

# Family, Child, and Teacher Perceptions of African American Adult Assistance to Young Readers

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## Abstract

This study investigated the perceptions of African American adult family members, their children, and teachers regarding how family members viewed their roles in assisting their elementary-aged children to become better readers. The study compared each of the subgroups' perceptions respectively regarding: (a) the child's reading level; (b) family reading practice; and (c) the perceived barriers and opportunities in families' decisions to help the child become a better reader. Survey questionnaires and interviews were used to collect data from each subgroup. Responses obtained from the surveys and interviews were compared to determine whether or not respondents had a shared understanding of what families believed and practiced. Findings indicated a mismatch among a majority of the respondents, suggesting a lack of shared understanding. However, in those instances where all three respondents agreed on a variable (e.g., reading to or with a child regularly), children were scored as reading above or at the class average. These shared perspectives provided frameworks for increasing mutually shared views regarding ways to assist a child to become a better reader. Differences in beliefs reflected processes unique to the African American adult family member, the child, and the teacher respectively, as well as pointing out conflicts in home and school relations. Several factors which could account for disagreement among the respondents were explored.

**Key Words:** African American adult family member, elementary students, elementary teachers, perception, literacy/reading practices, shared understanding

## Introduction

During the last several years, the debate over how to find more appropriate ways to facilitate family-school literacy connections has continued to intensify. This debate has increased our awareness about the function and the overall importance of literacy, as well as the role the family plays in a child's literacy development. Even though the child's formal education takes place within the school, the family and other proximal variables can, and often do, influence the learning process (Ryan & Adams, 1995; Serpell, Baker, & Sonnenschein, 2005). According to Serpell et al., sharing common goals does not necessarily mean that families and teachers will hold the same beliefs or perceptions about how to accomplish these goals. A lack of shared beliefs has resulted in, and indeed requires, a continued effort to build mutual trust and understanding among these subgroups concerning family reading practices. Snow et al. (1991) discuss the disagreement regarding literacy practices and the family's role in a child's literacy development relative to the child's poor performance or failure in school. These authors view such disagreements as stemming from two serious, opposing views: one considers it a barrier if most or all of the family members lack school-like literacy, while the other considers the school as the main cause of such misunderstanding. Those who look to the home as the cause of poor literacy skills tend to focus primarily on low levels of parental literacy education, marital and/or financial instability, a paucity of reading materials, or a lack of parental aspiration. Those who look to the school as the main cause point to such factors as limited school resources, inadequate teacher preparation, low expectations for student achievement, and a deficiency in discourse patterns (i.e., communication exchanges between home and school).

The persistent debate over these views demonstrates a continuing lack of consensus on the best way to connect home reading practices with classroom instruction. In order to further explore the home and school literacy connection and its role in a child's reading development, the present exploratory study compared the perceptions of African American adult family members, their child, and the child's teacher regarding: (a) the child's reading level, (b) family reading practices, and (c) the perceived barriers to or opportunities for a family's decision to assist a child to become a better reader.

Diamond, Randolph, and Spillane's (2004) study of teachers' expectations found that teachers and other school personnel generally perceived African American students as deficient and those who did well as the exception to the rule, focusing on non-cognitive attributes such as being disrespectful, lacking discipline, and being anti-social. Conversely, instances where European American students performed poorly were generally perceived as an exception

to the norm. Perceptions such as these limit teachers' instructional practices. Similarly, on the part of the African American families, prior experiences of discrimination combined with lower income and educational level likely reduce a minority parent's expectations of their children's success. Other researchers (Farka, 1996; Farka, Robert, Sheeben, & Yuan, 1990) also found teacher perceptions regarding the academic aptitude of lower-income African American students was lower than teachers' perceptions of academic capacity for middle- and upper-income American students of European origin.

Literature (e.g., Burgess, Hecht, & Lonigan, 2002) also suggests that literacy development depends greatly on the availability of resources, parental participation in reading activities, the extent to which parents model literacy (i.e., parent reading), a parent's efforts to directly engage his or her children in reading activities, and the extent to which reading is a shared activity in the home. However, many authors fail to discuss the nature of American society and its complex cultural issues, including family beliefs and teacher expectations, and discrepancies that might influence a child's reading development either positively or negatively. Failure to recognize these fundamental issues may result in misconceptions among individuals in home and school settings.

### **Importance of Family Reading Practices**

Hansen's (1969) study of 48 fourth graders and their parents reported that a significant correlation exists between reading activities in the home and a child's independent reading at school. Similarly, Neuman's (1986) study of fifth graders and their parents revealed a positive correlation between student reading attitude and parental influence. Sonnenschein and Schmidt's (2000) review of studies on the home-school literacy connection expressed that the involvement of siblings and other family members is critical to the child's literacy development. More importantly, family members were essential in terms of: (a) modeling learning for the child; (b) introducing functional literacy to children; (c) providing a vital source of information to teachers concerning the range of activities and relevant experience the child engaged in at home; and (d) helping educators to recognize the myriad factors outside the home that can affect a child's literacy development. Similarly, Vygotsky (1979) stated that families create literacy situations naturally, such as during dinner table conversations and through interactive bedtime story rituals that allow children to experience literacy in an active way. Weigel, Martin, and Bennett (2005) also noted that a child's reading often does not occur in isolation. Rather, it takes place within a rich context of the direct or indirect influence of the home and the school.

Even federal legislators have recognized the importance of family literacy, and legislation providing financial assistance to literacy initiatives has proven to

be the primary source of support for family literacy programs throughout the United States (Morrow, Tracy, & Maxwell, 1995). State and local initiatives for child reading/literacy have also increased public awareness about the role the family can play in a child's literacy development.

Home-school literacy partnerships have been developed through what Swap (1993) calls a Home-to-School Transmission Approach aimed at training families to be involved in a child's education in a manner prescribed by the school. However, Swap prefers a partnership model that allows families to share their expectations, plans, and decision-making with the schools prior to ultimate implementation of any plan in particular. Similarly, Barge and Loge's (2003) study of three middle schools investigated parental involvement and communication activities between parents and school. Their findings identified two types of discourse essential to a strong home-school relationship: (a) one based on partnership discourse that values family voices, and (b) the other based on information transmission discourse, which is similar to Swap's Home-to-School Transmission Approach. These researchers have anticipated potential conflicts that could arise in the event that the school and the home do not possess common goals for the child's education. Lightfoot (1978) concurred, acknowledging that a lack of consensus between families and teachers may lead to misunderstandings, even when teachers are making a concerted effort to invite families to participate in school activities.

### **The Ecology of Family-School Reading Practice Connections**

Bronfenbrenner (1979) attested to the importance of the interplay among four spheres of the child's ecological environment and discusses how these can directly or indirectly facilitate or detract from a child's development. Although the present study focuses on African American homes and school settings, Bronfenbrenner viewed the child's immediate environment more extensively, taking into consideration not only the home, but also neighbors and peers. Beyond this, he considered other venues a little further removed, such as libraries, churches, and places of employment. He contended that these are as important as the school. The child's literacy growth involves an ongoing relationship between these various spheres, and supportive links must be established between all such environments. McNaughton (1995), who applied Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological theory to the development of literacy skills in school-age children, noted that the development of literacy takes place both within the home and school contexts. Certainly, the literacy activities in which children engage can be unique to each of these environments. Through carefully nurtured interactions, such activities can be mutually supportive.

The discontinuities between home and school environments may ultimately deny families and teachers opportunities for interaction (Goldenberg et al.,

2001; Sonnenschein & Schmidt, 2000). Teachers' have reported what they considered to be a lack of parental interest and support to be the most frequently occurring educational problem (Elam & Gallup, 1988). Elam and Gallup considered the information flow from the teacher to the families as perhaps the most vital communication, but one that presents only half the story pertaining to what happens in the school. A Chicago study of low-income African American sixth and eighth grade students found that while a majority of parents (61%) did not help with school activities, the majority of students (86%) reported that their parents did help them almost three times a week. Parents reported having unsuccessful or negative school experiences themselves and, consequently, they did not view the school as a source of hope for their children's future success and welfare (Menacker, Hurwitz, & Weldon, 1988).

Chavkin and Williams' (1993) cross-ethnic survey of elementary schools, surveying general views of African American and Hispanic American families regarding teachers, indicated that 95% of these families agreed to help their children with homework, and 97% agreed to cooperate with their children's teachers. Teachers and parents often tend to have reciprocally negative attitudes toward one another or have assumed that the other shares their views on a child's learning aptitude and performance. Stallworth and Williams (1982) reported similar findings showing that parents representative of a wide variety of economic backgrounds, including the disadvantaged, had positive self-perceptions and were willing to do more to work with the schools. However, the teachers surveyed in this same study tended to judge a majority of these parents as doing little to actually help their children. The study does not indicate whether or not the families that intended to help teachers were eventually true to their word, and if not, what impediments prevented them from doing so.

In another survey of elementary school teachers and parents, Epstein (1983) reported a low level of interaction between parents and teachers, with teachers making few overtures toward parents and rarely requesting their help in conducting learning-related activities in the home. Nearly two-thirds (60%) of the parents had never participated in conferences with the teacher during the school year; roughly 60% of parents reported that they had never even talked with the teacher by telephone. However, teachers indicated that they had indeed communicated with parents concerning their children's reading program at school, despite contentions that such exchanges rarely occurred.

Greenberg, Reese, and Gallimore (1992) noted incongruence regarding approaches to reading practices at school as opposed to those practiced at home. Delpit (1986) posited that families may not be familiar or aware of the reading approaches practiced at their child's school, due primarily to changes since their own childhood years. According to McCarthy (1997), making a home-school

connection is not enough. It is vital for teachers to understand the complexity of a student's life, especially students whose backgrounds are dramatically different from the teachers' own. These previous research studies serve as a benchmark for investigating the differences and similarities in the perceptions of individual adult family members, children, and their teachers regarding a child's reading development.

## **Study Rationale**

Previous research on the home-school literacy connection has primarily focused on emergent literacy (Anderson & Stoke, 1984; Leichter, 1984; Stewart, 1995; Sulzby & Teale, 1991), particularly among ethnic groups other than African American, variables other than reading, or single environment scenarios (i.e., either the home or the school, separately), or may not have considered the relationships between the three subgroups in terms of their composite perceptions. Such studies may have underestimated the importance of a shared understanding between the home (the adult family member, the child) and school (the teacher, the child). The present study, which focuses on African American families and third and fourth grade children, sought to extend the previous research on the home-school reading literacy connection by examining the different perceptions of the African American adult family member, the child, and the teacher with the purpose of understanding (a) the perceptions of the three subgroups regarding how each adult family member considers his or her role in a child's reading development and, subsequently, what the family did or did not do to assist the child in reading, and (b) each subgroups' perceptions of opportunities for or barriers to a family's decision to assist the child in his or her reading efforts. Focusing on children in grades three and four is particularly relevant because, at these age levels, essential reading instruction allows children to apply reading skills in conjunction with independent reading and home literacy practices.

## **Methods**

### **Population Sample and Procedures**

Participants for this study included 3rd and 4th grade children at an elementary school in a mid-sized city in Iowa, their adult family members, and their corresponding teachers. The total student population at the PreK-5 research site was 426, comprised of 2 Asians, 26 Hispanics, 1 Native American, 256 European American, and 141 African American children. The total minority enrollment was 39.9%, as indicated in school district data (Community

Schools Annual Report, 2003-2004). Among the 141 African Americans, the sampling frame consisted of 41 children from grades three and four, their family members (41), and associated teachers (7). Four of the seven teachers taught grade three, while the remaining three teachers taught grade four; six teachers were European American, and one was African American. The 41 children were unevenly distributed across the seven third and fourth grade classes. Among the 41 students, 18 were boys and 23 were girls. Of these students, 87% received free and reduced lunch. Consent letters were mailed to all participating families (41), their children (41), and teachers (7) respectively, asking them to take part in the study. Family members were defined according to criteria established by Edwards, Pleasant, and Franklin (1999) as all members of a household who reside under one roof and two or more people who reside together and who share similar goals and commitments. In this study, only the primary caregiver for each child was selected.

The demographic information for participants indicates a majority (88.4%) of adult family member respondents were female ( $n=24$ ) and 11.4% ( $n=3$ ) were male. Of family members, 48.2% ( $n=13$ ) were between the age of 26 to 35; 37.0% ( $n=10$ ) were between the age of 36 to 45. The remaining 14.8% ( $n=4$ ) were aged 46 years and above. The majority of those identified as a child primary caregiver were 88.4% ( $n=24$ ) mothers, with 2 responding (7.4%) fathers, 1 grandfather (3.7%), and one also self-identified as other (3.7%).

Adult family members' education level information indicated that 59.0% ( $n=16$ ) of the family members had less than a junior college diploma, 33.3% ( $n=9$ ) had a junior college diploma, and 7.4% ( $n=2$ ) had college or university degrees. Regarding job status, 74.1% ( $n=20$ ) were employed outside of the home, and 25.9% ( $n=7$ ) did not work outside the home. Of those who worked outside the home, 75% ( $n=15$ ) of the family members worked full-time, and 25% ( $n=12$ ) worked part-time.

## **Instrument and Data Collection Procedures**

### *Survey*

A survey was administered as a means of collecting data, using questions modified from those employed in studies of parents, teachers, and students conducted by Stewart (1995), Dauber and Epstein (1993), and Shields, Gordon, and Dupree (1983). The survey questionnaire included categorical (Yes/No) semi-structures and multiple choice questions. Questionnaires were sent to all 89 study participants. The 41 questionnaires for adult family members were sent to the family's home, and the 41 children's and 7 teachers' questionnaires were delivered to the school. The initial survey from the 41 adult family members yielded 19 responses. A follow-up phone call was made to all family

participants to remind them to return the surveys. Family members who failed to return survey responses after the follow-up phone call were called again and asked if the researcher could visit them in their homes in order to complete the survey. This process increased the number of survey respondents from 19 to 27 adult family members. Family members who did not respond to either the telephone follow-ups or visitation by a researcher were categorically dropped from the study, along with those children whose family members did not return the surveys. All 27 children whose family members completed surveys and all 7 teachers were surveyed at the school. This resulted in a final sample size of 27 (66%) family members, 27 (66%) children, and 7 (100%) teachers. Children were unevenly distributed across the two grades. Pseudonyms are used in place of all the names of the adult family members, the children, and the teachers in order to ensure confidentiality. Four teachers (Mrs. Bernard, Mrs. Simpson, Mrs. Alexander, Mrs. Edward) taught grade three, and three teachers (Mrs. Baker, Mrs. Hartman, Mr. Lawrence) taught grade four.

### *Interviews*

Roughly two months after the initial survey, a follow-up procedure was conducted, sampling and interviewing a small number of the participants (6 families, 6 children, 6 teachers) from the original surveyed population. This sampling technique was employed specifically for the purpose of gleaning additional information to add to survey findings (McMillan & Wergin, 2002).

Originally, 7 children and 1 adult family member associated with each child (i.e., 7 in all) were randomly selected. The child and his or her adult family member were then matched with the corresponding teacher. They were next contacted for face-to-face interviews in order to validate the information obtained from responses to the survey. However, one family eventually chose to discontinue its participation due to scheduling and work conflicts. This meant that one child and his or her teacher also had to be omitted from the final results. Therefore, 18 participants, 6 from each subgroup, were ultimately confirmed for interviews. Teacher and child interviews were conducted on school premises, while family members were consulted in their homes.

### **Data Analysis**

Iowa Test of Basic Skills (ITBS) reading score was utilized for a child's reading score record. Data were analyzed following two main categories of variables: (1) the perceived child's reading level, and (2) the family's reading practices. The family reading practice variables were categorized into five domains, whether or not the family: (a) provided reading materials, (b) shared reading concern, (c) had regular reading time for the child, (d) another family member read to child, and/or (e) attended Every Child Reads parent education sessions (see

Table 1). In addition, an independent analysis provided additional information from interview responses that mainly focused on the perceived barriers to and opportunities for a family’s decision to assist the child to become a better reader and reading strategies families used as they read to or with the child.

The analysis employed used analytic strategies consisting of frequencies of responses (yes/no), percentages, and chi square using the Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) Version 11.0. At times, an alternative analysis was performed to manually match across survey and interview responses from each adult family member, child, and corresponding teacher to ascertain whether or not there was evidence of a shared understanding between these individuals.

Table1. Perception Variables and Participants’ Response Options

Variable Name	Responses
Perceived Child Reading Level (PCRL)	1=Classmates read better than child
	2=Child reads as well as classmates
	3=Child reads better than classmates.
ITBS Reading Scores	1 = 00-40
	2 = 41-70
	3 = 71-100
<b>Family Reading Practice Variables</b>	<b>Responses</b>
Provided Reading Materials (FPRM)	<input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> Yes
Shared Reading Concern (FSRC)	<input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> Yes
Had Regular Reading Time at Home (RRTH)	<input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> Yes
Family or Other Family Members Read to Child (OFMRC)	<input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> Yes
Family Attended Every Child Reads (FECR)	<input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> Yes
<b>Family Status Variable</b>	<b>Responses</b>
Family Work Status (FWS)	1=Doesn’t Work (DW)
	2=Work Part Time (WP-T)
	3=Work Full Time (WF-T)
Family Educational Level (EL)	1=High School or Below
	2=Junior College or Above
	3=University Level

## Results

The results section presents the general descriptive analysis which provided general perceptions of each of the subgroups toward the adult family member’s

reading practices. This is followed by an alternative analysis that manually matched or compared the survey and the interview responses obtained from the three subgroups. Each of the observed patterns was subsequently anchored to either the Perceived Child’s Reading Level (PCRL) or the ITBS reading score. Information gathered from surveyed and interviewed participants are presented for each of the three research questions.

**Research Question 1: How do perceptions compare among the family, child, and teacher regarding the child’s reading level?**

**Perceived Child’s Reading Level by Family, Child, and Teacher and ITBS Scores**

*General Descriptive Analysis*

Table 2. Perceptions of Child’s Reading Level (n=77)

Respondent	PCRL	n	%	ITBS Score %
Family	Middle**	17	63.0	25.9
Child	Middle**	20	74.1	25.9
Teacher	Low*	14	51.6	63.0
Family	Low*	9	33.3	63.0
Child	Low*	4	14.8	63.0
Teacher	Middle**	7	25.9	25.9
Family	High***	1	3.7	11.1
Child	High***	3	11.1	11.1
Teacher	High***	6	22.2	11.1

\*Most classmates read better than the child

\*\*Child reads as well as his/her classmates

\*\*\*Child reads better than most classmates

As shown in Table 2, a majority of the adult family members (63%; n=17) and children (74.1%; n=20) reported the child as reading as well as her/his classmates, while the teachers reported that 51.9% (n=14) of the children were reading below the levels of their classmates. ITBS reading scores indicated only 25.9% (n=7) read at the class average. As it turns out, the teachers’ perceptions were less disparate vis-à-vis the ITBS scores than were those of the children and the adult family members. Another 33.3% (n=9) of the adult family members and 14.8% (n=4) of the children reported that the child was reading below his or her classmates, while teachers reported that only 25.9% (n=7) of the children were reading at the class average. All three groups (family, child, and

teacher) perceived the majority of children as reading worse than their classmates. In this instance, 3.7% ( $n=1$ ) of adult family members and 11.1% ( $n=3$ ) of children perceived the child as reading better than his/her classmates, compared to teachers who reported 22.2% ( $n=6$ ) of children as reading better than their classmates. The analysis of frequency indicates that all respondents felt only a few children were reading above or at the level of their classmates. A discrepancy also was clearly noted in those instances in which children were perceived as reading below or at the class average. While a majority of children and their corresponding family members perceived the child as reading at the class average, teachers reported that a majority of the children (51.9%;  $n=14$ ) were reading below the level of their classmates. The ITBS scores indicated 63.0% of the children were reading at a level below their classmates.

### Perceived Child's Reading Level by Family, Child, and Teacher

#### *Specific Descriptive Analysis*

Although the discrepancies regarding the subgroups shared understanding was noted in the previous analysis of percentages and frequencies, an alternative descriptive analysis was performed to manually match the adult family member, the corresponding child, and the associated teacher to determine the indices of agreement or disagreement regarding the child's reading level. To achieve this process, perceived scores on the child's reading level were tracked back to determine which adult family member, their child, and the associated teacher matched in terms of their perceptions of the child in question.

Matching the adult family member's responses to those of the child and the teacher yielded some noticeable patterns. The patterns were divided into the following groups: those who expressed total agreement, partial agreement, or total disagreement. Total agreement referred to those instances in which the individuals in the subgroups were all in agreement as to the child's perceived reading level. In the partial agreement group, the adult family member and the child were in agreement, but the teacher was not, or the adult family member and the teacher were in agreement, but the child was not, or the child and the teacher were in agreement, but the adult family member was not. For the total disagreement group, the adult family member, the child, and the teacher were all in disagreement. (Note: A grid showing responses for each category by child is available by request from the author.)

In the first category, the adult family member, the child, and the corresponding teacher agreed on the child's reading level—this occurred only 4 times out of 27. Of the 4 potential areas of agreement on PCRL, 3 of the subgroups actually scored the child as reading at the level higher than his or her classmates, while 1 scored the child as reading lower.

The second category refers to the 12 instances in which the adult family member and the child were in agreement, but the teacher was not. In these 12 areas, 6 teachers scored the child lower, while 6 teachers scored the child at a higher reading level. Every time the teacher scored the child higher, the family scored the child as reading at the average. None of the children in this particular grouping self-scored himself/herself as reading better than everybody else.

In the third category, 4 adult family members and 4 teachers agreed regarding the child's reading level, but the child did not agree. Within these 4 instances, 3 family members and teachers scored the child lower while the 3 children self-scored themselves as reading above or at the class average. One child self-scored as reading below the class average. However, this particular child was scored by the family and the teacher as reading at the class average.

The fourth category included 4 times in which the child and the teacher agreed, but the family did not. Of these 4, 2 of the family members scored the child lower, and the other 2 scored the child higher. When the child and the teacher agreed, 3 of 4 teachers scored the child as reading at the class average.

The fifth category depicts the 3 instances where the adult family member, the child, and the teacher were in total disagreement. In this instance, two teachers scored the child as reading below the grade level; however, 2 out of the 3 children self-scored as reading above the class average, while one child self-scored as reading at the class average. One family member scored the child as reading below the class average, while the child self-scored as reading at the class average, and the teacher scored the child as reading above average.

These findings indicated the adult family members and their corresponding children agreed with one another at a greater frequency than either of them agreed with the teacher.

## **Research Question 2: How similar or different are the perceptions among the adult family member, the child, and the teacher regarding what families do to help the child read?**

The null hypothesis states: There is no significant relationship among the subgroups' perceptions of what the family did to help the child read. Conversely, the hypothesis states: There is a significant relationship among the subgroups' perceptions of what the family did to help the child read.

The results on subgroups' perceptions of family reading practice variables indicated that over one-half (55.6%;  $n=15$ ) of the adult family members and even more (68.6%;  $n=21$ ) of the children reported that the family provided reading materials, while teachers reported that slightly under one-half (48.1%;  $n=13$ ) of the adult family members provided reading materials. Fifty-one

percent ( $n=16$ ) of the family members and 55.6% ( $n=15$ ) of the children reported that the adult family members shared reading concerns with the child's teacher, while teachers reported that only 29.6% ( $n=8$ ) of the adult family members shared reading concerns with them. As for Family Had Regular Reading Time at Home (FRRT), the results showed that 37.0% ( $n=10$ ) of the family members and over two-thirds (77.8%;  $n=21$ ) of the children reported that they had regular reading time at home. Next, 60% ( $n=21$ ) of family members but only 45.7% ( $n=16$ ) of children reported that another family member read to or with the child. Nearly 54% ( $n=19$ ) of the adult family members and 62.9% ( $n=22$ ) of the children reported that the adult family member did not attend reading conferences, while teachers reported that 68% ( $n=24$ ) of the adult family members did not attend Every Child Reads parent education sessions (Table 3).

Table 3. Perceptions of Frequencies of Family Reading Practices ( $n=27$ )

Variable Response		<i>n</i>	Family (%)	<i>n</i>	Child (%)	<i>n</i>	Teacher (%)
FPRM	No	12	44.4	06	22.2	14	51.9
	Yes	15	55.4	21	68.6	13	48.1
FSRC	No	11	40.7	12	44.4	19	70.4
	Yes	16	59.3	15	55.6	08	29.6
FRRTH	No	17	63.0	06	22.2	-	-
	Yes	10	37.0	21	77.8	-	-
OFMRC	No	19	70.4	10	37.0	-	-
	Yes	08	29.6	17	63.0	-	-
FECD	No	16	59.3	18	66.7	16	59.3
	Yes	11	40.7	09	33.3	11	40.7

FPRM= Family Provided Reading Materials, FSRC= Family Shared Reading Concerns, FRRTH= Family Had Regular Reading Time for the Child at Home, OFMRC= Other Family Member Read with Child, FECD= Family Attended Every Child Reads Sessions

The results partially support the hypothesis stated above. The perceptions measured by Family Shared Reading Concerns (FSRC) were not significantly different between the family, the child, and the teachers. However, the child's perceptions measured by Family Provided Reading Materials (FPRM) and FRRT were significantly lower than the perceptions of the families and teachers ( $p<.05$ ). The teachers' perceptions measured by FSRC were significantly lower than the perceptions of the families and the children ( $p<.05$ ). Finally, the family perceptions measured by Other Family Member Read with Child (OFMRC) were significantly lower than the perceptions of the child (Table 4).

Table 4. Respondents' Perceptions Between the Subgroups

Variables	Family		Child		Teacher	
	$\chi^2$	<i>p</i>	$\chi^2$	<i>p</i>	$\chi^2$	<i>p</i>
FPRM	.333	.564	8.333	.044*	.037	.847
FSRC	.926	.336	.333	.564	4.481	.034
FRRT	1.815	.178	8.333	.004*	-	-
OFMRC	4.481	.034*	1.815	.178	-	-
FECR	.926	.336	3.00	.083	.926	.336

\*An asterisk indicates that a significant difference was found among the subgroups.

### Specific Descriptive Analysis

#### *Whether Family Provided Reading Materials at Home (FPRM)*

The second research question was asked with the purpose of determining each participant's perceptions as to whether or not the adult family members were providing the child with reading materials. Of the 27 respondents, there were 4 instances in which the adult family member, the child, and the teacher agreed that the family member provided reading materials. When all 3 parties agreed that the family provided reading materials, 3 of the 4 adult family members and 3 of 4 teachers scored the child as reading at or above the grade level, while all of the children self-scored as reading at or above the class average.

In the second category, 8 instances occurred in which the family and child agreed that the family provided reading materials, but the teacher did not. In this category the family and the child were in more agreement than the teacher on perceived reading levels, as well. In the third category, 2 instances occurred in which the teacher and the child agreed about provision of materials, but the family did not. In the fourth category, 5 instances occurred in which the child and the teacher agreed that the adult family member provided reading materials, but the family member did not.

#### *Family Shared Reading Concerns (FSRC)*

This question asked whether adult family members communicated with the child's teacher about reading problems, reading progress, or simply wanting to know more about what their child is doing in reading. Of the 27 adult family member-child-teacher groups, 5 instances occurred in which all agreed that the family shared reading concerns. Data indicated that when the family member, the child, and the teacher all agreed that the family shared reading concerns, the teacher scored the child as reading above or at the class average.

Secondly, there were 6 instances in which the family and the child agreed that the family shared reading concerns, but the teacher did not. In a single instance, the teacher disagreed with the premise that the family shared reading concerns and scored the child as reading above the class average. However, in most instances when the family and the child agreed but the teacher disagreed,

the teacher scored the child as reading below the class average. There was only one situation in which the family and the teacher agreed that reading concerns were shared but the child did not. Also, only one instance was noted in which the child and the teacher agreed, but the family member did not.

In summary, when the adult family member, the child, and the teacher agreed about the family sharing reading concerns, the teacher scored the child as reading above or at the class average. However, when the adult family member and the child agreed, but the teacher did not, the teachers tended to score the child as reading below the class average.

*Family Reading Time (FRRT) and Other Family Members Read with Child (OFMRC) at Home*

There were only 9 instances out of 27 in which the family and child agreed they had regular reading time at home. None of the children self-scored as reading below his or her classmates whenever the child and the family perceived they had regular reading time at home.

It was curious to note the responses to perceived child reading levels when the survey indicated other family members read to the child. Only 6 out of the 27 family members and their children agreed that other family members read to the child at home. In all of these instances, the child self-scored as reading at the class average within this particular category, while 4 of the 6 family members scored the child as reading below the class average. Yet every time the parent and child agreed that other family members read to the child, the teacher scored the child as reading above the average, while no family member scored the child as reading above the class average.

There were 3 instances in which the child and the adult family member agreed that there was regular reading time and other family members did read to child. Among these instances, the teacher scored the child as reading above the classmates. In 2 of these instances, the child and the family members both scored the child as reading at the class average. Yet one family member scored the child as reading below his or her classmates.

*Family Attended Every Child Reads (FECR) Parent Education Session*

There was only one instance in which all respondents agreed that the family attended an Every Child Reads parent education session. In this instance, all respondents scored the child as reading below the class average. Of the 27 groupings, there were 4 instances in which the adult family member and the child agreed about conferences, but the teacher did not. There were only 2 instances in which the family and the teacher reported attending parent education sessions but the child did not. Finally, there were 4 times in which the child and the teacher agreed about session attendance, but the family did not.

## An Independent Analysis

An independent analysis presented additional information from interviews. The interview responses were based on what was discussed during the family-teacher conferences and whether or not the teacher shared reading strategies or showed families how to read to or with their children. Frequently occurring responses regarded how the child could best be assisted in reading. Teachers were asked whether or not they shared reading strategies with parents during those Every Child Reads parent education sessions, and whether family members were using them. Each of the six participating teachers commented on one family and the corresponding student. When the teachers were asked whether they had shared any reading strategies, none of them seemed to have done so.

Mrs. Baker: No strategy.

Mrs. Bernard: I try to encourage her to read at home, just read anything.

Mrs. Simpson: The family is not open to relationship yet.

Mrs. Alexander: No.

Mrs. Herman: No.

Mr. Leonard: Not at all.

To assess the adult family member's knowledge as to whether or not he/she used reading strategies when reading with the child, the six adult family members were asked to identify things done when reading with their children (e.g., what did they do when they arrived at a word the child did not understand). Each corresponding child was also asked to share some of the things that the adult family member did when reading to or with him/her.

Five out of six adult family members and all six children indicated that they used reading strategies at home. Responses from adult family members and their corresponding children revealed that they used strategies similar to those used during classroom instruction. When coded into categories, it appeared that families used reading strategies such as phonemic awareness (Adam, 1992; Bishop, Yopp, & Yopp, 2000), support reading strategy, contextual analysis, modeling strategy (Rasinski & Padak, 2004), and reciprocal questioning (Manzo, 1969). The following are families' responses regarding what they did when reading to or with their children.

### *Support Reading Strategy/Phonemic Awareness*

Humphrey has been monitoring Rebecca's reading and providing her with assistance, support, and encouragement as she reads. At the same time, he uses a phonemic awareness strategy as he asks Rebecca to sound out the words.

Humphrey (*Family*): I explain what the word means. I make sure she understands what the word means.

Rebecca (*Child*): They try to make me figure it out...sound it out, do action.

### *Contextual Analysis/Prediction*

Ana reported that she provided Renate with challenging books and encouraged her to read by herself. In the following example, Ana is using a contextual analysis strategy in which Renate is required to use the context (pictures) to predict what the story is about. This strategy helps the reader become curious and maintain an interest in what is happening in the story.

Ana (*Family*): I try to get her some challenging books.

Renate (*Child*): I try to look at the pictures. They correct what I say.

### *Contextual Analysis/Phonemic Awareness/Repeated Reading*

Tehama uses a context strategy to enable Tatty to rely on the passages, sentence meaning, and his own experiences to puzzle out unknown words. Similarly, Tehama asks Tatty to repeat what is read. This strategy enables him to become more familiar with recurring phrases and other predictable language patterns. Thus, he is able to gain a better understanding of the story and to acquire more vocabulary.

Tehama (*Family*): I tell him to slow down and repeat the word.

Tatty (*Child*): Sometimes they grab a piece of paper, write out the word, and sometimes they rip it up and we put the pieces under the word. Then, I try to spell. Sometimes when it is hard...they don't sound it out. They tell me to go past it, and after, I go back and read it.

### *Modeling Strategy/Phonemic Awareness*

Mokena is helping her child, Herma, by modeling when she reads aloud with her. This reading strategy is important, especially for less able readers.

Mokena (*Family*): If she has problems, I will read them or use directions on the computer games. I will read those (directions). I read those all the time so that she can understand.

Herma (*Child*): They help me sound it out.

### *Phonics/Phonemic Awareness*

Nina uses a phonemic awareness reading strategy to help Queen develop an awareness of individual words in the text. She is also assisting Queen to decode and comprehend the materials they are reading.

Nina (*Family*): I tell her to slow down and just pronounce letter by letter and pronounce the word.

Queen (*Child*): No, they don't do anything. Sometimes they sound it out.

### *Reciprocal Questioning/Phonemic Awareness*

By guiding the child to ask questions, Tanya is applying reciprocal questioning, a strategy that allows the child and the teacher (in this instance, the family member) to ask questions concerning information not directly contained in the text. Subsequently, by asking the child to use a computer or a dictionary, Tanya helps Cecilia find synonyms and use the context to determine the meaning of new words.

Tanya (*Family*): I tell her to ask questions about it. If she doesn't know the meaning, she's got the computer...dictionary. If she cannot pronounce, I tell her to sound it out.

Cecilia (*Child*): They ask me questions: How did you like the book? To remember, tell us something about the book. They help me if this is really a long word.

It appears that adult family members have some knowledge of and use appropriate reading strategies. However, teachers did not know whether or not families were using a variety of reading strategies when reading to or with their children at home. The following section addresses the perceived opportunities for or barriers to adult family members assisting a young reader.

## **Research Question 3: What are the perceived opportunities for, or barriers to, adult family members' decisions to assist a child in his or her reading effort?**

### **Perceived Barriers or Opportunities**

The results in the following section were primarily based on responses from the interviews designed to determine the respondents' (family, child, and teachers) thoughts pertaining to perceived opportunities for and barriers to the family's decision to assist a child in his or her reading efforts. Respondents were asked to reflect upon the opportunities, constraints, problems, and concerns related to the reading assistance the child received at home. Interview questions asked whether the families perceived any window of opportunity to share reading concerns with the teacher and helped identify each of their respective wishes concerning what they felt families, children, or teachers could do to assist the children to become better readers. The interview questions also sought to determine how each group regarded the quantity and quality of the communication activities that already existed between home and school.

Humphrey, a pastor in a local church, shared some of his concerns regarding his child, Rebecca. He acknowledged his desire for more positive communication with his child's teacher, Mrs. Baker. As he said, "I need to hear from the teacher that my child is doing well." He also wanted to see rewards and assurances that the teacher was helping his child select different books. He further stated, "I wish I had more time. I would encourage her to read more books." However, Rebecca's teacher reported that Humphrey never shared any of these concerns with her nor had he attended any Every Child Reads parent education sessions. The teacher perceived the child to be reading below the class average, while both the family and Rebecca agreed that she was reading at the class average. Mrs. Baker reported, "I suggested books to be read at home, and I called for a meeting, but the family never showed up at school. The family is very quiet and wants the child to succeed."

Ana, a single mother, was aware of what it meant to assist her child, Renate, in reading. However, she noted, "My daughter's negative view to her teacher prevents her progress." She also remarked, "...think I should be more involved, for me it is just time. Being a single mom, I don't see that my child gets enough help." All parties agreed the child was reading below the class average. The teacher's concern was that the family never attended Every Child Reads, while the family member thought she had attended whenever there had been a session. However, the parent mistakenly thought that the only time they could contact the teacher was during the conference or session time. Most family members expressed a desire for more contact with the teacher and wanted their children to read more challenging books.

Tehama, Tatty's grandmother, felt that she helped Tatty with his reading. However, she said, "I wish I had opportunities to meet with the teacher. I have a busy schedule." Her grandchild's teacher, Mrs. Simpson, also wished that the family could attend parent education sessions. While Tehama thought Tatty read at the class average, Tatty and his teacher scored Tatty as reading below the class average. In this instance, the teacher and the family had good intentions concerning the child's reading development, but their perceptions of the child's reading level differed.

Mokena, Herma's mother, indicated her willingness to work with her child's teacher. The teacher, Mrs. Alexander, wished that she had had the opportunity to meet with the adult family member. She said, "The family is not always open to a communication relationship yet." However, Mokena had a different view about the teacher and said, "I don't think the teacher talks about positive things about my child. I wish the teacher could talk about positive things." While the family and the child perceived the child as reading at the class average, the teacher scored the child as reading below the class average.

Nina, Queen's mother, also shared her wishes and concerns regarding opportunities for family literacy practices. "I wish they could do more for the child's reading. The teacher calls me when Queen is in trouble...I wish Mrs. Hartman could spend more time with Queen, instead of calling me every time...deal with the problem and then call me. Tell me Queen is reading at this level or she is moved to this level." Mrs. Hartman was concerned about the family as well. For instance, she said, "After the first Every Child Reads session, I tried to talk to them (family members), but they did not respond to me...a couple of times I was almost cut off...I called them four times but they didn't respond." Interestingly, the adult family member, the child, and the teacher all agreed on the child's reading level by scoring Queen as reading at the class average.

Tanya, Cecilia's mother, acknowledged that reading was most important. However, she expressed her concerns about Cecilia's reluctance to read; she also regretted not having the time to attend the Every Child Reads sessions at the school. Despite the mother's regret, Mrs. Edward, Cecilia's teacher, did not have any concerns, nor did she have any complaints about the child's reading. Although both Mrs. Edward and Tanya had a positive attitude toward each other, both admitted that they had never met at any of the parent education sessions. They all agreed by scoring the child as reading at the class average.

When children were asked to share what they perceived to be opportunities for or barriers to their family's decision to assist them in reading at home, 3 out of 6 made no additional comments. However, three children wished that adult family members could help them with reading every day and buy more books for them. The children promised to work hard to attain their reading goals.

## Discussion

The consensus regarding a child's academic ability and ascertaining the overall influence of what occurs in the home environment to help the child read is still a key challenge facing educators. A variety of factors have been investigated as possible elements pertinent to meeting this challenge. This study sought to focus primarily on the African American adult family member, the child, and the teacher, with the aim of determining whether or not these respective parties had a shared understanding of the following: the child's reading level, the family's reading practice, and their relative views on opportunities for or barriers to families' decisions to assist a child in reading. The data showed patterns of agreement/disagreement. In some instances, there was pronounced disagreement between the teachers and both the family and the child, suggesting a lack of shared understanding. The causes of this disparity may be cultural issues, lack of communication, or differing expectations for a child's success,

as discussed by a number of previously cited studies, especially studies that focus on teacher and parent beliefs tied to race and social class biases impeding home-school relations (Diamond et al., 2004). The alternative analysis applied in the current study matched the individual family member, the child, and the teacher and revealed some interesting patterns that previous studies, which relied heavily on general statistical analysis of percentages and frequencies, have not explicitly acknowledged.

### **Views on a Child's Reading Level**

The data indicated that while a majority of family members and their children thought that the child was reading at the class average, their teachers perceived most of the children as reading below their classmates. In addition, when the perceptions of each subgroup were compared to the children's ITBS reading scores, the teachers' perceptions most closely matched the reading level indicated by the child's standardized reading scores. Only a few family members, children, and teachers in the present study felt that many students were reading above the class average. This was similar to Jussim, Eccles, and Madon (1996) and Pretzlik (2000) who found that teachers' expectations were closely related to the child's actual academic skills. The question remains, however, as to why there has been such a disparity between the teachers and the parent-child perceptions. Numerous reasons could be furnished as to why these varying perceptions regarding the child's reading process exist. The next several paragraphs discuss the delineation of some of the factors that could account for the variables related to the perceptions of the subgroups in this study. These can be as subtle as an unconscious bias on the teachers' part, or as overt as anxieties and stress stemming from social and economic conditions within the home. A myriad of factors can influence a teacher's or a family member's perception of a child's reading ability and a child's self-perceptions (including what the parent or the teacher thinks about that child). According to Goldenberg et al. (2001), when families and teachers are from different ethnicities, they are likely to have different expectations and beliefs regarding the child's academic performance, which may lead to a home and school disconnect.

In the current sample, several reasons for the variability of perceptions may have occurred. One possibility is that the child's reading progress may not have been consistently communicated to families. As a result, family members' responses were not supported by updated data from students' school records, or families may not have taken the time to inquire about the child's reading progress. Results from race comparison studies have typically shown European American teachers as having low expectation for African American students' academic performance (Graham, 1992). This present study does not rule out

these lines of thinking on the part of the teachers. Children's self-perception regarding their reading level clearly demonstrated a closer affinity to that of the associated adult family member, while typically being quite disparate from that of the teacher. This evidence echoed Guthrie and Greaney's (1991) argument that families are powerful socializers of children's self-perceptions. Most likely what was missing was uniformity of experience between families and teachers regarding the child's reading ability which led to differing perceptions.

An alternative analysis that matched the individual family member, the child, and the corresponding teacher provided patterns that warrant further interpretations. Pattern one occurred when the family, the child, and the teacher all agreed on the child's reading level. In this instance, the child was unanimously perceived as reading either above or at the class average. The second pattern occurred when the teacher and the family member agreed, but the child did not. In this pattern, three-fourths of the families scored the child as reading below the class average, while three-fourths of the children self-scored as reading above or at the class average. When a child who self-scored as reading at the class average was asked why she thought she was a better reader, she said, "I read to my friend and I sometimes help them to read." A third pattern is when one child self-scored as reading below the class average, while the teacher and the family scored the child as reading above the class average. Here there is a possibility of low-self esteem on the part of the child. In most instances, when the family and the child agreed, but the teacher did not, the child was most often scored as reading below the classmates.

These patterns could lead us to a number of possible conclusions. One possibility could be that of differing orientations toward education. Goldenberg et al. (2001) argue that when families feel successful, value education, and expect success from it, they work hard toward achieving it. On the contrary, when they feel unsuccessful, they do not value its importance, do not expect a high level of performance, and thus do not benefit.

Why most children self-scored as reading at the class average merits some consideration. Pretzlik and Chan (2004) caution that sometimes when comparing themselves to readers who have strong support, children might feel that they have learned the basic reading skills and, based on this, perceive themselves as similar in other respects to other readers. If this happens, it is a positive result in its own right. Such self-perceptions need to be recognized within the dual context of both the classroom and the home. When children discover that their perceived ability and actual ability are not in truth the same, it is incumbent upon educators and families to help them examine the causes for their success or failure and enable them to act accordingly (Pretzlik & Chan). Teachers need to recognize such feelings among their students and acknowledge that

some students may be considering themselves to be better readers than the teachers feel them to be. Teachers need to help these students come to terms with the realities of the situation and make progress, in spite of whatever prior experiences the teacher may have had with the student.

### **Views on Family Reading Practice in the Home**

The result of the research in this area reveals many facets regarding the advantages of a shared understanding (and conversely the problems extant when such an understanding is not present) between the three subgroups. Interesting findings were observed from this study. For example, when the respondents agreed that the family provided reading materials to help the child read, shared reading concerns with the child's teacher, and attended reading conferences regularly, the child was always scored by all subgroups as reading above or at the class average. Most often when the family and the child agreed but the teacher did not, the child was scored as reading below his or her classmates.

These results provide cogent evidence that when individual respondents within the three subgroups establish a strong connection to each other, positive outcomes occur. There are several possible explanations. For instance, teachers' expectations may have influenced the uniformly high perceptions of the child's reading skills. Another possible explanation for this finding may relate to the fact that such connectivity tends to instill in each of the parties a positive attitude toward one another. "If teachers ... know the parents, they treat the student better. It makes a difference when the faculty knows the parents are involved and that the parents do care" (Barge & Loges, 2003, p. 146). Teachers tend to rate the children from minority families as less competent academically and have lower expectations for the child's future success than do parents (Hauser-Cram, Sirin, & Stipek, 2003), especially when such perceptions stem from selective or negative memories or perceptions of a child based on past experience. The present study suggests that maintaining a positive view is an essential means to achieving positive results, constituting a necessary and important pre-condition for implementing a sharing of perspectives regarding the individual child's efforts in reading, whether at home or school.

In some instances in the study, adult family members perceived their child to be a better reader, but reported not reading with or to a child at home (reading practice). Similar findings were reported by authors (Chavkin & Williams; 1993; Dauber & Epstein; 1993) noting an overall decline in the number of families who assisted their children in school activities as the child advanced from lower to higher grade levels. Some families interviewed in the present study revealed that they never read to their children because they thought their children were doing well in school. Others thought reading to a child every day was their responsibility as parents.

Other striking evidence from this study relates to whether or not the teacher shared or the family used reading strategies at home. Teachers seemed to have little knowledge of whether or not they have ever shared reading strategies with families. However, family members showed that they were using strategies similar to those teachers used in classrooms. Such findings prompt one to make unflattering conjectures as to teachers' awareness of what was addressed during the Every Child Reads parent education sessions. Future research needs to investigate more on the content of family-teacher meetings and parent sessions with a follow-up on how meeting information is implemented.

Edwards et al. (1999) have further argued that the importance of fostering understanding between all parties concerned with the child is typically overlooked. A more thoroughly developed approach to a shared understanding involves a concerted effort, primarily on the part of the teachers and parents. When implemented, it correctly allows both the teacher and the adult family member to assume more responsibilities in meeting the child's literacy needs in a collaborative way. This would present the child with greater opportunities to make the best use of the home and school learning environments. Hoover-Dempsey, Bassler, and Burrow's (1995) study of parental involvement with elementary-age children concluded that most parents, not surprisingly, wanted to help their children succeed but worried and reflected on the role they should take and how to handle those roles successfully. Most seemed unfamiliar with ways they might optimize their child's home environment.

Narratives regarding the perceived opportunities for or barriers to families' decisions to assist their children to become better readers appeared to be clustered around five predominant ideas. These ideas are impediments to assisting the child in his/her learning development: (a) the nature of school-home communication, (b) the lack of opportunity for interaction, (c) the families' work schedule, (d) the differing perceptions among individuals within the subgroups, and (e) differing expectations. When there was disagreement during interviews, both the family and the teacher accounts reflected constant uncertainties concerning the other's knowledge about whether a family practiced literacy in the home. Addressing such concerns would bridge many of the differences and assuage numerous doubts. All viewed their perceptions and actions as legitimate within their own contexts (i.e., home or school). It appeared that some adult family members and the corresponding teachers felt a sense of isolation from each other that inhibited collaboration. Parents expressed, in particular, a desire for more positive communication from teachers.

It is encouraging to note, however, that each of the subgroups perceived opportunities to strengthen families' partnerships with teachers as they strived to assist the child to become a better reader. For instance, adult family members

wished their children could have more positive attitudes toward their teachers, and they regretted not having found time to attend the Every Child Reads parent education sessions. Children wished their families could buy them more reading materials and read to them more frequently. Also, teachers wished to place children with reading difficulties into a remedial reading program and also wished children could receive more attention from adult family members. These were arrays of opportunities perceived by the subgroups. However, such wishes can easily be a rhetorical exercise with little hope of future implementation if those involved do not find a way to translate their words into concrete actions. Unless someone is willing to take initiative, such wishes are fruitless.

### **Limitations and Future Research**

The lack of shared understanding regarding family reading practices, as reported by the respondents, warrants serious consideration. The findings in the present study are limited in terms of their overall generality. The present study is a preliminary attempt to match the views of the African American family, the child, and the teacher relative to their perceptions of the family's role in assisting the child to become a better reader. Further research is needed in this area involving families, children, and teachers from diverse settings (e.g., how might an African American student be regarded or perceived by an African American teacher as opposed to teachers of European origin). Nonetheless, in spite of its relative small sampling size, the findings from this study add to our understanding of the importance of facilitating more open communication exchanges between adult family members, children, and teachers. Replicating this study with a larger sample may offer further insight and extremely valuable information which could pave the way to conceiving and effectively designing literacy plans that are more inclusive and practical in their results.

### **Concluding Thoughts**

Data from this study suggest that educators should consider multiple sources of information in order to better assist a child's reading efforts. One route to follow that is often overlooked is to encourage a better level of shared understanding between the adult family member, the child, and the child's teacher regarding their respective expectations and goals concerning the child's reading effort and achievement. Differences among the subgroups' perceptions do not necessarily signify conflict, but may reflect each subgroup's unique experiences. As Conoley (1989) stated, to fail to know the family and the school is to fail to know the child.

A lack of one-to-one or collective communication between educators, African American families, and students may erode the likelihood of a shared understanding of the process variables related to successful reading practices. African American families and teachers may be in opposition, frequently unknowingly, due to conflicting interests, values, and expectations. All of these can result in the parties not being able to attain consensus. Collaborative efforts are vital to enhancing a child's reading development. The challenge that has emerged from this and similar studies is to find ways to overcome the perceived barriers and to bring about more opportunities for a mutual understanding between the individual African American family, child, and teacher regardless of their beliefs and ethnic background. This means creating greater and more frequent channels of communication.

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