Elementary School Teachers' and Parents' Perspectives of Home–School Engagement and Children's Literacy Learning in a Low-Income Area

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Abstract

It is well-established that home–school engagement can contribute to children's literacy learning. This research examined language arts teachers' and parents' perspectives of home–school engagement and literacy learning in a school located in a low-income area. The school was focusing on ways to improve students' literacy learning providing the impetus for this research. Ten language arts teachers were interviewed, and two focus groups were held with 26 parents or caregivers at the K–Grade 5 school. The following themes were found: contrasting perspectives on home–school engagement, differing perspectives on homework completion, and similar views on what motivates students in literacy. This article discusses implications for practice and proposes recommendations, such as the need for teacher agency and the increased engagement of school administration.

Key Words: home–school engagement, teacher beliefs, parent beliefs, agency, motivation, low-income families

Introduction

Historically, parental involvement in their children's education has been shown to be an effective means of supporting children's academic achievement

(Hill & Taylor, 2004; Pomerantz et al., 2005), and the earlier the involvement, the greater the effect (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2013). The benefits of parental involvement can go beyond students' academic achievement to include improved teacher–parent relationships, attendance at school events, and parental confidence (Pomerantz, 2007). Positive teacher–parent relationships may also further assist parental involvement and engagement, which can increase student achievement. Given the importance of home–school engagement, this research was conducted with a Title I school that demonstrated limited gains in children's literacy achievement over several years. The focus was on examining home–school engagement as a possible area that could be leveraged to improve children's academic success in literacy.

Literature Review

Importance of Parental Involvement/Engagement

Children living in poverty often achieve less in school than their middle-class counterparts (Baker & Iruka, 2013), including in reading achievement (Hindin & Paratore, 2007). One of the ways to support children's literacy development is to focus on parental involvement because of its links to academic success (Serpell & Mashburn, 2012). Results of Crosby et al.'s (2015) research suggest that "long-term systemic parent involvement in primary grades is possible and can have a significant impact on children's literacy development even in schools where substantial numbers of students struggle in reading and communities manifesting significant levels of poverty" (pp. 170–171). Parental involvement in their children's education is an effective means of supporting children's academic achievement, including their literacy achievement (Hill & Taylor, 2004) and reading motivation (Baker, 2003).

Unfortunately, some schools tend to define parent involvement as involvement in student academic achievement or in terms of participation at school-initiated functions (López & Vázquez, 2006). Parents who do not attend school events, such as parent–teacher conferences, are often perceived as lacking the ability to provide supportive home learning environments for their children (Auerbach, 1989). In order to understand parents' role in children's learning, there needs to be bidirectional communication and a positive relationship between homes and schools that goes beyond having parents carry out "school-like" activities at home. Effective teachers recognize the importance of this type of relationship (Ortiz & Ordoñez-Jasis, 2005). Parental engagement versus parental involvement is often desired because "engagement" implies a greater focus on listening to parents' voices rather than on telling parents what needs to be done (Stefanski et al., 2016). The U.S. Department of Education has also broadened the focus on parents to families and focused more on a

shared collaboration or the engagement between families and educators (Mapp & Kuttner, 2013).

Factors Related to Home–School Engagement

It has been suggested that some groups of families have been less engaged with schools than some others. "Families with the most difficulty participating in children's education often come from cultures different from the mainstream" (Ratliffe & Ponte, 2018, p. 220). These families could be immigrant families or families who speak English as a second language at home, or families from low socioeconomic backgrounds (Turney & Kao, 2009). Language has been proposed to affect school engagement in previous research (Kim, 2009; Sohn & Wang, 2006; Turney & Kao, 2009), as has parents' educational background (Vang, 2005). As shared by Ratliffe and Ponte (2018), foreign-born minority parents are more likely to report language as a barrier to school engagement and their involvement in children's education in general (Turney & Kao, 2009; Wong & Hughes, 2006). Some parents who have a low literacy level and who have little or no formal schooling may also have difficulty assisting children with homework or participating in other aspects of schools (Vang, 2005).

It is common knowledge that some school initiatives have proven unsuccessful for less educated parents or parents who belong to cultural groups that are different from the school staff (Power, 2015). Considering that parents who are well educated often have social capital that matches well with schools and that they perform tasks that align with the school interests (Power, 2015), this finding is not surprising. Often, the focus has been on how parents can acquire school capital and less on how teachers can acquire social capital from parents or families in order to become more culturally responsive to parents (Holloway & Kunesh, 2015; Power, 2015).

Based on prior studies, researchers have identified factors related to parents' participation in school engagement that centers on teachers' perspectives of that participation. Less research exists on the barriers in the school that prevent minority parent participation than on parents' barriers for engagement with schools (Kim, 2009). The following are some of those factors identified by Kim (2009): (a) "teachers' perception about the efficacy of minority parents," (b) "teachers' beliefs in the effectiveness of parental involvement and developmental philosophy," and (c) "school friendliness and positive communication" with families (p. 80). Poza et al. (2014) also report that teachers' own bias may affect family engagement with schools. Sometimes, parents' perspectives of home–school partnerships are overlooked by educators because of the school's agenda for parent–teacher involvement (Ratliffe & Ponte, 2018). This overlooking can include the needs of families within family–school partnerships. "By recognizing parents as resources, they [educators] acknowledge the importance of both

schools and families in the lives of children and youth (Birman et al., 2007)" (as cited in Walker-Dalhouse & Dalhouse, 2009, p. 328).

Because parent–teacher engagement implies active mutual participation (Ratliffe & Ponte, 2018), teachers should have a sense of agency. Teacher agency involves the active contribution to shaping both their practice and conditions associated with that practice to improve educational quality (Biesta et al., 2015). As part of teacher agency, educators examine the outcome of changing their practice and work backward in order to take the steps necessary in order to create the desired outcome. As teachers enact steps to create change in home–school engagement, barriers can surface. As shared by Biesta et al. (2015), the onus of responsibility of roles in parent–teacher communication and involvement is sometimes not clear, which can contribute to a lack of home–school engagement. That is, sometimes "there is a grey area in the issue of whose responsibility it is to ensure that learning takes place" (Biesta et al., 2015, p. 631). Teacher agency involves what educators can do to change outcomes, which occurs through reflection and action. Therefore, if educators are uncertain of their responsibility or lack a clear understanding of their roles or of education, this will affect teacher action. "Purposes that are narrowly framed inevitably narrow consideration of what is possible, and frame subsequent action accordingly" (Biesta et al., 2015, p. 637).

Theoretical Framework

This research is based on the theory of co-construction of knowledge between homes and schools (Vygotsky, 1978). It involves the co-construction of meaning between school staff and parents via a mutual interaction in which cultural knowledge that may be different from the mainstream is valued (Ratliffe & Ponte, 2018). In order to co-construct knowledge, stakeholders (including educators and parents) willfully share, listen to, and respect diverse viewpoints in order to create new knowledge. There are many benefits of the co-construction of parent–teacher knowledge for home–school engagement. Perhaps most importantly, when there is compatibility between homes and schools, students are more likely to succeed (Purcell-Gates et al., 2004). Engagement includes listening to parents' perspectives on home–school communication and child practices. To engage all parents, teachers must value the diverse knowledge that cultural groups bring to the home–school relationship, along with validating the significant roles that parents or caregivers play in children's school development. An effective partnership between homes and schools encompasses a relationship that has mutual priorities, is culturally responsive, developmentally appropriate, and strengths-based (Kim & Sheridan, 2015). In other words, the literacy beliefs and practices of families are valued and integrated with

school-based beliefs and practices in the co-construction of knowledge (Ortiz & Ordoñez-Jasis, 2005).

Method

Participants and Data Collection

The author volunteered in two classrooms for approximately five days at a Title I elementary school that had a record of low literacy achievement on standardized assessments over several years. For an entire school to qualify for Title I funds, at least 50% of students must qualify for the free and reduced lunch program (U.S. Department of Education, 2018). Approximately 500 children attend the Kindergarten–Grade 5 school in an inner city area of the southeastern U.S. Following the author's in-class volunteering, all elementary school teachers (K–5) that were teaching language arts in this Title I school were invited to be individually interviewed. All 10 teachers consented. The author had contacted the family service liaison at the school who described the intent of the research to teachers before teachers consented to an interview. Teachers were interviewed about home–school engagement and their language arts teaching (see Appendix for a list of sample questions). All individual interviews were held at the school, and most were conducted either at lunch time or before or after school. Each semistructured teacher interview was audiorecorded, lasted approximately 30–40 minutes, and was transcribed in its entirety. The author recorded handwritten notes of teachers' responses of items that were focused on during the interview, in addition to reflective notes at the end of the interview. The author also summarized teachers' responses throughout and at the end of the interview to elicit respondent validation. Teachers were from diverse backgrounds, including some that spoke Haitian Creole and Spanish, the two dominant first languages of families with children attending the school.

Following individual interviews with language arts teachers at the school, two focus groups were organized with parents. The term parent will be used throughout this article to include main caregivers of students. The goal was on consensus and diversity across parents rather than their in-depth experiences, therefore a focus group for parents was chosen over interviewing (Morgan, 2019). According to the U.S. Department of Education (2018), Title I schools must implement parental involvement activities. The purpose of these group sessions was to learn more about home–school communication, including perspectives on how school engagement could be improved upon, as well as information on children's literacy practices in and outside of school.

The parents were contacted through advertisements left in the main school office frequented by parents, as well as through the family services liaison at

the school who shared information about the upcoming focus groups at meetings with some parents at the school. The family liaison spoke Haitian Creole as well as English and Spanish. Overall, there were 26 parents who attended one of two possible sessions. Most of the parents who attended were of Haitian background, followed by those of Hispanic descent, which was representative of the population of the school. The author designed several questions to lead the focus group discussions (see Appendix). Parents were given numbers at the beginning of the session and were asked to state their number or hold up a number card prior to speaking.

Each session lasted approximately 45 minutes and was audiorecorded. Approximately three to four of the parents in one focus group spoke Haitian Creole exclusively. In that case, the family service liaison attended the session and translated for the parents. Sometimes, other parents also assisted in explaining the questions. Answers were typically shared with another parent, who then shared some responses with the entire group. Both focus group audiorecordings were transcribed in entirety. In addition, handwritten notes of parents' responses in the sessions and reflective notes at the end of the focus group were recorded.

Data Analysis

For the teacher interviews, data analysis focused on exploring meaning inductively from in-depth interviewing (Miles et al., 2014). It involved reading through all transcripts and then placing codes that reflected content-based analysis. Following inductive analysis, these codes were then modified and expanded upon to create categories as the transcripts were reexamined. These were open categories that were grouped into topic areas to become themes (Creswell, 2013). For example, one teacher theme was a lack of parental involvement.

Following the reading of the focus group transcripts, parent data was examined in a similar process in that codes were placed by content-based analysis and later modified as the transcripts were reexamined and then grouped to become themes. The author then examined the data comparatively across both parent and teacher data sets, and similarities and differences were noted among common topic areas and themes. As part of this comparison, a theme from the teacher data, such as a lack of parental involvement, was collapsed into a broader theme of contrasting perspectives of home–school engagement. A doctoral student was employed to code all the transcriptions according to theme-supported codes identified from the comparison of teacher and parent data. The student's independent coding resulted in approximately 85% agreement.

Findings

The following three themes evolved from this research: contrasting perspectives for home–school engagement, differing perspectives on homework completion, and similarities in views on what motivates students in literacy.

Contrasting Perspectives for Home–School Engagement

Parents and teachers focused on each of their concerns with home–school engagement and had differing views for why home–school engagement was not as strong as it could have been. Parents and teachers seemed to place emphasis of responsibility on the other for the lack of effort to establish more positive home–school engagement. Reasons for why there was limited home–school engagement between parents and teachers were shared, as well as differing views of who should initiate the engagement process.

Several reasons were proposed by teachers for the lack of parental engagement. Teachers reported parent intimidation, or being frustrated, or "just not understanding the jargon" (Teacher 9 or T9) or "knowing how to read" (T7), as reasons parents were not involved. Additionally, T4 stated: "I believe a lot of the parents have language barriers." Therefore, it seemed that some teachers believed that parents' low self-concept of efficacy for both school engagement and assisting their child at home restricted parental engagement. Teachers also suggested that parents' language and literacy knowledge may have been a reason for limited engagement with the teacher. T10 recognized that some parents want to be involved: "It's not that parents don't want to be involved. I just don't think they know how to be involved. Even though we give suggestions on how to improve literacy at home, they don't have the resources."

In addition, teachers proposed parents' personal limitations, such as work schedules and time availability, as reasons parents were not as engaged as they could have been with the school, impeding their communication with teachers or engagement with students' literacy development. As remarked by T3: "My parents do want to be more involved in their students' activities; but again, the work schedule." T4 concurred: "a lot of my students tell me mom or dad are working late, and they get home very late and can't help them." In many cases, it seemed that teachers saw parents' personal situations as barriers that were not their responsibility to address in order to increase engagement and placed the onus on parents to change their behaviors.

Although there was a strong sense that home–school communication and engagement could be improved upon from the perspective of teachers, some teachers believed they were performing their role in the process. For example, T10 stated, "I send home every two weeks the grades they [students] get

from their biweekly assessments… I feel I am doing my best to communicate with parents." In circumstances such as when language barriers are present, T4 stated: "we [teachers] just help each other" to provide some translations when necessary. Some teachers did acknowledge that parents make attempts to try to be involved. One teacher (T7) reported that some parents will say, "What can I help my child with?" This teacher remarked, "That's different; then I'll be a bit more specific, but I don't get that much." The focus, therefore, was on parents to reach out to teachers to ask for assistance or for more specific details on students' development.

For parents, a different perspective for the home–school engagement process evolved. Parents generally believed that if you want to meet with teachers to gain information or discuss concerns, you need to ask for more teacher time. "If you want more one-on-one time with the teacher, you've got to ask for it. After open house [beginning of the school year], they [teachers] don't call no more" (Parent 2 or P2). Some parents also believed that the limited communication from teachers was not timely, in that children's learning issues should have been discussed much earlier. As stated by P3, referring to a child experiencing learning difficulties: "The parent has to look for answers, and communication is too late." P3 claimed that "most of the communication with teachers is initiated by the parents." A couple of parents in the second focus group, which was several months into the school year, reported never meeting their child's teacher face-to-face. Texting was the most common form of communication between teachers and parents in this study. Overall, parents believed teachers should initiate the communication with the parent, and the frequency of the process was less than parents desired.

With further communication, parents could also learn more about what was happening in school, and parents believed that this would support their home engagement practices with children. Several parents wanted more specific information on ways to help their child (e.g., P18, P19). P19, a native Creole speaker with a child experiencing difficulties in reading and writing, stated that she wished she had more strategies to help her child at home, including translations for some of the material to assist her child. Overall, it seemed that both teachers and parents placed onus on the other individual to initiate more engagement practices. Some parents wanted to be engaged but struggled with ways to support their child, whereas teachers believed they were performing their role in involving parents. For some parents, communication with teachers was limited, which reduced their ability to share information with teachers.

Differing Perspectives on Homework Completion

Homework was a task that teachers commonly recommended to parents to participate with their child in order to increase students' literacy achievement. Teachers considered homework involvement as one of the most important ways that parents could assist their children at home, and most teachers reported it as a way that parents could benefit children's in-school learning (e.g., T2, T5). Worksheets and participation in the i-Ready program (a technology-based reading assessment and instruction program) were the most common form of homework reported by the teachers.

Although most parents and teachers agreed that some of these homework activities could support in-school learning, there was variation for reasons why homework was not completed. Teachers strongly encouraged parents to participate with children in the i-Ready program as part of students' language arts homework. Teachers believed that there was a lack of parental engagement with children in this process. Teachers were aware that technology was a barrier for some parents. Nevertheless, several teachers suggested that parents could take children to the library when they did not have technology at home (T1, T6, T9). T6 reported that she sent home steps on how to log in (to i-Ready) and the child's password. In contrast, when I asked parents if there were limitations for visiting the library, several parents in the second focus group nodded in response. Access and understanding the technology navigation was also an issue for some parents. P22 shared: "Give them [parents] knowledge in technology, like how to do their [students'] homework on the computer."

A related limitation for parents in supporting children's general homework completion centered on parents' ability to understand the instructions: "Explain the homework, how to go about the homework" (P2). Furthermore, some parents wanted more direction on the activities children were asked to complete at home because of language barriers. One Haitian Creole speaker (P10) explained that "if resources came home in Creole, I would be able to help my child better." P2 reported that she asks her husband, who is bilingual, to translate homework instructions for some parents in the community, which can pose a difficulty for helping children at home when community assistance is sporadic for parents. These parents felt there was too much homework when parents struggled to help their children.

Overall, some teachers did not report options for parents when language barriers exist with completing homework (e.g., T5, T6), and one teacher reported not being encouraged to speak to students in their home language, which might assist students to better understand their homework: "In school they don't encourage us to talk to them [students] in Creole, because they want

them to speak English" (T6). T6 also acknowledged: "She [a parent] doesn't have anybody in the home that speaks English, so she has to get a friend to help the child." It seemed that some teachers believed that if parents were interested or motivated enough, more parents could overcome their barriers. As stated by T9, "If you are motivated, you will find a way [to help children]."

Finally, there seemed to be a contrast in the content of the homework completed at home from what was expected at school. As an example, P2 claimed that her son does not have to spell correctly because the teacher does not correct it. P2 states: "I would like for them [teachers] to work with me if he is not doing it [spelling] the right way.…At home when I am trying to correct it, he argues back because his teacher accepts it, so that part I would like for them [teachers] to work with me on." Another parent (T16) with two children who did not like to read was confused about the homework process: "I don't exactly know how the teacher reads with them, even though when I have to do homework with them, I have to read with them." Further information from schools to homes on the role of inventive spelling and information about shared reading interactions may assist some parents' understanding of these literacy activities.

Similarities in Beliefs on What Motivates Students in Literacy

Both parents and teachers had similar beliefs about what motivates children in literacy. Teachers and parents agreed that out-of-school activities motivate children in school. For example, T3 stated that children are motivated for learning "when it's new, when it is connected to their own lifestyle, [and] when it is something that is culturally relevant to them." T6 discussed an opportunity for students to be creative in using their own experiences as motivation. Sequence books and "books they like [comic, action figure]" were described by parents, as were audio books (e.g., P4, P5). P16 stated, "He likes Batman, and I get a story with Batman, I know he's going to sit down." Making learning fun through activities when reading or writing was shared by teachers and parents as a means to increase children's school motivation (e.g., T7, P7). Both parents and teachers also agreed that some children were not as motivated for school learning as they could be.

Several of the parents reported that their children enjoyed math and reading (when it wasn't for homework or for assessment purposes) but were less interested in writing homework. Parents and teachers presented suggestions to increase student motivation. Some parents suggested cross-curricular links to improve children's literacy motivation in school, such as art and music (P3, P5, P12, P24), and T1 discussed classroom centers which involved small group discussions on different activities as motivating students. A couple of parents

(P21, P24) believed that children were not academically challenged enough in school, which affected children's motivation.

Considering the rather prescriptive curriculum requirements, such as for reading intervention, and the focus on assessments in this Title I school, teachers did not believe they could integrate activities that motivate students as much as they would have liked, such as a focus on culturally relevant texts (e.g., T3, T4). T4 shared: "I did do a book study with them, but that's usually after state testing. Maybe the last month of school I'll do a book study." T7 stated that for Black history month, she covered Ruby Bridges and children enjoyed it. "I did a little booklet, and I had them write stories." T7 then discussed the time constraints and that she did not get to cover Presidents' Day the past year even though she really wanted to. Overall, more motivational activities were not integrated in the classroom throughout the school year, not because teachers did not value their benefit for learning, but because some teachers believed there were limitations placed on them by the curriculum program and focus on assessing children at their school that impacted such engagement practices (T3, T4, T7). There was a sense of conflict between several of the teachers' own beliefs of what was engaging learning practices for students and beliefs about external limitations on their practice that impeded more meaningful instruction. Unfortunately, perhaps due to the limited communication between some parents and teachers, there may not have been a clear understanding among parents of why some children were not more motivated for in-school learning, even though parents and teachers agreed upon what motivates students.

Discussion and Implications

In reflection on the themes, the following three outcomes evolved from the main study findings: listening to parents' perspectives, the need for teacher agency, and the role of school administration and policy. Future action to address parents' and teachers' concerns is proposed.

Listening to Parents' Perspectives

Many parents had different perspectives from teachers on home–school engagement. For example, some teachers believed that parents did not make completing children's homework a priority, whereas some parents reported wanting assistance with helping children with homework because they could not read the directions in English. Several teachers believed that parents' own issues were the reason they were not engaged with school or in children's education, whereas parents implicated teachers for not inviting their engagement. Kim (2009) suggests that "teachers may assume that minority parents do not

have the time, interest, money, or energy to support what they are doing, so they bypass the parents, thinking that they are helping them by not bothering them" (p. 87). Davis (1993) suggested that reaching parents may not be as difficult as teachers believe. Validating what parents are already doing to support children's learning and respecting parents' viewpoints, rather than viewing parents' role from a deficit perspective, invites further engagement. Indeed, many parents in this study wanted to be more informed about the curriculum throughout the year. This involved more than the curriculum expectations, which would be a focus during the open house early in the school year, and information on state assessments. Rather, parents requested reasons for and further information on classroom activities and processes.

Beyond being informed of curriculum expectations, when teachers provide suggestions to parents about helping their children with particular subjects, the parents come to understand their involvement in these areas is important (Drummond & Stipek, 2004). Teachers in Islam's (2019) research would advise the parent in how to assist children's homework completion or how to gain help if no one in the family could assist the child with homework. More quality time sharing information about students and listening to parents' perspectives could support the co-construction of knowledge. Certainly, face-to-face meetings with teachers are known to affect school results (Islam, 2019) and were limited in the current study. As T7 reported in this study:

> Face-to-face is better. Before, we used to have the parents come to our room to pick up their students, but because we have a pick-up area, that's kind of gone out. I enjoyed having parents come to the door to pick up their kids because then I could have a little conversation.

When parents perceive that they are receiving more communication and invitations from teachers, they become more involved in helping their children at home and in school (Deslandes & Bertrand, 2005). If the school is able to "convey to the parent that his or her involvement is welcome and useful in supporting student learning and success," then this will "influence parent's decisions to become involved" (Walker et al., 2005, p. 94). Opportunities to talk to each other can support the development of a collaborate relationship (Daniel, 2011; Ratliffe & Ponte, 2018). Perhaps when teachers believe parents may not seem to care about engagement, it is because parents' voices were typically not heard (Christie, 2005).

What seemed to motivate students were activities or topics that related to their out-of-school lives. According to parents, their children were lacking in motivation for some areas of literacy learning, including writing. Parents had perspectives on how in-school learning motivation could be improved upon. Although teachers believed they had some restrictions on teaching activity

choices, listening to parents' perspectives on what motivates students might provide further impetus to act on that knowledge, given links between student motivation and literacy achievement (Guthrie & Toboada Barber, 2019). Also, when children are more motivated to participate in a school literacy tasks at home, parents may be more likely to engage with students. A deeper understanding of the perspectives that parents bring to home–school engagement is needed (Ratliffe & Ponte, 2018).

Need for Teacher Agency

Linked to listening to parents' perspectives is the need for teacher agency. Assisting parents in overcoming some of their barriers to school engagement rather than placing emphasis on parents alone to do so is of benefit. We know that "if parents doubt their ability to help children, for example due to low levels of parental education, they are also unlikely to involve themselves in the school community" (Humphrey-Taylor, 2015, p. 69). Edwards et al. (2010) suggest that educators should go beyond telling parents to demonstrating activities with parents that may benefit children's learning. Similar to Fox's (2016) study, the parents who participated in this current research wanted to be involved in children's homework. Several parents reported wanting to learn more about choosing books on grade level for children and methods for interacting with books. Teachers can assist parents in addressing some of their reported limitations by providing homework directions in the native language (many times the language arts homework was photocopied from a workbook in these classrooms) and by offering literacy sessions that demonstrate ways of supporting children's literacy at home. Such teacher agency may influence school administrators to further build the home–school relationship. More systematic intervention would likely occur with support from administration (Kim, 2009).

Respect between parents and teachers can support a sense of agency. As shared in Daniel (2016), the outcome of a parent–school engagement program is dependent on the teacher's effectiveness in building trusting relationships with parents (Emerson et al., 2012). Research shows that teachers who felt more confident about their associations with parents were more likely to conduct parent partnership activities (Evans, 2013). Confidence may come when teachers have more control over formal networks in the classroom so that they can strengthen informal networks with parents (Dove et al., 2018), which school administrators can assist in establishing. T10 in this study, stated: "I feel like there is no support for teachers in urban schools to truly make an impact on literacy." This teacher discussed the need for an agenda for change, which can be supported by the school. Schools, under the leadership of principals, pose the primary responsibility for initiating the development of family–school

partnerships (U.S. Department of Education, 1997, p. 117). However, it is a shared responsibility. While strong leaders are needed for effective family engagement, a collective effort in which educators take responsibility for connecting with families is more constructive for building partnerships (Epstein et al., 2019; Leo et al., 2019).

Some educators in this research did refer parents to afterschool programs that could support students' learning, and thus demonstrated some agency to work with children's families to improve children's education. However, further efforts to connect parents with other parents or to local family literacy programs may support child achievement through child and adult literacy development. Rather than just stating, "I wish we [teachers] had more support for the students" (T2), exploring options with school administrators and community members may address some of the barriers to home–school engagement and literacy development. Some families did not have easy access to technology to support children with their homework; therefore, examining ways to make technology more accessible through community or school involvement can demonstrate a sense of agency through teacher action.

Given that teacher agency involves an active contribution to shaping their practice and conditions associated with that practice to improve education (Goodson, 2003; Priestley, 2011, as cited in Biesta et al., 2015), teachers with agency advocate for the learning needs of students. Therefore, teachers need to have some sense of agency over what they teach. T7, a veteran teacher, stated that she lets other teachers at her school know that they can vary somewhat from what are strongly prescribed lessons in the school curriculum. She reported: "They [administrators] want to see your lesson plans and see that you are all basically doing the same thing" and that "some teachers will just stick to what they are supposed to be sticking to." As T7 explains, "if someone comes in and says, well, why are you doing this, I could justify it by saying I'm covering what we need to cover." Many other language arts teachers in this school did not have the same level of teacher agency as this particular teacher for adapting to students' needs. This teacher changed activities that were less relevant to students while still meeting curriculum expectations. Other teachers may gain agency by working more closely with this teacher. Through the process, homework and school activities may become more meaningful to students.

Parents also need to have agency, that is, parental agency—actions and responses in regard to their concerns (Vincent, 2001). Teachers can play a role in developing parental agency through building trusting relationships with parents. Perhaps then, parents may not feel as though they are imposing by asking for more teacher time to discuss their children's development. Parents should continue to advocate for teacher support and network with other parents, perhaps through a parenting association linked to the school.

Role of School Administration and School Policy

Family engagement—and teacher encouragement of the engagement process—can be shaped by the broader rules of the school. As cited in Daniel (2016), "teacher practice in facilitating parental involvement is in turn related to institutional and leadership support and a school culture that encourages and supports high involvement of families (Barnyak & McNelly, 2009; Bauch & Goldring, 2000; Tschannen-Moran, 2001)" (p. 559). A school can place emphasis on relationship-building with families that may support the increase of home–school engagement. In her research with families and schools, Mapp (2003) reported on why and how Title I eligible parents were involved in their children's education. Parents indicated that their school's emphasis on building relationships with school staff and other parents was key. It seems that connecting families to each other, to staff members, and to their children's learning was a strong incentive for family engagement (Mapp, 2012). For the school in this current study, homework discussion groups organized by the school for parents may be an effective strategy for supporting relationship building, as well as other opportunities, including language assistance and translations beyond schoolwide notices. Leadership can shape a changed understanding of the educator role, including one that places more emphasis on engagement with families.

Along with relationship building, the school district can provide more autonomy to teachers to shape the curriculum based on students' academic needs (Dove et al., 2018) and cultural interests, rather than placing further limits on opportunities for such teaching in this school. Teachers can then integrate classroom activities more meaningfully with children's lives, which can also link to homework recommendations. In the end, children's motivation for literacy learning may be positively affected. Home–school engagement might then involve the co-construction of meaning between schools and parents in which knowledge from different stakeholders is valued (Ratliffe & Ponte, 2018).

Family engagement should be "a shared responsibility among families, school staff, and community members" (Mapp, 2012, p. 2). As reported in Epstein (2018), schoolwide partnership reduces the burden on individual teachers to conduct all family engagement activities alone. Consequently, when teachers perceive interest from the school district, they believe parents are more interested in children's education (Moosa et al., 2001). The process may begin with school policy and administration and extend to influences on teacher agency. Once teachers are more committed to learning from parents and taking more control over their students' outcomes, parental agency may also increase.

A greater focus is seen within Title I school documents on implementing curriculum and not enough attention is paid to teachers' knowledge of home–school engagement. As Antony-Newman (2019) describes, the absence of support for teachers' outreach in policy documents is apparent in comparison to the emphasis on what parents need to do: "There is almost no word on teachers and teacher readiness to work with parents, even though prior studies have shown that parental involvement suffers when teachers are not prepared to work with parents collaboratively (Patte, 2011; Uludag, 2008)" (as cited in Antony-Newman, 2019, p. 156). Mapp (2012) concludes that parental engagement requirements are one of the weakest areas of Title I compliance.

The policy for Title I schools could be more specific for family engagement and expand on the minimum of one formal meeting between parents and teachers each school year. Islam's (2019) findings suggest that more frequent meetings between teachers and parents could be associated with better performance among lower achieving students. In addition, some teachers and parents placed value on face-to-face communication in this study. Policy changes may be needed to impact school administration's support for the implementation of home–school initiatives. As suggested by Kim (2009), the greatest change for successful schooling may be that of school policy, emphasizing family involvement in children's learning and administrative support for teachers to implement parental involvement.

Conclusion

Overall, the findings of this research suggest a need to continually work on ways to build better home–school engagement. The findings of this study are consistent with that of Baker et al. (2016), who found that parents wanted consistency in parent–school communication and desired more proactive communication, particularly before children began to experience learning difficulties in school. Similarly, parents in Baker et al.'s (2016) study wanted more information on how they could assist children academically. Although some teachers in the current study did demonstrate agency (e.g., by providing opportunities for children to access afterschool programming), the need for an increased use of agency to engage more parents in understanding the language arts curriculum, as well as providing ways to assist in the process of helping their children at home, is indicated by the findings. To support teachers in gaining more agency for their teaching, Biesta et al. (2015) recommends that teachers focus on the long-term significance of their work rather than just temporary goals. This change in focus can then prompt teachers to participate in actions or activities that offer long-term changes for students' performance.

Further, administrators and policymakers may want to increase their mandated parent–teacher conferences or meetings in Title I schools so that parents, particularly socioeconomically and culturally diverse parents, have an opportunity to learn more about the school community and to build a relationship with their child's classroom teacher. Educators would also have an opportunity to learn about parents' practices and perspectives for their children's learning.

There are several limitations of this research. This study was conducted at one school in a low-income, culturally diverse area, and therefore, the findings may not be generalizable across socioeconomic and other cultural groups nor to all Title I schools. Focus groups with parents offered the advantage for all parents attending to hear the perspectives of others. This may increase participation for some parents but limit the participation of others who may differ from the experiences shared (Morgan, 2019). Furthermore, parents who attended the focus group may be more engaged with schools than those parents who did not attend. If parents who volunteered are more active in their children's literacy than those who did not attend the sessions, then concerns of home–school engagement are likely even more intense based on the perspectives shared in this research.

To conclude, most parent–school research focuses on how parents can acquire school capital (Power, 2015). There has been less knowledge published on how teachers can acquire social capital from parents or families in order to become more culturally responsive to parents (Holloway & Kunesh, 2015). Increased opportunities for teachers and parents to talk to and listen to each other is a starting point. Essentially, there should be a stronger focus on developing parent–teacher relationships in this school (Daniel, 2016; Ratliffe & Ponte, 2018). The co-construction of knowledge is possible for improving children's literacy learning but currently remains limited.

Obstacles may be encountered when teachers are encouraged to learn about home cultural contexts but are restricted in the ways they can integrate that knowledge in the school curriculum. School administration should provide opportunities for teacher action. That is, they can support teachers by providing more curriculum decision-making flexibility and by encouraging and aiding teachers in building relationships with parents, such as through classtime meeting scheduling and the design of broader home–school literacy events.

This research was conducted with practicing teachers. Given the study results, it seems imperative to work with preservice teachers as well as in-service educators to further emphasize the importance of home–school engagement and practices to support that engagement. A full course on family partnerships and teacher agency for undergraduate students and school organization for parent engagement, has been advocated in the research (Epstein, 2018), including ways to more effectively implement home–school engagement in Title

I schools. The findings of the current research illuminate the need for a greater emphasis on parent–school engagement in schools serving low-income families and the need for school administrators, teachers, and parents to work together on creating this change. With this increased engagement, literacy achievement in schools could significantly improve (Crosby et al., 2015).

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Appendix. Interview Protocols

Sample Questions for Teacher Interviews

<u>Part A</u>

1. I would like to know more about literacy teaching and learning at your grade level. Can you please share what a language arts session may look like for you in an average day?

2. How do you decide which books or materials to use for teaching language arts? (i.e., what influences your decision?)

3. Are there specific language and literacy areas that students are more or less motivated to engage in throughout the year? If so, can you provide an example or two?

<u>Part B</u>

1. Please tell me about your communication with parents/caregivers of the students you teach. How frequently and by what means do you communicate with them (e.g., by phone, face-to-face)? In general, do parents respond to your invitations?

2. From your perspective, are parents supportive of the literacy learning of students at home? What types of activities may parents engage in to support children's literacy learning?

3. Are there barriers that may prevent parent engagement with helping their child with literacy learning? Is so, please share some of those barriers.

4. Have you made suggestions (or do you plan to make suggestions) to parents about what they might do to further support their child in literacy learning? If so, please share some of these suggestions.

5. What might you do in the future to assist children's in-school literacy learning?

Sample Questions for Parent Focus Groups

1. How frequently do you meet with your child's teacher in a year? Is it an invited session? Please tell me about this time.

2. Is there anything that you would like to know more about in regards to language arts learning in school or about what you might do at home? If so, please explain.

3. Are there barriers that affect your ability to assist your child at home with language or literacy? Are there ways that the school can assist with those possible barriers?

4. Are there recommendations that you might have for the school or teachers to improve your communication or engagement with them? If so, then please share those.