow & Gambrell, 2002). Moreover, hearing text proficiently read aloud has multiple purposes: It expands children's appreciation of language (Keene & Zimmermann, 2007); models good fluency (Harvey & Goudvis, 2007); introduces basic concepts in print to children (Gunning, 2013); and supports sound-letter connections (Diller, 2007). Sénéchal & LeFevre (2002) found that exposure to books at home predicted several aspects of reading development in Grade 3. However, there is some indication that although many parents read to children prior to their starting school, the number of times per week children are read to at home drops precipitously once they are five years old (Scholastic Inc., 2014). Participating

families in the current study were asked to share the frequency with which they read to their children at home as well as the types of books selected for shared reading.

In addition to family reading frequency declining after first grade, other factors have been shown to impact how often adults read to children at home. Some research shows socio-economic disparities in families' reading frequency and possession of home libraries (Raikes et al., 2006) while access to quality local and public libraries with large collections and convenient hours often reflects the socio-economic wealth of a neighborhood (Neuman & Celano, 2001). At the same time, some cultural groups might prefer oral story telling or other forms of adult-child verbal exchanges over shared book reading. Reading to children is not a universal phenomenon but is rather a somewhat unique cultural trend, particularly associated with European American, middle-class families (Anderson et al., 2010).

There is also some question about family members' specific goals in developing their children's literacy competencies. While several papers on reading to children include tips for enhancing the effectiveness of reading aloud, for example by discussing target words to develop vocabulary (Beck & McKeown, 2001) or reading with fluency to support comprehension, family members don't always have these goals in mind when seeking to support their children's development. Indeed, although school-based literacy values meaning-construction and personal connections to texts, in some families or some communities, more emphasis might be placed on memorization, repetition, drill, and practice (Anderson et al., 2010). Evans, Fox, Cremaso, & McKinnon (2004) found that teachers tended to view reading as a top down process in which readers use their knowledge of the world and of language to make sense of text without necessarily attending to print features. Teachers' responses to a survey indicated that most held a constructivist view of reading, in which pictures, broader meaning, and interest primarily

impacted reading comprehension. Parents on the other hand viewed reading as a bottom up process, with readers processing letters and letter patterns to decipher words to get at the meaning of a passage. Most of these parents valued decoding processes and accurate oral reading over constructivist processes. These findings provide support for the notion that home and school might value different components of literacy, and that advice to parents to read to their children might not always result in the types of shared reading advocated by schools.

**Text Types: “Me Books” and “We Books”**

When considering the benefits of adult-child shared reading, some consideration must be made of the types of texts that are being shared. Recommendations for teachers on how to select books to read aloud are replete with specific pointers such as selecting books that would be interesting to children, that have rich content (Santoro, Chard, Howard & Baker, 2008), that are linked to the curriculum (Lane & Wright, 2007) and that have new vocabulary made accessible by the text (Beck & McKeown, 2001). Some guidelines for teachers include tips on choosing information texts, such as accuracy of content, accessibility of text features, and appeal to young readers (Saul & Dieckman, 2005). Others suggest involving children in the decision-making process and ensuring that books read aloud will augment and extend children’s independent reading (Boyd, 2008). Fewer recommendations are available for families who might not consider that some texts make better read alouds than others or may not have school-centric goals in mind when choosing texts. Adults’ selection criteria for books to read with their children might be based on perceptions about gender norms, a personal preference for fiction, or familiarity of text (Anderson, Anderson, Shapiro, & Lynch, 2001).

Texts for primary grades students have been conceptualized as falling under two major categories, those intended for independent reading by children, and those that are considered authentic literature (Cheatham, Allor, & Roberts, 2014). In the first category are those with different textual scaffolds, intended to support children's reading skill development (Mesmer, 2008). These texts include qualitatively leveled texts that tend to be predictable and emphasize meaning by providing a good match between text and illustrations, and decodable text that includes only letter patterns that children have learned. The other category, frequently referred to as authentic literature, includes texts that were written for a broader audience beyond classrooms and schools. These texts are considered to be highly motivating, and due to their use of rich language, supportive of children's vocabulary development (Ciecierski & Bintz, 2015). Frequently, with young children, authentic literature is used for shared reading since the text demands can be difficult for many children to read on their own. The Teachers College Reader's and Writer's Project (Teacher's College, Columbia University, 2014) describes different types of texts referring to texts that children read independently as "just right" texts, and those that teachers read to children to teach specific skills or crafts as "mentor texts". Some teachers, and specifically the teachers who participated in this study, refer to the types of texts as "me books" and "we books" indicating that some are to be read on one's own, and others are to be shared with a grown up. A goal of the current research was to learn how adults choose books to read aloud with their young children at home in order to inform teachers about how to guide families in choosing books to share that might best support children's literacy growth.

This study took place at an urban elementary school that partners with the university's department of elementary education. The elementary school serves a racially diverse (31% white; 18% Black; 21% Latino; 21% Asian) and socio-economically mixed (37% students

eligible for free lunch) student body. Participants included 70 family members, three first grade teachers and a faculty member from the partner university. Of the 70 families, 18 were eligible for free or reduced lunch and 52 were not free or reduced lunch eligible; the racial mix of participants reflected that of the school as a whole. Teachers were all white and female with different levels of teaching experiences (2 years; 7 years; and 9 years). One of the teachers was co-teaching a university course on literacy with the faculty member, a white female with 7 years of teaching experience and an advanced degree in education. The first-grade team met weekly in a professional learning community and the faculty member joined the weekly meetings for the duration of this investigation.

The school's curriculum is created by the teachers and includes a literacy program which uses a balanced approach informed by Teachers College Reader's and Writer's Project (see Teacher's College, Columbia University, 2014). In the first-grade classrooms the teachers use different texts for different purposes, including leveled texts for independent reading ("just right texts" or "me books") and high-interest, above level texts to read aloud to children and to model reading skills ("mentor texts" or "we books"). As part of the literacy program, teachers assigned students nightly independent reading practice with leveled books from the school's leveled library. Students were given new books each week that aligned to their assessed reading level and were told to practice reading the texts at home. Although not explicitly assigned as homework, teachers had stressed to families the importance of regularly reading with children at a back-to-school event. Teachers were not aware of how frequently shared reading was happening in children's homes, nor of the texts adults were reading with children if they were.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

During the first-grade team's weekly meetings, teachers and the university faculty member discussed differences between the different text types in use in their reading program and wondered about families' familiarity with different text purposes. Seeking to better understand families' shared reading practices and wanting to assess their own homework assignment methods, the teachers, in collaboration with the university professor developed the "*Family at Home Literacy Questionnaire*" to distribute to families. Of interest was the frequency with which families read to and with their children, the types of books selected for shared reading, and the factors influencing families' at-home reading practices including shared reading and homework help. Teachers hoped that results of the questionnaire would give the team insight into what parents were doing at home and why they were doing it, so that they could shape homework assignments to help parents support children's literacy growth.

The questionnaire asked twelve closed-ended, multiple-choice questions and five open-ended questions. Paper copies of the questionnaires were sent home with all first graders. The questionnaire was distributed twice, to two cohorts of families (120 families), once in the 2014 school year with a response rate of 65% of (n=39), and once in the 2015 school year to a second set of families with a response rate of 52% (n=31). Hence a total of 70 families responded to the questionnaire.

Responses from the "*Family at Home Literacy Questionnaire*" were collapsed across subsets of families and summarized according to themes including read aloud frequency, text types used for shared reading, and factors influencing families' literacy decision making. Results were further analyzed for differences based on family income measured by children's free or reduced lunch eligibility status.

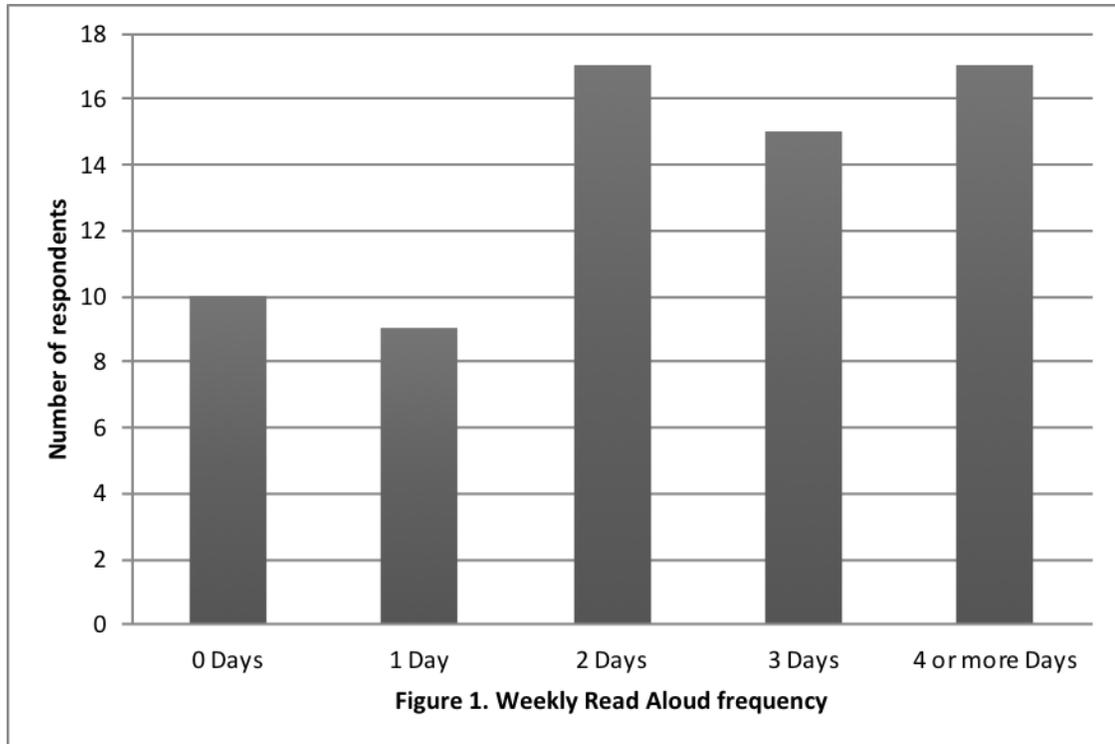
## **Results**

*Reading aloud to children.* Several items on the questionnaire asked family respondents to report their read aloud frequency. Families were asked:

I read aloud to my first grader using a book above his or her reading level:

- a. 0 days a week
- b. 1 day a week
- c. 2 days a week
- d. 3 days a week
- e. 4 or more days a week

Responses to these items on the questionnaire suggest that first graders' families infrequently read aloud to their children. Results, presented in Figure 1, show that fewer than half of the respondents read aloud to their first graders more than twice per week, and more than one fourth of families read to their children only once per week or not at all. When examined by family income level, the average frequency was just over twice per week, regardless of lunch-eligibility status.



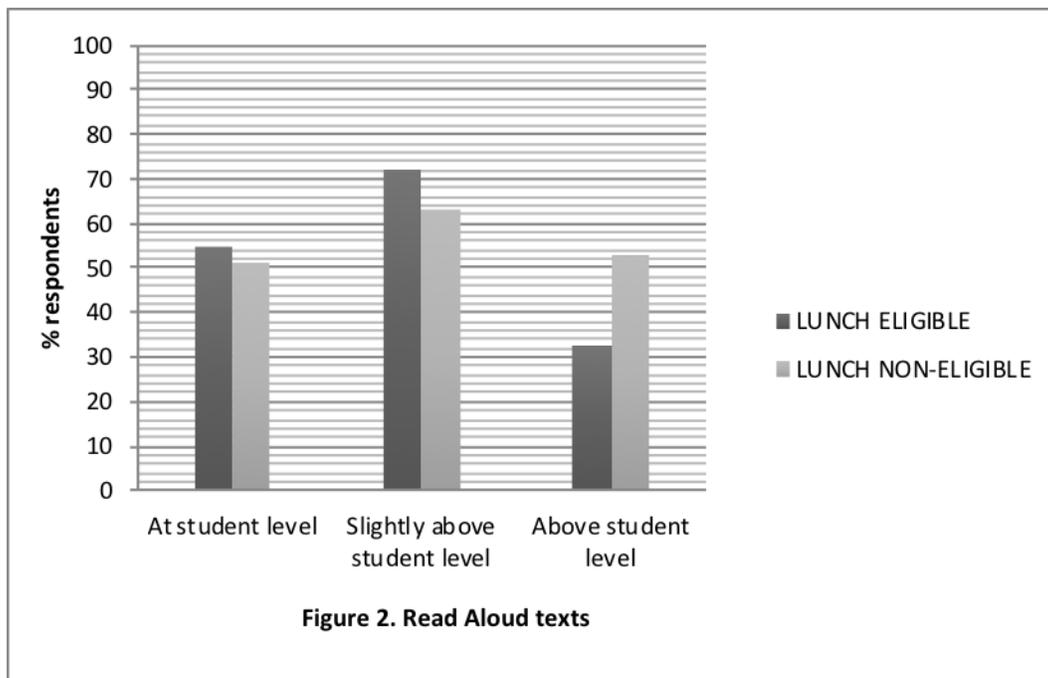
*Read aloud text types.* A few questions asked respondents to identify the texts they selected to read aloud for their first graders. The following questions were asked:

The books that I read aloud to my first grader most often are: (Choose all options that apply.)

- a. At his or her reading level (From the homework bag)
- b. Slightly above his or her independent reading level (If my child is assigned level E books, then I read level H or above or high interest books from the homework bag)
- c. Above his or her independent reading level (I tend to read chapter books or non-picture books aloud to my child)

Results, disaggregated by family income level, are reported in Figure 2. Most respondents chose more than one option, with the highest number reporting that they read books just above the student's level. Families whose children were not eligible for free lunch reported reading above

children’s level more frequently than did those whose children were eligible for free lunch. About half of the respondents indicated they read to children from books at the child’s level, regardless of income level. This finding shows that although most families were reading appropriately difficult, high interest texts intended to facilitate literacy growth, many were reading texts that children could and should be reading independently.



*Read aloud text sources.* Next, teachers wanted to learn where families found texts that they read to their first grader. Families were asked:

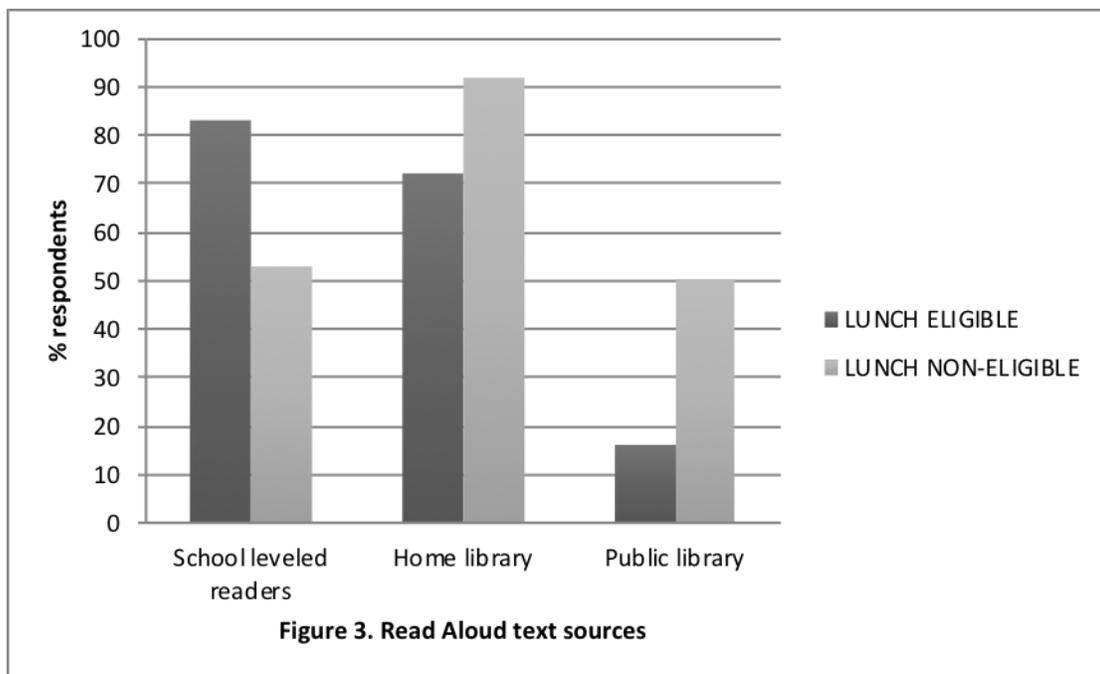
When choosing a book to read aloud to my child, we mostly:

**Choose ALL that apply:**

- a. Read the leveled book provided by school
- b. Read the high-interest book provided by school
- c. Read the “From Our Home to Your Home” book
- d. Read online books on these websites:

- e. Read books from our home library
- f. Read books from the public library
- g. Read a book we borrowed or received from a friend or family member

As Figure 3 shows, most respondents, regardless of income level, were likely to use books from their own collection. However, families eligible for lunch were more likely to use leveled readers sent home with their child, whereas families not eligible for lunch reported visiting the public library more often.



*Families' literacy decision making.* Teachers wanted to learn about which sources of information were most influential in families' decision making about how and what to read with their children. An item on the questionnaire asked parents:

I assist my first grader with his/ her homework and reading...

**Choose ONE response – the most influential.**

- a. The way my family did with me

- b. The way that my friends work with their children
- c. Based on recommendations from teachers
- d. Based on what I have read/learned about how children develop these skills

If you chose “based on what I have read/learned about how children develop these skills” Please share a recommended website or book that you used.

Almost half of respondents, 43%, reported using personal research to inform their home-based literacy practices. Teachers did have an influence on families’ literacy role construction, with 28% of parents reporting that they used teachers’ recommendations when reading with their children. Less than one third of respondents reported either using approaches they recalled being used with them as children (26%) or relying on friends’ practices (3%). This finding highlights how significantly personal research shapes families’ at home literacy practices.

Results on this item were further analyzed by families’ reports on the types of texts they generally read to their children. Of interest was the relationship between information sources relied on to inform home literacy practices, and the text types identified as choice texts to read aloud to children. Surprisingly, families who reported using personal research to inform their at-home literacy practices were more likely to read aloud the lower level texts intended for children’s independent reading. Of the 38 families that reported reading leveled texts to their first graders, 45% reported relying on personal research to understand how children develop literacy skills, but only 23% of respondents reported using teachers’ recommendations.

## **Discussion**

This study was intended to uncover families' at-home reading practices in order to inform first grade teachers' homework assignments. Families were administered questionnaires asking about the frequency of, and text-types used for, shared reading with their children. They were also asked to indicate how their at-home reading practices were informed. Results highlight a dissonance between teachers' intended assigned literacy activities and the actual at-home practices occurring. Family respondents reported not only spending less time reading aloud to their children than anticipated by the teachers, but also selecting read aloud texts that were meant for their children's independent practice. Family members did not seem to have an understanding of "We Books", or appropriate texts for reading aloud to children. Surprisingly, families reported that their own personal research informed their at-home literacy practices more often than recommendations from the teacher.

### **Responses on Questionnaire Inform Teachers' Practices**

**Reading to children at home.** The questionnaire findings enhanced the current teachers' knowledge of families' shared reading practices and consequently provided them with important information. Unlike previous research highlighting socio-economic disparities in families' reading frequency and access to home libraries (i.e. Anderson et al., 2010; Raikes et al., 2006) responses on the questionnaire indicate that at this school, first graders' families' frequency of reading to children was similar across income levels, as was reported presence of books in the home. This finding counters that of Anderson et al. (2010) whose study associated reading to children with Caucasian, middle-class families. The majority (53%) of the respondents in this study, regardless of socio-economic status, stated that they read to children just over twice per week. The remaining 47% read to their children more than three times a week. This finding

was not unanticipated, as previous research has indicated that parents read to their children less as they begin school (Scholastic Inc., 2014). However, it was concerning to teachers since frequent reading to children from books above their level by teachers (Anderson, et al., 1985; Anderson, et al., 2010) and parents (Sénéchal & LeFevre, 2002; Trelease, 2013) is considered to be an important facilitator of literacy skills.

The infrequency of shared reading could be due to families' limited time: Several families reported difficulty with finding time to read together (Corno & Xu, 2004). Teachers questioned whether their focus on assigning children independent reading homework took time away from opportunities for adults to read to them. A second factor appears to be access to quality book collections. While all families reported sharing books they had at home, families with higher incomes reported using the public library more frequently than families with lower incomes. Other researchers (i.e. Neuman, & Celano, 2001) have implicated unequal access as a reason that families from lower incomes are less likely to use public libraries. In the current study, students at the school come from all over the economically diverse city; well-stocked, public libraries are present in some, but not other neighborhoods.

**Text-purpose confusion.** Of interest in this study was the type of books families read with their children. The teachers in the current study adhere to the Readers' and Writers' workshop model of instruction (see Teacher's College, Columbia University, 2014), which emphasizes the use of different texts for different purposes. Teachers read aloud to children from high-interest books to demonstrate a specific reading strategy or skill (Cheatham et al., 2014), and then children practice application of skills to texts (leveled readers) that are at their own independent reading level (Mesmer, 2008). The leader of the first-grade team, who also co-

taught an undergraduate literacy class at the university, had anticipated that parents might not immediately distinguish between high-interest, linguistically rich “we books” and simple “me books” with controlled vocabulary appropriate for children’s independent practice. Half of the respondents reported reading books to their children at their child’s independent reading level. In the current study, many families reported reading to their first graders from leveled texts, sent home for independent reading by children almost as frequently as high interest-books. The level-readers, meant to be read independently by the first graders, were being read by the parents. These “text-confusion” findings support the notion that families tend to view reading as a bottom up process, prioritizing foundation skills over constructivist, whole language approaches (Evans et al., 2004). Accordingly, families’ misunderstanding could impact how they read books to children and the particular elements they emphasize (Beck & McKeown, 2001; Anderson et al., 2010). This type of text-confusion may have a negative effect on children (Dumont et al., 2012), or at least not be as supportive of literacy development as home based shared reading has been found to be (Sénéchal & LeFevre, 2002).

### **Rethinking homework.**

The respondents reported that personal research informed the majority of their literacy practices. However, many also reported using literacy practices, such as reading leveled readers to their child, that do not align with best practices or research. Therefore, the teachers identified a need to be more explicit with the parents. Following analysis of the questionnaire results, the first-grade team and university faculty member came together to discuss the findings. Prior research has suggested that the more teachers know about families’ needs, the more likely they are to tailor homework materials to help ensure children’s success (Brock et al., 2007). In many households, afterschool time is limited. With this in mind, teachers should develop at-home

activities that are not too burdensome (Corno & Xu, 2004). Further, for home-based literacy assignments to be beneficial, parents must be given practical tools and ideas to help their children (Padak & Rasinski, 2006) because facilitating children's text reading is a commonly assigned homework activity (Brock, Lapp, Flood, Fischer, & Han, 2007). Despite its intent homework can reinforce a mismatch of expectations between school and home (Torres & Hurtado-Vivas, 2011) and result in families' misunderstandings, leading to the use of non-research-based methods, which take up time and confuse children. Teachers need to enhance their understanding of their students' home lives to ensure that there is both time and support for homework (Mapp, 2003; Pomerantz et al., 2007). Clear directions, practical materials, and the "right" type of homework assignments are needed to ensure that opportunities to enhance literacy practices are maximized.

Teachers and the faculty member decided to revisit the current homework practices to find ways to support families as they worked with children at home. They brainstormed solutions to the issues that were raised by responses on the questionnaire and decided to label texts "me" books (independent leveled readers or "just right" texts e.g. Mesmer, 2008) and "we" books (high-interest books to read aloud (e.g. Cheatham et al., 2014; Ciecierski & Bintz, 2015) by physically labeling the books with different stickers to make the distinction clear for families. Additionally, the first-grade teachers decided to rotate their assignments so that some nights, children would read independently, or out loud to their parents from leveled "me" books to enhance their own word identification and fluency skills. On other nights, parents could read to children from the high-interest "we" books, in order to promote comprehension strategies, enhance vocabulary acquisition, and model fluency for readers (Beck & McKeown, 2001; Santoro et al., 2008; Harvey & Goudvis, 2007; Lane & Wright, 2007; Morrow & Gambrell,

2002). Additionally, the teachers developed a high-interest lending library entitled “From Our Home to Your Home” to encourage families to read and discuss high-interest books together. Books were paired with games and activities to encourage families to promote reading comprehension strategies, and these books were assigned on several nights per week.

Like any partnership, teachers and families should actively listen and work together collaboratively to ensure that students are best served and *mis*understandings avoided. In particular, teachers should examine the impact of their homework assignments and redesign assignments that may conflict with families’ at-home literacy practices or result in families’ confusion or inappropriate application. Similarly, further research should identify the type and quality of resources currently used by families to better assist teachers’ knowledge base of families’ literacy knowledge. Moreover, family-school partnerships should include all stakeholders in their development and execution. Teachers must play a vital role in parental literacy role construction and likewise, avenues must be established to enhance families influence on teacher literacy role construction

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