

Building an Understanding of Family Literacy: Changing Practices Regarding Homework and Other Forms of School–Home Engagement

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Abstract

School to home communication has often been seen as a one-way path, with homework and other materials serving children and families while teachers were the facilitators. When schools were forced to rapidly switch instruction from face-to-face classrooms to entering kitchens, living rooms, and other spaces to deliver virtual instruction, teachers were suddenly “in” the homes of their students. Findings from this qualitative study of 11 practicing teachers showed a new appreciation for family literacy efforts. Virtual doors were opened so that teachers had increased opportunities to develop a deeper understanding of cultural and academic practices in the home. Teachers now had access to families’ funds of knowledge to enhance classroom curriculum and practices in the virtual space. As schools reopened and teacher, parent, and caregiver relationships returned to a more distant space, these participants described small but significant changes in the way they planned to engage parents and caregivers in the future.

Key Words: family literacy practices, homework, bidirectional parent–teacher engagement, home–school connections

Everyone is just doing the best they can. I have learned that it's important to take this into account when working with my students and to understand that I cannot expect the same outcome from all students and their families. I must be understanding of their individual circumstances and work with them accordingly in the absolute best way that I can!

Introduction

What have teachers learned from the virtual “home visits” of the COVID-19 pandemic school year? The above vignette shows how one participant in a pilot study of current teachers, described here, changed their attitudes towards parents. The year of transition from traditional face-to-face delivery of instruction to a variety of instructional virtual models for even the youngest children is of particular interest to the study of school–home engagement. It provided entry into the homes of children where teachers might not have previously ventured. Although the research on home visits is well documented (Chappel & Ratliffe, 2021; Power & Perry, 2001; Szech, 2020; Wright et al., 2018), restrictions such as time concerns, privacy, and even fear has held many teachers back from taking this opportunity for true parent/caregiver and teacher exchange in the environment most comfortable for the parent. This is unfortunate because we know that in home visits teachers learn from the families and can better understand and value their contributions. Seizing the moment when teachers were connected with families virtually on a routine basis could help teachers realize the social capital gained from getting to know and understand families and caregivers, just as they expect parents and caregivers could benefit from their experiences with the school community (Lynch, 2021). Ginsberg (2007) described what teachers can learn about parents: “their contributions have helped make the school’s curriculum rich and relevant in terms of global awareness. For example, with input from immigrant families, teachers at Barnes recently created story problems for a math unit on double-digit division that originated in real-life situations these families had faced in the process of resettling in the United States” (p. 17). This paradigm shift requires a shift in mindset, “to embracing family engagement as an equity mindset—where you see families as cocreators, regardless of what they look like, what language they speak, who they are” (Stoltzfus, 2021, p. 3).

As a teacher educator, my research interest is in family literacies or those literacy practices that take place in the home and other settings outside of school as an outgrowth of cultural and social capital. The importance of an additive perspective to bidirectional parent–teacher engagement to enhance working with children in the classroom, homes, and community is emphasized. Prior research examined homework as a school to home family literacy practice and how materials, such as homework, school newsletters, and even school forms,

could be viewed as a form of bidirectional or two-way communication from the school to the home and back to the school (Fox, 2010, 2016). Rather than quantify or qualify the effects of homework, the way homework is taken up in the many diverse settings called home that can inform teachers of how best to engage the child and even the family can be examined. How teachers use the information from the home may be referred to as *tapping the funds of knowledge* that exist in the home (Lindahl, 2015; González et al., 2013).

With the advent of the sudden transition to virtual schooling, would a broader definition of the work that teachers were doing with children in the homes now be called “homework?” Getting at the actual practice of this work would warrant an investigation into how parents, caregivers, children, and teachers negotiated homework as a collective team. Graduate students in their final semester of an advanced degree in literacy education—typically in-service teachers with a range of years of teaching experience—consistently expressed the same emotion during this transition period: a sense of loss paired with confusion that often resulted in frustration. In online discussion boards, written reflections on assignments, and anecdotal comments in class, students described decisions being made for them by administrators, complaints from parents and community members about school closings beyond their control, and fear for meeting the needs of the children in the remote environment. As time went on, however, the anecdotal stories began to change. An upside of the conversations with pre- and in-service teachers often included funny stories that emanated from virtually being in the kitchens, bedrooms, and living areas of the homes of their students. Prior to their virtual teaching experiences, current teachers may have missed out on what has been called “lessons from the kitchen table,” where families shared stories with teachers on home visits (Ginsberg, 2007). Now, through their virtual teaching setting, tales of pets, younger siblings, extended family members, and children acting naturally as they received instruction in their homes seemed to lighten the challenge of remote instruction. Of research interest was how the dynamics between the home and school might change the way teachers interacted with the families in their future teaching, focusing on homework and other forms of family literacy.

This action research study was implemented to inform other teacher educators about new insights occurring with teachers’ adjustments to virtual and blended teaching. An additional hoped-for effect was to inform current pre- and in-service teachers on how to interact with parents and caregivers, particularly in the new virtual climate. (Note: The terms “parents and caregivers” were used to purposefully acknowledge the multiple participants in the home and community of the child.) The initial question was: *What lessons can be learned from practicing teachers to better prepare pre- and in-service teachers for*

parent and caregiver engagement in the virtual environment as well as traditional school-to-home-to-school methods? This overarching question led to a logic of inquiry on homework as practiced in the home setting, as well as other forms of family literacy. As practicing teachers acquire tools to work virtually with children of all ages, backgrounds, and living situations in their home environments, how will parent and caregiver engagement with teachers over in-home instruction change? It was important to consider a beginning teacher in the initial years of the role, contemplating what to “send home” for the first time. It would be easy to see how old habits can return, such as one dimensional and traditional paper-and-pencil homework, especially without an alternative based on research situated in the home.

In this pilot study, a small group of teachers were asked about lessons learned from engaging with children and families during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic school transition to virtual and blended forms of instruction. This was a convenience sample of teachers in a graduate literacy degree program, all enrolled in the researcher’s literacy course. Through our previous class discussions, it was discovered that participants were learning to communicate with parents and caregivers in different ways than they had used in prior years regarding both homework assignments and other forms of family literacy activities. After university Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval, the pilot study was initiated. Questions were designed to discern teachers’ attitudes on the benefits of homework, parent communication, and family involvement in homework and the classroom (see Appendix). The evidence described in this small study provided insight for teacher educators on how teachers developed an increased appreciation of parents’ and caregivers’ relationships with their children from the virtual field trips, much like a home visit in the child’s home. At the same time, because participants’ responses acknowledged the untapped potential in their exchanges with parents and caregivers for academic engagement and support for their child, teacher educators can see opportunities to operationalize new and innovative bidirectional school–home engagement efforts.

What Prior Research Can Tell Us About Homework

In thinking about what I hoped to learn from this study, I began with assumptions from prior research on homework and other forms of school to home interactions (Cooper, 2001a; 2001b; Cooper et al., 2006; Dell’Antonia, 2014; Fox, 2016; KidsHealth, 2015). Traditionally, in both the colloquial sense and in the literature on the subject, homework has been characterized as a negative and even potentially traumatic event, as a hassle (Beaulieu & Granzin, 2004), as harmful to parent and child relationships (Bennett & Kalish,

2007), with little to no positive effects (Kohn, 2007), or as causing emotional distress (Dell’Antonia, 2014). A book called *Homework Without Tears* sold over 750,000 copies (Canter et al., 1988). In a review of over 120 studies examining homework, Cooper et al. (2006) described a synthesis of findings around the negative effects of homework, citing satiation, denial of leisure time, parental interference, and cheating (p. 7). Contrary to what more current research advocated, such as a more collective approach to family literacy practices, including homework, in the home (Fox, 2016), the majority of resources available on electronic searches continue to describe the parents’ role as checking homework after completion (Beaulieu et al., 2004; Canter et al., 1988; Unger, 1991). A current search on homework on the U.S. Department of Education website cites National Parent Teacher Organization guidelines that recommend best practices for homework as having a well-lit place for homework away from T.V. and other distractions (U.S. Department of Education, 2006). “Staying away” from homework as a parent is emphasized, stating, “Too much parent involvement can prevent homework from having some positive effects. Homework is a great way for kids to develop independent, lifelong learning skills” (U.S. Department of Education, 2006, p. 1). A somewhat isolated, non-participatory setting, away from electronics, with a parent as a monitor but not participant is often recommended (KidsHealth, 2015). For optimum conditions, the setting is traditionally recommended as a quiet space, away from distractions, with ample room to work. Special considerations, such as lighting and a student-sized desk, are often mentioned. (Vatterott, 2012). Assumptions concerning homework from prior research on the roles among stakeholders—children, parents and caregivers, and teachers—were consistent. Children were to complete the homework independently, away from distractions. Parents and caregivers were to provide the space for homework and to check that it was completed. Teachers were to provide assignments to be conducted in the home (Beaulieu & Granzin, 2004; Canter et al., 1988; Unger, 1991; U.S. Department of Education, 2006; Vatterott, 2012).

What Previous Research Tells Us About Teacher–Parent and/or Caregiver Engagement

Although studies acknowledge the role of parents in supporting their child’s homework (Fox, 2010; California Department of Education, 2004), the assumption that these conditions are reasonable and equitable is contrary to a collective approach to family literacy. In truth, scholars have known families live in diverse settings and situations, with their own sets of traditional practices and values that influence their concepts of parent involvement (Boethel, 2003; Chrispeels & Gonzalez, 2006; Fox, 2010, 2016; Ho et al., 2007; Hong

& Ho, 2005). The challenge is to operationalize pedagogy in meaningful ways so that pre- and in-service teachers can see their instructional practices through a culturally relevant lens that examines their diverse settings and situations. Exploring opportunities that enhance and barriers that prevent parent–school engagement is inherent in this critical lens (Anderson, 2014).

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), is an often-used term visible in programs of teacher education study and course syllabi. In the case of best practices for homework, culturally relevant pedagogy calls for teachers to see homework as a bidirectional opportunity. This approach to homework provides the teacher with opportunities to engage with the family through assignments that promote an exchange of cultural and linguistic information (Colombo, 2005; Cooper, 2001b; Fox, 2016). The goal of designing bidirectional homework in order to understand and build upon diverse literacy practices reflects what Edwards calls *parentally appropriate programs*, stressing the point that “because parents are different, tasks and activities must be compatible with their capabilities,” interests, and preferred practices (Edwards, 2009, p. 83).

Virtual schooling is not new, with 501 full-time virtual schools enrolling 297,712 students and 300 blended schools with 132,960 students in the U.S. offering some type of virtual learning in 2018 (Molnar et al., 2019, p. A-1). A 2019 report prepared for the National Policy on Education Council gave a dire description of existing virtual schools in the U.S. and went as far as recommending a moratorium on virtual schooling until the issues were addressed (Molnar et al., 2019). Lack of scientifically based research into successful practices, non-standard and missing accountability measures, and lack of equity factors both evaluated and/or addressed were some of the concerns. An additional concern provided information on the potential of bidirectional homework and family literacy activities when done with the intent of cultural exchange. Molnar’s team found that very little attention was paid to the cross-cultural differences in virtual instruction delivery. The report described lessons as lacking in ways to address the needs of diverse populations. This finding provides a rationale for examining what was learned in the year of virtual instruction due to the COVID-19 pandemic so that teachers can better design not only virtual instruction, but also ways to engage diverse parents and caregivers.

Methods

As stated in the introduction, this pilot study emerged as inservice teachers in a graduate language and literacy program held informal conversations,

participated in class activities, and wrote in class discussion boards about their experiences during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic. Each participant taught at a different school in one of five different counties in the region surrounding the university. Grade levels taught ranged from K–11; classroom designations included self-contained, special education, literacy coach, and English as a Second Language (ESL) instruction. Questions arose regarding the expectations for in-home work through virtual instruction as compared to independent homework practices prior to and during the COVID-19 virtual instruction period. As a researcher, the homework and other forms of family literacy practices were intriguing: What were teachers learning about in-home literacy practices through their virtual interactions with children, their siblings, and other family members? While the greater culture and society were being affected by the pandemic, it was important to capture the phenomenon for teachers, children, families, and caregivers.

A qualitative phenomenology framework was used to examine the survey data and identify trends and outliers. Phenomenology is a theoretical research approach that investigates human perspectives of individuals who are vital to the settings and environment (Giorgi, 1994; Patton, 2002). As in a “telling case” (Mitchell, 1984), the phenomenon is authenticated and valued, with the potential to impact future research. Phenomenology research is primarily concerned with examining the shared experiences—or the phenomena—of a group, in this case, teachers in the new experience of virtual teaching in the homes of the children they had previously taught in traditional classroom delivery. In particular, how group members interpret and make meaning throughout the experiences (Patton, 2002) is an outcome of phenomenology. The lens of phenomenology research was used as a framework to analyze the survey responses.

To explore the phenomenon, a grounded theory approach was needed. Grounded theory is a structured yet flexible methodology rooted in fresh data, “appropriate when little is known about a phenomenon; the aim being to produce or construct an explanatory theory that uncovers a process inherent to the substantive area of inquiry” (Chun Tie et al., 2019, p. 1). Results of the data analysis would then lead to guiding questions for further study (Walsh et al., 2015). Ultimately, capturing the in-time decisions teachers were making was important to operationalizing the results for teacher education and professional development programs.

The participants in this pilot study were from a convenience sample of in-service teachers in a graduate level language and literacy class. The class members were invited to participate in this study to “explore family literacy practices observed during the COVID-19 pandemic virtual schooling period”

by completing a one-time, open-ended, written electronic survey. Because the project involved in-service teachers completing the survey about their own school sites and classrooms, the methodology protocol was particularly important to establish (Green & Harker, 1988). Participants were informed of their right to participate or decline in the survey without it affecting their course grade. They would not be asked to identify themselves or their school. Because of the intimate nature of the small class, the results would not be shared in class by the instructor. Everyone in the class ($n = 11$) chose to participate and completed the survey.

This pilot study was designed to gather data from teachers' reflections on homework and other forms of family literacy through their new virtual lens. In true inquiry of the phenomenon, the intent of the survey was to capture "a view of the world encompassing the questions and mechanisms for finding answers that inform that view" (Birks, 2014, p. 18) that would eventually affect pre- and in-service teacher development. The survey provided a starting point for the pilot study to build upon for later expansion of the study that would include a wider, more diverse participant group of teachers.

In designing the survey, how to understand teachers' previous thoughts on family literacy practices and how they may have changed due to the transition from traditional in-school instruction to virtual instruction was considered. The participants had all experienced going from face-to-face instruction to virtual instruction at some point over the year prior to the study. In thinking about what new knowledge was desired, questions started with assumptions based on prior research on homework. Survey questions focused on the participants' interactions with families and caregivers. This included queries on their appreciation of homework prior to, during, and after COVID-19 pandemic changes in their instruction. Questions 1–5 addressed homework design, return, and effectiveness. Questions 6–10 focused more broadly on lessons learned on other family literacy practices from the recent virtual engagement with parents and caregivers. The final question specifically asked how their parent/caregiver outreach would change in the upcoming school year after having had the virtual experience with children and families in their homes. A complete list of Questions 1–10 is in the Appendix.

Looking for both trends and outliers in the data, the theoretical tool of critical discourse analysis (Gee, 2014) was used to analyze survey responses. The data was examined for both scholarly inquiry and for the potential pedagogical impact on current class design. Knowing this pilot study had the potential to lead to a larger study, attention was paid to the design of the questions in order to evoke a greater depth in the participant responses. Questions were left broad and open ended. As in any pilot study, the questions were stated clearly and

so that the responses would yield usable data, yet not necessarily generalizable. Rather, this unique phenomenon suggested a “telling case” approach to the data analysis (Mitchell, 1984). Ways to operationalize the findings to increase effectiveness of the researcher’s course design to support pre- and in-service teachers still working through the impact of COVID-19 pandemic were desired. *In-vivo* coding was used to capture statements and phrases from the participants’ own language (Miles et al., 2014) that addressed the overarching research questions of how to better prepare preservice teachers for parent and caregiver engagement in the virtual environment around existing family literacies and school work. Even though the responses were anonymous, using a convenience sample of students, there was a sense of the participant–observer in reading the responses.

Results

Evidence derived from this small study provided insight for teacher educators on how teachers developed an increased appreciation of parents’ and caregivers’ relationships with their children from the virtual home visits initiated by school closures during the COVID-19 pandemic. Questions were designed to explore teachers’ attitudes on family literacy practices, including homework, parent communication, and family involvement in homework and classroom.

Results showed emerging themes. A general lack of appreciation for homework both prior to COVID-19 pandemic school closure and after was expressed. What was called homework, however, was not clearly defined. Teachers stated a deeper appreciation of parents and families’ involvement in children’s education, as well as parents’ and caregivers’ growing involvement in curriculum. Some bidirectional benefit was noted from teachers’ learning about cultural and familial practices from the return of the homework and the virtual home visits. A mutual sympathy was also expressed in statements describing how challenging the COVID-19 pandemic had been for all stakeholders.

Participants shared mixed feelings about homework and family engagement. The issues with homework seemed to be amplified with the pandemic’s closure of traditional face to face instruction, namely parents’ perceived lack of participation or overdoing participation in homework. For example, one participant said,

I have always thought homework was not a necessary component of education. Some families are going to overly support or do students’ homework. Some parents are not going to be able to have the time or resources to dedicate to students’ success with homework.

No participants described values or benefits of homework.

The most favorable comments were about parents and children spending time together with homework, for example, “Homework should be a time when parents read to and with their children.”

The acknowledgement of parents’ time with children was described by more than one participant. One said,

I’ve tried to involve families as much as possible this year and provide parents and caregivers with concrete steps to help their student succeed as much as possible. Instead of sending home a work sheet with practice problems or spelling words, I try to advise parents what skills their child needs to practice so that the parent can do it in a way that works for them and their student.

Some participants described how their classroom homework policy had changed this year:

However, I have only been giving “homework” for our Wednesday remote learning days...on the other days when students are in-person, I haven’t been giving any homework.

I decided not to give homework this year, because all work was done at home or able to be completed at home...Instead of thinking in terms of “pages” to complete or read, teachers thought about how many minutes each assignment would take. We all agreed that students should spend more than 30 minutes a day on any one subject.

This is the first year I have not given homework and I can tell it is a huge relief to my students and families. I am hearing more stories about things they do at home, with their families, that they might not have had time to do when they had daily homework.

Of the 11 participants, all who were currently teaching, six said they did not send homework. Two of the four participants who did assign homework described using a weekly or monthly Homework Choice calendar. This practice, which we had previously discussed in class, gives children opportunity to choose the homework assignments they will do that week. Choices include individual work as well as family, project-oriented work. Two of the four participants said they gave daily homework for the remote instruction days only. For those four participants who said they gave some type of homework, the return was described as 75%, 75%, 75%, and 90%, respectively.

For those seven teachers who said they gave no homework, they acknowledged that this could be different from what parents expected. Examples include: “I do not give homework—this is puzzling to some parents and families, but others are grateful to not have this extra task to complete with their

student,” and “Our parents actually have always asked for homework, or complained when we didn’t give any, that is why we’ve been giving it these past few years (we tried to not give it one year and parents freaked).” For those students who do not submit homework as given, it was described as “Most of my students return their take home packets, however sometimes the packets are only partially completed if the student or their families are having a hard time with directions. Sometimes the student also says that they didn’t have time to finish or maybe they didn’t realize there was a back page to something” and “I have 2–3 students that consistently do not do their remote work. Parents typically do not give a response, or state their child is too stressed out or busy to do it.” Participants described how they were responsive to parent requests for digital homework: “In previous years, parents would ask me questions like, ‘My child turn this in digitally?’ I always said yes, and even created a folder for students to drop assignments into, and be flexible about how children showed evidence of work,” and “I do ask students to just color in each time they read to justify our schoolwide program of Book-it.”

When asked to describe the benefits of homework in terms of “individual and/or collective,” all 11 participants responded that homework is or should be a more collective activity. Several qualified their statements by saying it depends on the family with what type of support they may be able to offer, for example, “...it may not be fair to assume that all families can dedicate time and resources as part of a collective activity.” Two of the 11 included the need for individual homework assignments together with collective, more family-engaged homework assignments. One respondent described a practice in the planning stage with another teacher that would involve project-oriented homework that would span across different subject areas. She described the change: “This way, students can work together outside of school with each other and their families.”

Participants were asked to describe how they communicated best with parents and caregivers during the COVID-19 pandemic school closures. Three modes of submission were given that included email, text messaging, and Class Dojo. Some respondents used two and/or three of these mediums. One respondent identified herself as an ESL teacher with responsibilities across seven grade levels at one school. She stated she had begun a practice she called “family dialogue journals.” She described these journals as weekly communication logs between her and the families. Children and family members used the journal beyond the initial use as a homework assignment. She related how a grandmother used the journal to ask about how to help the young child she was caring for. She ended the response by saying, “Next year, I want to use family dialogue journals so that I can learn about home literacies without parents feeling like I’m prying, because everyone will be doing it!”

Participants described their engagement and interactions with parents and caregivers during the COVID-19 pandemic school closures. Six of the 11 respondents described the parent participation as very high and/or higher than previous years (e.g., “I have had lots of parent/caregiver participation this year, in the form of texts, emails, phone calls, and participation in our live Google Meets”). Other participants described the range of parent involvement (e.g., “Being that [instruction] is still occurring ONLY through zoom, the parents are usually there to help their children get online and with certain lessons—cooking lessons, etc.—but of course, there are always [children] whose parents are nowhere to be found when something goes wrong with the tutee’s end of the zoom call.”). Another participant described declining parent interactions as follows: “...some parents have taken advantage of not being able to come in, since this means they don’t have to come to IEP meetings or behavioral conferences with the teachers and admin so they are able to avoid it.” That same respondent described other parent interactions as “more parents open to texting me with their issues rather than calling, and we haven’t had any conferences this year unless absolutely necessary.” Three participants described the parent interactions as “very low,” “non-existent,” and one summed it up with “very low. I hardly get responses from parents. I think everyone is very stressed and overwhelmed.”

Participants were asked what parent and caregiver engagement in the virtual classroom was observed. Answers ranged from parents joining in on Zoom conversations to parents sharing personal issues and concerns about the child to parents and caregivers asking for help for working with the child. Other types of parent engagement were more instructional and shared with the whole class through zoom. Examples included a parent who led a class science experiment, a parent sharing how their family celebrated Easter with the example that “you do not eat chicken the three days leading up to Easter,” parents sharing tamale recipes and traditions around a study of Christmas in Mexico, and another child sharing knowledge about building a family garden. One example showed how parents could contribute more spontaneously when the teacher provided that opportunity: “Parents who would join in on activities with us during Zoom time to demonstrate interest in a particular subject such as learning about pumpkins and having the parent bring over different kinds of pumpkins into the viewing screen for the kids to see a different type.” One participant described how she purposefully designed bidirectional activities that would include time for families to share family news, events, and traditions: “Completing a family pennant and ‘what’s on the fridge’; the fridge is an area where students can talk about what is happening at home. I have learned a lot about my family’s cultures from this activity.” Two participants described how

they hoped to engage parents more in the upcoming year with bidirectional family journals, where teachers and parents and caregivers could write to each other, and more opportunities to participate. Only one participant responded with no additional information or goals for the upcoming year, saying, “Honestly, I can’t think of any.”

Participants described new ways to address parents and caregivers in the upcoming year. Due to the timing of the survey (i.e., in the last week of the master’s program and just three weeks from the end of the school year), all participants were in some stage of transition. Some planned to go on to new roles, others to different grade levels and/or schools, and some to stay at the same job but without graduate school as a responsibility. For their upcoming year the responses reflected a need to keep parent–teacher communication open, even if the school year uses more traditional delivery. Participants mentioned continuing to use Zoom for parent information nights and literacy events. Holding virtual meetings was mentioned by two respondents. Using Google Voice and text messages was described as a desired way to communicate for two respondents, particularly for parents who spoke languages other than English, by using translation features. Sending photos and positive messages to inform parents of students’ progress was described by one participant. One participant stated she would send a survey at the beginning of the year, “to see what would be beneficial to them as a parent/caregiver.” One participant described what the parents had learned and how she hoped they would now, “but also having them understand boundaries. I think this year has been successful in parents understanding that teachers have lives and responsibilities just like they do outside of our jobs! [participant emphasis].”

The final question asked participants to summarize what they had learned about parents and caregivers from working remotely with children in the homes. Overall participants described respect for the challenges of parenting, for example, “Everyone is just doing the best they can.” This was repeated in almost every response, with statements such as “I must be understanding of their individual circumstances and work with them accordingly in the absolute best way that I can!” and “My students deal with so much more than I could ever know or understand when they leave the four walls of school, and I need to be as empathetic as possible while also holding families and students to high expectations.” A sense of missed opportunities and desire to work with parents was also evident (e.g., “I have learned that these families have so much potential for learning engagements and that we are missing the opportunities to tap into those experiences” and “Families love to play academic-based games and enjoy using Class Dojo to find out what’s going on in the classroom and to communicate”).

Some participants seemed to appreciate the experience of being close up with the family through remote learning, “Being virtual seems to break down a barrier between the home life of students and the school environment. It feels less separated when the children are learning from their homes and you are teaching from your home.” Other participants noted the challenge of remote learning:

Children crave routine and attention in a way that isn’t negative or based off of rewards. They want to share with their teachers their stories and toys and jokes. Being out this time last year and not getting that end of year experience has made me more grateful for it this time around.

Another participant stated,

I have learned about what jobs they have, what their home schedule is like, what time they typically get work done based on when the parents are available to help. I have learned that students prefer to be in school rather than doing remote work on their laptop.

The emerging theme from Questions 1–10 was the acknowledgement of parent and caregiver engagement, while at the same time lacking acknowledgement of traditional homework as important to this engagement. “Everyone is just doing the best they can” seemed to sum up many of participants’ responses regarding the work across stakeholders. Regarding a more bidirectional and culturally relevant approach to working with parents and caregivers, an additive theme emerged: “Encourage families to be a part of your classroom by keeping lines of communication open. If those lines seem to close, collaborate with other teachers and for feedback about what you’re doing and ask them what they are doing.”

Discussion

Results from this pilot study showed teachers’ declining use of traditional homework as an instructional practice. As in prior research (Canter et al., 1988; Fox, 2010), a lack of return on assignments as well as feeling that homework added stress to the home were noted comments. Responses showed that many participants expressed no need for continuing homework as they knew it. What seemed unclear was a delineation of homework from schoolwork done in the home but submitted electronically. This blurring of lines between academic work done in homes through a virtual classroom and academic work done in the home outside of school hours was not seen as a conflict by participant responses. When a participant expressed, “I don’t assign homework,”

this same teacher described her instructional method as teaching virtually four days of the week with one day as “remote.” On this day, she reported that she assigned “homework.” This implies that the work she assigned from her screen synchronously to the home was considered schoolwork. When off screen and after school hours, it was called “homework.” What is not acknowledged in this disconnect of terms is that to a parent or caregiver, much less the child, all work done in the home is homework. All is open to the members of the home. Just as traditional “schoolwork” is a part of the school, all work done in the home is in a sense, “owned” by the home. The lack of cultural awareness cited in the 2019 Molnar et al. report was continued in this aspect of the current study responses.

Another modification to future school–home engagement was the participants’ plans to continue electronic meetings with parents and caregivers. Parent conferences and IEP meetings conducted through apps such as Zoom were two ways participants described as working well and something they should continue. Participants described the benefit of email and text messaging for more consistent communication. Programs such as Class Dojo, Remind, Google Voice, and Schoology were named as schoolwide communication methods that offered information not only to and about the child, but also were used to communicate directly with parents (Fox et al., 2020; Laho, 2019).

Successful virtual schooling for multiple children in diverse home settings, when seen through the lens of previously published best practices for homework, goes against the typical guidelines. Instead, teachers see less need for quiet spaces with fewer distractions, and instead see engagement with the child in the home setting over schoolwork as a communication time that includes family members. What Ginsberg (2007) described as lessons learned from families at the kitchen table was valued by teachers in the virtual home visit. These interactive lessons had the potential to contribute to the curriculum, with parents and family members serving as classroom resources.

Results from this pilot study showed that teachers gained a new appreciation for the diverse home settings, needs, and situations of the children with whom they worked. Almost all participants expressed, at least once, a respect for the challenges of parenting a school-aged child during the school closures. Participants acknowledged parents and caregivers as loving providers. The stress of parenting was also acknowledged; “doing the best they can” seemed to be described in multiple ways as something participants learned from the virtual teaching experience.

Implications and Conclusions

The COVID-19 pandemic caused a paradigm shift for many educators who previously never saw themselves as online educators. Just as for participants in this pilot study, many teachers—in just a few days and/or weeks—transitioned their traditional in-classroom instruction to virtual communication from teacher to the diverse home settings of the children they taught. What lessons from this bidirectional window did teachers learn to affect future engagement with parents and caregivers?

Designing homework to be bidirectional so that it not only informs the family about the academics of the classroom, but also brings information from the family to inform the teacher was a goal stressed to my in-service education students. The “tapping of family resources,” a term associated with families’ funds of knowledge (Moll et al., 2001), was espoused in my classes and among my in-service students as a common goal. What these readings and exemplars did not do however was make the bridging from school to home and back to school operational for my previous university students. Barriers between school and home were too strong. Regulations against travel, the long working hours of a teacher, and fear of the other, even when this “other” was the parents and neighborhoods of the very children they taught, precluded getting to know the communities of the children. Initiatives like beginning of the year bus rides into the communities (Fox et al., 2020; Rodriguez, 2007) and salary incentives for “growing our own teachers” did not open the door and enter the kitchens and living spaces. Research on summer and holiday learning loss, characterized as the “faucet effect” (Entwistle et al., 2001), added to new fears of academic loss due to disconnection from the brick-and-mortar resources housed in the school. What was missing was a learned, actualized belief that teachers could enter homes; bridge cultural, linguistic, social, and economic gaps; and work with the child within diverse home and community settings.

The study presented here shows initial thoughts from a select group of K–12 teachers. The consistency of their responses regarding homework as an unnecessary practice in their future classrooms showed a disconnect from what they considered work done in the home after instructional hours and that they assigned in the virtual classroom. An increased appreciation for the work of parents and caregivers with children was consistent across responses. The responses that addressed future engagement with parents showed interest in more interactions, more parent participation in the classroom, and more interest in what cultural knowledge the parent and caregiver could bring to the classroom. The participant quoted in the opening vignette acknowledged the missed opportunities of the past that she hoped to change by tapping into

parent knowledge for better teaching. In acknowledgement of the challenges many families faced, teachers described innovative outreach efforts. Using technology for meetings and ongoing communication with parents and caregivers provided more access and consistency. This not only made communication more efficient but provided an opportunity for the parents to have ongoing access to the teacher as well.

The report submitted to the National Educational Policy Council found barriers that were making virtual instruction unsuccessful and even detrimental in some cases (Molnar et al., 2019). Just months after this report was presented, the COVID-19 pandemic forced the rapid and unanticipated closing of schools across the U.S. and throughout the world. Issues such as lack of accountability, consistency, and cultural awareness were described. The current study reported here shows ways teachers, when the virtual window makes it possible, can learn from parents and caregivers, making a bidirectional exchange from school to home and to school again. As one participant stated, she would send a survey in the beginning of the year to ask parents what type of support they would need in the upcoming school year. Another participant designed a two-way journal where she could communicate with parents and caregivers to offer academic support but also to keep on top of family and community needs. These beginning efforts to make real the promise of school-home connections is one unexpected outcome of the COVID-19 pandemic. The forced virtual entry into kitchens and living spaces of the children they taught opened a small window for this group of teachers to view authentic family literacy practices surrounding homework and other school-home work.

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Appendix. Survey Questions

1. Since returning to face-to-face instruction (post COVID-19 initial closing), how has your perception of “homework” changed? Please describe here. [Open ended text box]
2. What method of homework distribution do you most currently use?
 - Daily, depending on daily assignments
 - Daily, on a repetitive schedule (e.g., Monday—Math, Tuesday—Reading to self, etc.)
 - Weekly, with a repetitive nightly routine
 - Weekly, project-oriented
 - No homework
 - Other, please specify [Open ended text box]
3. What is the rate of return on your homework?
 - 100% return
 - About 75% homework return
 - 50%–74% homework return
 - Less than 50% homework is returned
 - I don’t give homework
 - Other [Open ended text box]
4. Please describe the type of homework response you get from children, parents, and caregivers: [Open ended text box]
5. How would you describe your parent/caregiver participation this school year? Briefly, in your opinion of best practices in teaching, do you consider homework to be a family (collective) activity or an independent activity for the particular grade level you teach? Please explain your response. [Open ended text box]
6. What forms of parent communication have worked the most effectively for you in this year of COVID-19?
 - Written
 - Phone call
 - Text messages
 - Email
 - Unsure
 - Other, please specify [Open ended text box]
7. How would you describe your parent communication in this year, impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic? [Open ended text box]
8. Please list your best example of families/caregivers sharing their “funds of knowledge” with you and/or in your classroom. [Open ended text box]
9. In what ways, if any, do you plan to increase parent and caregiver engagement this year? [Open ended text box]
10. In summary, what have you learned about children, families, and caregivers over this past year? [Open ended text box]