Homework as a Family Literacy Practice: What Counts as Best Practices for Children Deemed as High Risk for Academic Failure Due to Socioeconomic Status

Kathy R. Fox

Abstract

Homework is a constant yet often controversial practice in homes and other settings. This study set out to determine answers to the question: *What practices were used to support children with homework in families deemed as at risk due to low socioeconomic factors?* Homework was examined as a common practice that routinely took place in a variety of settings with diverse participants. Interviews were conducted at an afterschool program and on home visits with families living in a small urban subsidized housing development. Findings showed that homework was viewed, shared, discussed, handled, and ultimately accomplished in ways which differed from established recommendations and mainstream teacher expectations. Implications from the reported cases showed that families held perceptions of the benefits, purposes, and effects of homework that had the potential to inform teachers in the design, implementation, and evaluation of meaningful, culturally responsive homework assignments.

Key Words: family literacy, parent involvement, homework, low socioeconomic status, academic success, best practices, siblings, teacher feedback

Introduction

My preschooler gets a weekly packet for Monday–Thursday. He writes his letters and name, matches colors, and gets a cutting sheet. My first

grader gets a list for the week with 15 spelling words. He reads a book a week and has 10 or 5 vocabulary words. My older one is in special ed. He gets a pack for the week and has to read 30 minutes a day. I go over it, and I give them a test. They have to write their words 5 times a day.

In the above statement, the parent, a female head of household, demonstrated her familiarity with the varied homework routines of her three children. The ritual of homework provided a nightly school-like activity in the home. The parent, Ms. Turner (pseudonym, as are all names used throughout), viewed homework and other materials sent home with her children as sources of schooling practices that carried over to the home. She extended the homework time by creating her own school-like practices (i.e., "I give them a test"; writing their words 5 times day as directed by the parent). Her response, when describing knowledge of and involvement in her children's homework, was typical of the six mothers included in this study, all living in subsidized housing with school-age children attending Title I schools. This study examined homework as one component of family literacy, defined here as the intergenerational link between children's literacy with that of their parents and siblings.

In the past, family literacy has often been framed from a deficit perspective, presenting parents as holding negative opinions of schooling and needing to be trained to support their children with academic work (Amstutz, 2000). Research, however, has shown that homework as a form of family literacy was often highly valued and made more meaningful through parent involvement, including in the homes of children deemed at risk due to low socioeconomic status (SES) and/or minority language background (Cooper & Valentine, 2001; Deslandes, 2009; Epstein, 2010; Epstein, Simon, & Salinas, 1997; Fox, 2003, 2010). This article presents an investigation which set out to determine answers to the question: *What practices were used to support children with homework in families deemed as at risk due to low socioeconomic factors?* Through analysis of interview data gathered from six families, findings showed that homework was accomplished in ways which differed from more traditional recommendations and teachers' perceptions of best practices for homework (Fox, 2003, 2010). The successful homework practices in participant homes deemed as at risk because of low socioeconomic factors are of interest in order to better understand how homework practices may be differentiated among families. Practical implications can be shared with teachers regarding the variation or match between school and home expectations for homework.

Homework as a Culturally Disputed Practice

Traditionally, in both the anecdotal sense and in research on the subject, homework has often been characterized as a negative—even potentially

traumatic—event causing emotional distress, as in publications such as *Homework Without Tears* (Canter, Hausner, & MacMahon, 1988), or as a hassle (Beaulieu & Granzin, 2004), as harmful to parent and child relationships (Bennett & Kalish, 2007), and as having little to no positive effects (Kohn, 2007). Adding to this characterization, it was frequently recommended that in order for homework to have a positive effect it should occur in a somewhat isolated and quiet setting, away from distractions such as TV and phones and separate from other family members. Furthermore, the parent should act as a monitor but not participant (Kidshealth, 2015). In a meta-analysis of homework studies in the United States and United Kingdom (State of Queensland, 2004), isolation, special lighting, and a student-sized desk were often included in recommendations for parents. In a review of over 120 studies examining homework, Cooper (1989, 2007) described a synthesis of findings around the negative effects of homework, listing satiation, denial of leisure time, parental interference, and cheating as possible outcomes. Although more recent studies have acknowledged the positive role of parents' involvement in homework, for example, in supporting their children's second language growth and first language maintenance (California Department of Education, 2004; Fox, 2003, 2010) and in making homework more meaningful (Cooper, 2001), the majority of resources continue to describe the parents' role as a provider of conditions and a monitor (Beaulieu & Granzin, 2004; Canter et al., 1988; Unger, 1991). The well-respected National Parent Teacher Association's guidelines have continued to recommend best practice for homework as: "Let your child know you will be available for proofreading, finding simple math mistakes, or writing a note to the teacher if he or she doesn't understand an assignment" (Vatterott, 2012). In truth, what we know is that homework is situated in the home and community in which children live and spend out-of-school time, in diverse settings with varied situations, each having their own sets of traditional practices and values that influence their concepts of parent involvement, including homework (Boethel, 2003; Chrispeels & Gonzalez, 2006; Fox, 2010; Gonzalez, Fox, & Ho, 2007; Hong & Ho, 2005).

Parental Involvement as a Differentiated Practice

Homework may be viewed differently according to the age, ability level, and socioeconomic status of the child. In a large, longitudinal study of over 400 parents of fourth and sixth grade students, researchers found that both grade level and ability were stronger influences of parental involvement than economic status. Children who were considered low achievers in fourth grade received more parental involvement, while those children who were more successful had less parental involvement (Deslandes, 2009). Children in sixth grade

had less parental involvement across the group, with those children considered to have academic concerns continuing to have the most parental involvement in their homework (Deslandes, 2009). When language and culture factors were considered, the language of the homework had implications for the role of the parent and other family members in the homework practice. In the homes of language minority families, children at elementary school level took on the role of "teacher" to siblings and parents when the language of the homework did not match that of the home, as a part of a family-oriented or collective homework completion process (Fox, 2010; Gutierrez, 1995).

Homework as a Culturally Relevant Practice

The effects of homework on any one child and/or family cannot be evaluated with a one-size fits all measure. Diverse characteristics, including ability levels, socioeconomic status, gender, and non-achievement-related effects of homework have been shown to be contributing variables in the operation of homework (Cooper, 2001). Culturally relevant pedagogy, defined as "using the cultural characteristics, experiences, and perspectives of ethnically diverse students as conduits for teaching them more effectively" (Gay, 2002, p. 106), can, as Giroux (1992) characterized, "expand the school's definition" of what best practices for homework may be (p. 239). In a study of three Puerto Rican families previously characterized as low in parental involvement, researchers found that significant literacy activities occurred when using homework and other school-like practices; reading the TV menu and playing board games were ways to have quality conversations and activities between parent and child (Volk, 1994). McCarthey (1999) identified several culturally relevant key practices in her study of the mismatch between school and home, among them the recommendation for teachers to adjust school practices to meet the needs of the child. Enabling students to have modified time schedules, build on current skills, and have differentiated homework assignments were three identified strategies to improve homework's connectedness to the home (Epstein & Van Voorhis, 2001).

Culturally relevant pedagogy therefore suggests implications for teachers to adapt homework design and organization to accommodate the culturally determined factors in their students' lives. While classroom practices and curriculum are communicated from the teacher to the family through homework, culturally relevant pedagogy encourages teachers to view homework as an opportunity to learn about the family and their culture in a bidirectional fashion through intentionally designed, participatory assignments (Fox, 2003). A "funds of knowledge approach" aids teachers to see the home as a "major untapped resource for academic instruction" (Moll & Greenberg, 1990, p. 327)

by encouraging teachers to view a diversity of purposes and means for accomplishing homework as an additive component to their classroom. Considering differentiated factors across families as a support in the classroom may contribute to teacher initiatives regarding homework design, feedback, and flexibility. This article presents the potential for teachers and parents to expand the discourse on homework to be a more adaptable and communicative tool.

Methods

Setting

This study was conducted in a small coastal city in North Carolina. The setting boasts diverse populations in terms of language, culture, religion, ethnicity, and economics. Renowned as a tourist destination for its beaches, the area is also known for its history, including pre-Revolutionary and Civil War events and early civil rights actions. The county has a traditionally diverse racial makeup (79% White, 15% African American) and has recently become home to a large number of immigrants, primarily from Latin America (5%), but also from eastern European and African countries (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). Cultural and ethnic communities have developed, some thriving more than others. Residents may live in crowded trailer parks, decaying buildings, or subsidized housing projects just a few blocks away from university student housing and neighborhoods of exclusive two-story brick homes. Situated in a coastal agriculture belt, surrounded by rural counties, the immediate university area is often considered more urban and metropolitan. At any one time, 13,000 students are residents of the city. University documents indicated the student population at the time of the study was 87% White, and 13% were listed as combined minority. The college of education was the second largest department at the university and contributed the fourth highest number of teachers to the state.

The housing community wherein the participants lived and the afterschool program sat is adjacent to an area notorious for its high rate of violence, listed as 51% above the national average according to one realtor publication. After one recent incident, the city police officers began meeting the elementary school bus to escort the children to their doors. Thus, participants were deemed as at-risk to be victims of violent behaviors, unemployment, under-schooling, and basic disenfranchisement from the larger mainstream community.

Participants

Six families participated in the study representing a total of six adults and thirteen children. All six families lived in a low-income subsidized housing

project. They self-identified as African American and native English speakers. The children attended neighborhood elementary, middle, or high schools designated as Title I schools, indicating 40% or more of the population qualified for free or reduced lunch. Although fathers and/or other adult males lived in four of the six homes, only mothers self-selected to be interviewed. The role of the father in homework was an unexplored subject in the interviews as it was not initially isolated or questioned in the talking points, and none of the mothers voluntarily discussed it during the interviews. For the remainder of this article participants will be called "mothers," indicating the gender of the role and gender of the respondents.

Participating mothers and children were identified through membership in an afterschool program aimed at benefiting at-risk children and families by giving residents of the community a safe afterschool environment with a focus on school–community connections. Activities at the program included physical education, life skills, nutrition, academic support, and character education, often including university student volunteers, community volunteers, and parent and grandparent volunteers as activity leaders. Approximately two dozen children attended the program each day, representing 16 households. Children in the program ranged from kindergarten through fifth grades. Participants were contacted by the afterschool program director and asked to participate in the study. While the researcher was familiar with the children and the afterschool setting, mothers had not met with her prior to the interviews other than at afterschool program events such as a holiday party and a previous end-of-the-year ceremony.

Table 1 shows family demographics and the chosen interview settings. Families were assigned pseudonyms to provide confidentiality. Of the six mothers who volunteered for the study, three chose to be interviewed in their homes, and three chose to meet for their interviews at the afterschool program. The afterschool program site was adjacent to the housing project in a community church building. Its proximity to the participants' homes made it a familiar setting as the parents entered the site each day to pick up their children. Interviews lasted from 30–90 minutes, with the home interviews typically lasting longer than those conducted at the afterschool program site.

Data was examined as "participants living in subsidized housing community as an indicator of low socioeconomic status" rather than analyzed from racial, ethnic, linguistic, or gender-specific descriptors. Households had a mixture of adult ages and children from infancy through high school age. All adult participants in the study self-identified as African American female. The afterschool program was open to all races and ethnicities of children from grades kindergarten through fifth; the unifying descriptor of children in the program

was their low socioeconomic factor, traditionally considered to place them at risk (Willingham, 2012).

Table 1. Interview Structure

Parent	Interview Setting	Number of Participants	Time Spent
A. Ms. Johnson	Home visit	1 adult 1 1st grader 1 10th grader	90 minutes 2nd visit 20 minutes
B. Ms. Jackson	Home visit	1adult, mother 1 2nd grader 1 9-month old	45 minutes 2nd visit 15 minutes
C. Ms. Fields	Afterschool program site	1 adult 1 preschooler 1 1st grader 1 9th grader	30 minutes
D. Ms. Highfield	Home visit	1 adult 1 5th grader	60 minutes
E. Ms. Turner	Afterschool program site	1 adult 1 preschooler 1 elementary special ed., self-contained	30 minutes
F. Ms. Lemond	Afterschool program site	1 adult 1 kindergartner 1 2nd grader	30 minutes

Procedure

Conceptualizing literacy practices as being situated from one perspective requires that the research methods selected be carefully considered (Green & Meyer, 1991). The perspective of the researcher must be presented as just that—one perspective. What can be seen and understood is determined by the underlying theory(-ies) or lens through which the researcher frames the study (Green, Dixon, & Zaharlick, 2002; Green & Meyer, 1991). The questions addressed in this study are consistent with those types of questions best answered through interpretive fieldwork research (Erickson, 1986) within an ethnographic perspective (Green & Bloom, 1997). Using carefully transcribed anecdotal records of the interviews, trends and divergent points in the data were coded across families. All data were reviewed and compared by the researcher and a graduate student researcher. Discourse analysis allowed for a

"telling case" to emerge, one unique to the participants yet situated in the larger and very real context of many cases (Hicks, 1995). Discourse analysis encouraged researchers to examine not only answers per say, but responses within the broader or macro context of who, what, when, where, and why responses are situated (Santa Barbara Discourse Group, 1992). Results showed us what was true to this situation, at this time, to this participant, in this setting. As in single-subject and case study research, this methodology made visible a *micro* perspective of discourse unique to the participant. Participants in this study were considered both as individuals and as a representative group with their own unique-but-revealing story to tell.

For this study, data was gathered from participants drawn from the parent pool at an afterschool program serving families living in a low-income subsidized housing project. The children attended a neighborhood Title I school within walking distance of their homes, where 83% of the students received free and/or reduced lunch. The afterschool program was free of charge to participant families with the identified goal of benefiting academically and socially at-risk children and their families by giving residents of the community a safe afterschool environment. The researcher was somewhat familiar to many of the parents as a regular volunteer at the site.

Homework practices were investigated in families from an additive approach (Epstein & Van Voorhis, 2001; Gutierrez, 1995), recognizing that parents who might otherwise be labeled as "at risk" or disengaged in the school setting bring social (Bourdieu, 1977) and cultural (Coleman, 1989) capital to literacy practices in the home. For that purpose, the goal of the study was described to parents as providing participants with the opportunity to share what they would like teachers and the research team to know about the homework and literacy practices they used in *their* homes with *their* children. Participants were given the choice to be interviewed in their homes or at the local afterschool program site. Home visits were seen as a way to support a mutual sense of trust and build a stronger relationship between the home and the school program (Worthy & Hoffman, 2001) and, in this case, the researcher. Home visits were viewed as a "gateway" for strengthening communication by making sure that families knew that they were cared about outside of the school (North Central Regional Educational Laboratory, 1994). The afterschool program site was another setting where the parents and researchers could communicate in a climate of respect and care for their own values in a familiar context. This type of interactive field work allowed participants to feel listened to within a choice of settings.

Data Collection

The director of the afterschool program introduced the study to the parent group, which included mothers, fathers, grandparents, and caregivers. Participants were asked to volunteer to open their homes to the researchers or to interview at the afterschool site, whichever setting they preferred. A monetary stipend of $50 per family funded through a university faculty research grant was described, and potential participants were notified that their participation was voluntary and would not affect their child's status in the afterschool program. Participants made appointments according to their own convenience, which was most often in the late afternoon as children were being picked up from the afterschool program and in the evening for those being interviewed in a home visit. The afterschool program director printed and shared sample talking points with the participants. This preview of topics allowed the participants time to think of responses on their own terms for what would be a semistructured interview format. In a semistructured interview, the researcher sets the outline for the topics covered, but each participant's responses determine the way in which the interview is conducted, allowing both the researcher and participant to develop a more authentic conversation from the participant's perspective (Stuckey, 2013). In this study, the talking points emphasized that the focus of the interview would be on what was already occurring in the home during homework time (e.g., What type(s) of homework does your child have? How does the teacher manage the homework; is it daily, or given as a packet for the week? Where does your child do his/her homework?). The "talking points" are shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Talking Points

1. How many children do you have and what are their ages?
2. How often does your child (children) have homework? Can you describe it to me?
3. How does the homework get accomplished?
4. How would you describe how she/he does the homework—alone, with help from siblings, with help from parents, with monitoring? Other?
5. Where does the homework take place?
6. How long does it take to do the homework?
7. How is the homework organized or put together?
8. Is the homework graded? Is it included in a grade? What kind of feedback [award] is received?
9. What would you like to say to the teacher about the homework?

Afterschool site interviews were conducted by the faculty researcher, who some of the parents and all of the children had met as a volunteer at the afterschool program. A conversational approach to the interview was taken, using the talking points as starters. Field notes, audiotape, and still photos were used for data collection. Video data was purposefully not chosen, as it seemed intrusive for both the home setting and the afterschool program office where these interviews occurred.

Interviews at the afterschool program took from 30–45 minutes, depending on the participant. Mothers sat at a table next to or across from the faculty researcher. Younger children were in a stroller, standing by the parent or sitting at the table alongside the mother. The school-aged children remained in the afterschool program classroom during the interview. As in the home visit interviews, children were included in the conversation, with mothers sometimes asking for their input for clarification, other times as conversation partners, and still other times encouraging the child to give answers for themselves or for a sibling in absentia.

Home visits occurred in the afternoon and early evening, when children were at home together with their mothers. A second permission slip was signed at the beginning of each home visit session to reiterate to families that confidentiality and respect would be used with collected information. Care was taken to ensure that mothers understood that discussing the child's homework practices was the goal of the visit. A phone call to confirm the appropriateness and timing of the home visit was made on the morning or early afternoon of the scheduled visit. Upon entry to the homes, mothers welcomed the researchers and asked them to sit down. Although the homes could often be described as small, there were both communal and private areas in each of them. Two home visit participants were visited a second time as an outcome of the first visit, that is, delivering requested books or in response to a request for additional time to talk as cited below.

Results

Results showed that homework had varied interpretations, benefits, uses, and relevance for families and differed from what is typically reported in the literature as best practice for homework. Value was put on the academic transference occurring from school to home through homework. Parent participants provided a knowledgeable perspective of the homework of their children. In all cases, parent participants in the interviews were mothers, although in some cases other adults were in the home. Discourse analysis revealed that the amount of homework, teacher feedback, and homework routines were consistently

named by mothers as important elements and, in some cases, were the criteria for how they viewed the teacher and the school.

Homework to Communicate the Curriculum

Mothers placed significance on homework as a way to learn about the school curriculum and the status of their child's progress. Mothers described parent involvement in the classroom and/or in afterschool committee membership as difficult due to lack of transportation. Walking or public transportation would be their only methods to visit the school, and mothers expressed concern regarding walking in the neighborhood, particularly for evening meetings. Rather, homework was shown to be the purveyor of curriculum. Discourse analysis showed that school-like practices were shared and valued during homework practice, including what might be considered academic jargon. The responses of Ms. Johnson, the mother of a first grade boy, Lewis, and a tenth grade girl, Sarena, were representative of other parents in this group. She told how homework helped her to know what Lewis "should be learning." She described how he taught her about his literacy practices as he was taught, such as when he showed her his Word Work, or how to make new words by deleting the initial sound and adding a new one. She said, "He came out with that, and I said, 'That is beautiful!'" When the researcher described this practice as a "phonemic awareness" strategy, Ms. Johnson said, "Yes, the teacher had that on his report card."

Homework as a Routine

Mothers appreciated the routine of homework, particularly when organized by curriculum area. Such practices as spelling contracts that were repeated from week to week, a system that delegated reading homework to Monday and Wednesday and math homework to Tuesday and Thursday, and a weekly homework packet due on Friday morning were each described as being organized and effective homework practices. With all participants, discourse analysis showed routines were understood and adhered to by the family. Ms. Jackson noted that she could recite her child's homework schedule by heart. She knew that math homework would come home on Tuesday, and that this would be an easier task for her son. In comparison, she knew that his spelling contract was more challenging and required more parental intervention. She knew Monday night homework, therefore, would require more time. This routine helped organize the evening and weekly activities. Ms. Jackson related that the previous year's teacher had given weekly homework and had helped her son to keep organized by "suggesting" on the homework packet what pages to start each night. This strategy taught pacing, while at the same time provided some

flexibility for those cases when family events occurred and homework could not be done on a nightly basis. Mothers attributed homework design to the teacher and considered its organization as a marker of teacher quality.

Homework as Quality Time

In both Volk's 1994 and McCarthey's 1999 studies, families were found to have significant social uses for homework and other school-like literacy practices in the home to meet the needs of the child and family. These uses were largely unknown to the classroom teachers. As in previous studies (Fox, 2003, 2010), results of discourse analysis here showed mothers used homework to meet the needs of the child, as well as meeting additional needs of family members and situations. In several cases mothers expressed a need for *more* rather than *less* homework. Ms. Fields, the mother of three boys under nine years of age, said, "I asked for more homework.…He finishes it too early. He says he did it all at school. I like for them to sit together and have that to do together."

Other parents stated a desire for additional homework in terms of needing to keep the child occupied in a quality way without resorting to TV or video games. Ms. Johnson described her situation with Lewis: "He gets home at 2:30, and it's a long time before bedtime, and I can't take him to the playground all day every day." Ms. Johnson, like other mothers in the housing project community, did not allow Lewis to play outdoors in the nearby community playground without the parent present.

Homework as a Collective Rather Than Independent Practice

As in the example of Ms. Fields above, mothers encouraged children to sit and work on homework together. Mothers described how the homework was carried out in a communal area with multiple family members present and multiple ages working together. This use of homework as an activity accomplished with siblings was repeated in all six families in the study. On another home visit, Ms. Johnson called upstairs to Sarena to bring a homework sample from a personalized family scrapbook to show how the three of them (Sarena, Lewis, and Ms. Johnson) had collaborated to complete a "turkey" project when Lewis was in kindergarten. The teacher's directions, printed on the page, were to decorate the plain outline of a turkey using basic shapes on copy paper. Ms. Johnson, Sarena, and Lewis had gone beyond coloring the turkey to create a mosaic using Sarena's plastic hair beads. Both Ms. Johnson and Lewis seemed proud for the faculty researcher to photograph the work to show as evidence of time spent on homework. "I thought this was so cool," Ms. Johnson said (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Homework project sample.

Homework as Academic Enhancement

Homework was seen as a way to progress academically. The concern, however, was with the difficulty level of the homework and how it might prove to be a barrier for future parental help. Ms. Johnson said of her high school age daughter, "I try to help her, but she already knows more than me. She's real smart, and I told her to keep working at it and ask for help. I go off! 'I don't want you to be like me!'" She, along with other parents, expressed fear of not being able to support their children academically as they progressed, saying, "I need serious help in order to help my children. I'm serious. I am scared about what's going to happen next year, 'cause I'm not going to be able to help him," referring to first grader, Lewis. Analysis showed this response was reiterated at various grade levels by different parents.

Homework to Initiate Teacher Feedback

Parents' concern regarding supporting children academically through homework included the need for teachers' input and support. Parents valued teachers who gave feedback and grades on the homework. Teacher feedback was seen as an important way for the child's learning to be reinforced. When no teacher feedback was given, homework was seen as a negative use of the child's time and a deterrent to progress. One participant, Ms. Highfield, a parent of a ten-year-old, described it this way, "I see that the same things she got wrong on her homework are the same things she gets wrong on her tests. They get rewards for just turning it in, not if it is correct. How does this help her?"

Any and all feedback from the teacher was acknowledged to some degree, ranging from a sticker or smiley face with no written comments to actual grades reflected on a report card. Parents described teachers who gave feedback as more organized. Conversely, when teachers did not return homework with comments or did not acknowledge homework well done, these teachers were judged as unfair and unorganized. Ms. Lemond, the mother of two children, said, "I don't think she cared that she [child] had spent the time."

Homework as a Source of Pride

Parents showed pride in children's progress and proudly displayed homework projects and certificates of completion. Parents described children's homework engagement, efficiency, and success in multiple ways. In three of the six families, parents described extending the homework. In the introductory vignette, Ms. Turner described creating a test for her older son based on his vocabulary words. Ms. Jackson told about her child's assignment to create a "word bank" and how they had built additional words as an oral activity in order to extend the written assignment. As in the previous example of Lewis and his turkey project, evidence showed that homework samples were saved as keepsakes, as families shared work samples with the researcher.

Homework as a Connection for Intergenerational Literacy

Discourse analysis revealed an overwhelmingly positive approach to family literacy. Parents spoke of positive memories of one special teacher and/or school personnel who had made a difference in their own or their children's lives. Contrary to what much of the research implied regarding low-income parents having negative reactions to their schooling (Amstutz, 2000), these six mothers showed an affinity for one or more teachers in their schooling history.

Mothers made very specific comments, highlighting one particular teacher's attention to details, courtesy, or time spent together. Ms. Johnson recalled a

librarian that had spent time with her in ninth grade, sharing Shel Silverstein poetry with her during the lunch period. When discussing her child's nightly reading assignments, she asked the researcher if she knew of his poetry and said she had been looking for his books to share with her children but was unable to find them at yard sales or the used bookstore. Later, when discussing the honorarium for participation in the study, she asked if she might have the book, *Where the Sidewalk Ends* (Silverstein, 1974), rather than a financial gift for her participation.

Approximately two weeks later, when the researcher returned to the home to deliver a copy of the book, Ms. Johnson turned to the page of a favorite poem and read the title aloud to her tenth grade daughter: "Let me see. Page 52. Sarah Cynthia Sylvia Stout..." Sarena asked, "Momma, is that your book? You got your book?" and Ms. Johnson replied, "Yeah it's it. And it's still here. Listen here..." She proceeded to read the poem aloud, exclaiming to the researcher, "I can't believe you did that! From the university!" implying her surprise in receiving the book as promised.

Summary of Findings

Interview data from the six participant families revealed that homework was carried out in a central location of the home. In every case, homework was accomplished in a family or group area. In no case was there a quiet setting with an individual lamp or desk, as suggested in the literature on best practices for homework (Beaulieu & Granzin, 2004; Rosado, 1994; Teft, 2000; Unger, 1991; Vatterott, 2012).

Homework was used as an important artifact of print for mothers and younger and older siblings. Homework provided information for families who used it in both the intended and creative ways. Mothers used homework as discussion prompts about methods for learning. The routine homework assignments kept the mothers informed about the curriculum being studied. Homework was used to communicate and display family pride, as in Ms. Johnson's example of the turkey project she and Lewis made together using Sarena's hair beads, with the knowledge that the project would be shared in the classroom. Both school-like practices and family literacy events were held in esteem.

Data indicated that mothers were highly involved in the homework process and that multiple family members found benefits from the use of the school-age child's homework. Homework was seen as a family activity. Older siblings shared materials with younger children. Mothers cited this practice as an intentional homework strategy. Older children were described as routinely helping younger ones with their homework. Mothers encouraged the sharing of the homework event.

The goal of maintaining and valuing family time was made evident in all of the participant families. Mothers described homework as a parent–child activity and/or something for siblings to do together. Mothers and multiage children sat together, as in one case when a parent created homework for an older child to do while the younger child completed his homework. In another case, the mother expressed valuing the older child's reading homework as a chance for him to read to his younger brother.

In summary, participants saw homework as a link to school practices, to meaningful collective family activities, and to a better future through education. More, rather than less, homework was requested, and homework material was valued. Homework took on the role of a family event and was done in a collective atmosphere among family members. Feedback on homework was seen as informative, expected, and valued. Relationships with teachers were valued. These results lead to implications for the ways in which teachers design, distribute, and evaluate homework.

Limitations

A limitation of this study was the difference in the data collection procedure between the two settings used in the study. One setting included an afterschool site where children were cared for until their parents picked them up and/or they walked home when the center closed at 5:45 p.m. The researcher interviewed three mothers there. The second site was the home of the child, in a neighborhood near the school adjacent to the afterschool program site. The researcher interviewed three mothers in their respective homes. In the afterschool program site, children and their mothers were limited to how long they could talk because of the center's hours of operation. Additionally, in these interviews the children were seated at the table, in a stroller, or within reach in a small office play area with the mother and faculty researcher. In the home visit interviews, mothers talked longer and were less distracted by their child's behaviors and needs. In the homes children were playing in the room or adjacent rooms but were not seated with the mother for any length of time. In addition, the home visit interviews allowed mothers to share artifacts such as family photos and examples of school work with the faculty researcher.

A second limitation of the study was the small number of participants. The researcher encourages the reader to view the results through the lens of a telling case or a relevant illustrative example. What is stated is not suggested to be generalized but illustrative of this situation in this setting at this time, and thus valid for these participants (Hicks, 1995). These interviews allowed participant parents to self-report their own "best practices" as they engaged in homework and literacy activities in the home. Results were analyzed as individual cases and compiled to discover trends in group findings.

Discussion and Implications for Future Practice

Best practices for homework achievement were different for families in this study than what is often recommended in literature on homework achievement (Beaulieu & Granzin, 2004; Canter et al., 1988; Unger, 1991; Vatterott, 2012). Rather than an individualized event to build independence, homework was revealed to have a collective family focus with multiple goals and communicative benefits as an academic, social, and cultural link to the school. As cited in work recommending that parental involvement should reflect families' own cultural stance—in this case a collective rather than an individual perspective (Trumbull, Rothstein-Fisch, & Hernandez, 2003)—this research reiterated that homework can be examined through the unique cultural perspectives of the representative families.

Mothers in this study saw homework as a good use of their children's time away from school. Homework was viewed as a collective activity in which they could take part with their child along with multiple siblings. This finding is supported by Cooper's analysis of homework studies, revealing that one positive effect of homework is the meaningfulness it brings to parental involvement around an academic activity (Cooper, Robinson, & Patall, 2006). This is true in particular for those mothers whose children are deemed as "at risk," as Deslandes (2009) found in examining parent–child involvement with those whose children had identified disabilities or other academic risk factors. In contrast to a more drill and practice perspective, homework was seen as a communicative tool of "mainstream academic discourse" (Fox, 2010; Gutierrez, 1995). Mothers saw homework as a tool to assist in their children's academic achievement for overall success. They believed teachers valued homework and that the best teachers followed through with grades and feedback. This belief concurs with what research says about the positive effects of timely and specific teacher feedback (Opitz, Ferdinand, & Meckinger, 2011; Stenger, 2014). Table 3 shows representative comments from the findings with implications for teachers regarding culturally responsive practices.

Table 3. Analysis of Anecdotal Comments with Implications for Classroom Teachers

Parent	Responses	Analysis	Implications for Classroom Teachers
C	*I asked for more homework… He finishes it too early. He says he did it all at school. I like for them to sit together and have that to do together.*	Homework is part of the academic activity that occurs in the home.	Expect and acknowledge that homework is shared among family members. Need for additional and/or optional homework.
A	*I give extra spelling words because he finishes his homework so fast. The teacher gave me an extra workbook for him that we use.*	Homework is a meaningful activity. Homework is a tool from school to home for academic support.	Need for additional and/or optional homework.
B	*After we do his homework, we read every night, and then he reads to his little brother.*	Homework is part of the academic activity that occurs in the home. Literacy is shared across siblings. Literacy is a responsibility among siblings.	Expect and acknowledge that homework is shared among family members. Look for reading materials that can be shared across ages.
C	*I'm scared about what he'll be doing next year…he's going to know more than me!*	Homework is a shared communication of academic discourse between school and home. Homework may be mediated by the child to the parent.	Homework provides intergenerational literacy. Homework mediates school academics to the home.
D	*I don't think she cared that she had spent the time.*	Feedback is expected in order to acknowledge the child's effort.	Homework communicates home participation to the teacher. Homework involves family time and should be valued equally by the teacher.

E	*I see that the same things she got wrong on her homework are the same things she gets wrong on her test. They get rewards for just turning it in, not if it is correct.*	Feedback is expected in order to support academic growth.	Homework as an independent practice is a form of assessment and provides a teaching opportunity.
A	*She's real smart, and I told her to keep working at it and ask for help. I go off! 'I don't want you to be like me!'*	Homework is a means to improve academically which is valued for achievement and advancement.	Homework is valued as a tool for improving academically.
B	*My preschooler gets a weekly packet for Mon–Thurs.…My first grader gets a list of spelling words. He reads a book a week and has a list 10 to 15 vocabulary words. My older one…reads for 30 minutes a day. I go over it and give them a test. They have to write them 5 times a day.*	Homework organizes nightly activity for parent and children together.	The routine of regularly scheduled homework is valued.

In conclusion, as a former classroom teacher, I look back at the process I used in designing homework and realize that I treated the practice as a cultural expectation to satisfy school norms. I did not fully comprehend the families' expectation for the daily required homework. I can truthfully say I wish I would have known then what I know now—that for some, the family time spent on homework had a benefit of communicating school practices, as in learning phonemic awareness activities. For others, homework provided practice for multiple family members, as in reading to a younger sibling. For still others, homework gave children a safe and productive format for not only reinforcing but also initiating innovation of academic practices, as in creating the turkey project using a sibling's hair beads. Most revealing was the idea that homework provided a quality cross-age and cross-generation family activity. This was particularly true for children whose outside time was limited and whose mothers wanted to decrease TV and other electronic time. By tapping into their own students' different family practices, teachers could be made aware of family needs and dynamics, respecting the true best practices occurring in the home and better supporting them. As in my case, perhaps the biggest hurdle to this expanded definition of best practices for homework is an attitudinal shift on the part of the teacher. Future research should examine how homework and other family literacy practices take place in the homes of different demographic groups, including the role of fathers in family literacy. The juxtaposition

of teachers as homework assigners and teachers as parents of children with homework is another topic within the umbrella of differentiated family literacy practices yet to be explored.

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Kathy R. Fox is a professor and chair of the Department of Early Childhood, Elementary, Middle, Literacy, and Special Education in the Watson College of Education at the University of North Carolina at Wilmington (UNCW). Dr. Fox spent 22 years as a preK–2nd grade teacher in bilingual classrooms in central California. Since coming to UNCW as a teacher educator, she has taught literacy courses and continued her research to support children and their families both in and outside of the traditional classroom setting. Her research interests include family literacy—in particular, what families "bring to the table" from their diverse backgrounds—homework, technology, and teacher practices, particularly reflection. Correspondence regarding this article may be addressed to Dr. Kathy Fox, Watson College of Education, EB 271, 601 South College Road, Wilmington, NC 28403, or email foxk@uncw.edu