

Take-Home Decodable Book Bags: Leveraging the School to Home Connection to Support Phonics Instruction

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Abstract

Persistent reading underachievement among U.S. elementary students highlights the need for evidence-based, family-engaged literacy interventions. This mixed methods study examined the implementation and perceived effectiveness of take-home decodable book bags designed to extend phonics instruction into the home. Participants included three first grade teachers and the parents of 32 students at a suburban Oklahoma elementary school. Over eight weeks, students took home book bags containing decodable texts, phonics-based activities, and caregiver guidance materials aligned with classroom instruction. Quantitative and qualitative survey data revealed overwhelmingly positive perceptions of the book bags' instructional value, ease of use, and ability to boost students' reading confidence, engagement, and phonics skills. Teachers emphasized the book bag's coherence with classroom goals, while parents noted increased motivation and confidence in their children's reading. Reported challenges included teacher workload and limited objective progress measures. Findings suggest that take-home decodable book bags are an effective, family-friendly tool for reinforcing classroom phonics instruction and strengthening home-school literacy partnerships. Future research should incorporate student performance data to evaluate literacy gains and inform book bag refinements.

Key Words: early literacy, phonics instruction, family engagement, decodable texts, home-school connections, science of reading, skills, confidence

Introduction

A troubling number of children in the United States continue to struggle with reading, raising serious concerns about educational equity and long-term societal outcomes. According to the most recent data from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), only 31% of fourth-grade public school students performed at or above the proficient level in reading—a decline from previous years that reflects widening achievement gaps (U.S. Department of Education, 2024). In Oklahoma, the situation is even more concerning: just 23% of fourth graders demonstrated reading proficiency, placing the state among the bottom three nationally. These statistics indicate that far too many students are not developing the foundational literacy skills necessary for academic success. Early reading difficulties are particularly consequential, as they often predict later challenges across all content areas, reduced high school completion rates (Zheng et al., 2023), and limited opportunities in adulthood (Tamborini et al., 2015).

Illiteracy imposes both direct and indirect costs on society. Directly, it is estimated to cost the global economy more than \$1 trillion (U.S. dollars) each year (Cree et al., 2023). Indirectly, its effects are even more profound: limited literacy restricts individuals' access to critical information about health, nutrition, and safety (Castles et al., 2018). As a result, low literacy exacerbates social inequality and increases the likelihood of poor physical and mental health, workplace accidents, medication misuse, criminal involvement (NCTQ, 2023), and welfare dependency. Collectively, these outcomes generate extensive social and economic consequences that extend far beyond the individual level.

Addressing the literacy crisis requires a multifaceted approach that combines evidence-based instruction (Lane, 2024), early intervention (Wanzek et al., 2018), family engagement (Dahl-Leonard, 2025), and sustained investment in teacher preparation and professional development (Milne & Topping, 2025; NCTQ, 2023). In particular, this study focuses on the role of family engagement and its potential to support phonics instruction at home, helping children practice letter-sound relationships, decoding, and spelling skills outside the classroom. By highlighting strategies for meaningful parent and caregiver involvement, this study aims to demonstrate how families can extend and reinforce classroom instruction. Ensuring that every child has the opportunity to become a proficient reader not only improves individual outcomes, but also helps mitigate the broader social and economic costs associated with illiteracy.

Literature Review

For decades, the field of reading instruction has been shaped by what is often called the *reading wars*—a persistent debate over how children learn to read most effectively. Historically, this debate has swung between two opposing approaches: phonics, which emphasizes explicit instruction in letter–sound relationships (Chall, 1967; Flesch, 1955), and whole language, which encourages children to derive meaning from print through rich literacy experiences (Goodman, 1967; Smith, 1971). Goodman (1967) famously described reading as a “psycholinguistic guessing game” (p. 127), in which readers rely on semantic, syntactic, and visual cues to identify words. Variations of this approach, including the three-cueing model, continue to influence classroom practices in some settings today (Adams, 1990; Clay, 2013).

In response to these debates, the modern *science of reading* movement has shifted the focus from ideology to evidence (Moats, 2020; Seidenberg, 2017). Grounded in cognitive, linguistic, and neuroscience research (Dehaene, 2009), this movement clarifies how the brain learns to read and identifies instructional practices that reliably support literacy development (Castles et al., 2018; Gotlieb et al., 2022; National Reading Panel, 2000). Rather than framing phonics and meaning-making as opposing approaches, the science of reading integrates multiple strands of research to promote a comprehensive, systematic model of literacy instruction (Moats & Tolman, 2019; Scarborough, 2001). This evidence-based perspective represents an effort to move beyond the pendulum swings of the past toward consistent, effective reading instruction grounded in scientific consensus.

Extensive research has illuminated strategies that support reading proficiency (Adams, 1990; Chall, 1967; Herrera et al., 2021; Lyon, 1998; National Reading Panel, 2000; Snow et al., 1998; Torgesen, 2004). Collectively, these studies provide a clear understanding of how proficient reading develops and what constitutes effective literacy instruction. Approaches emerging from this body of work, commonly referred to as scientifically based reading instruction, have demonstrated the potential to reduce reading failure and improve outcomes for struggling learners (Peterscher et al., 2020).

More recent analyses underscore the critical importance of early, targeted intervention. The Institute of Education Sciences’ What Works Clearinghouse synthesis (Walsh et al., 2023) identifies instructional components that significantly improve K–3 reading outcomes. Wanzek et al. (2018) found that intensive early reading interventions produce measurable gains for struggling readers, and Denton et al. (2022) confirmed that

interventions combining foundational skills with comprehension support yield meaningful improvements for primary grade students at risk of reading failure. Together, this evidence supports a multitiered, preventative model anchored in early intervention and explicit instruction.

Within effective reading instruction, explicit, systematic phonics is foundational, particularly for beginning readers. Teaching letter–sound correspondences in a structured, sequential manner develops accurate and fluent decoding skills (Buckingham, 2020; Ehri et al., 2001; Moats, 2000; National Reading Panel, 2000). Daily practice and systematic review are essential to ensure mastery, with activities such as word sorts, word building, and reading decodable texts reinforcing newly acquired skills (Blevins, 2017; Ehri, 2009; Fisher et al., 2023). Integrating writing into phonics instruction further strengthens spelling, orthographic mapping, and reading fluency (Blevins, 2024; Moats, 1995).

Finally, family engagement is a critical complement to classroom instruction, providing students with additional opportunities to practice and reinforce literacy skills. Home–school partnerships that encourage shared reading, discussion of texts, and literacy-rich activities have been shown to enhance reading confidence and skill development (Brown et al., 2019; Colgate & Colgate, 2025; Cunningham & Stanovich, 1997; Mol & Bus, 2011; Tran, 2014). Research further suggests that sustained, interactive literacy experiences beyond the classroom can have long-term benefits for children’s language and reading development, particularly when families are actively involved in meaningful language-rich activities (St. Clair & Jackson, 2006; St. Clair et al., 2012). Recognizing this, schools are increasingly encouraging parents to actively participate in literacy learning. With guidance from teachers, families can reinforce phonics instruction at home through simple, consistent activities, such as practicing letter–sound relationships, reading decodable texts, or engaging in word games (Colgate & Colgate, 2025). When home literacy practices align with classroom instruction, students are better prepared for academic tasks, less likely to experience setbacks, and more likely to develop strong reading confidence and skills (Brown et al., 2019). By intentionally integrating family engagement into literacy programs, educators can amplify the effects of instruction and create a consistent, supportive environment that fosters early reading success.

Research Questions

This study aimed to explore the implementation and perceived effectiveness of take-home decodable book bags in supporting early literacy

development, with a particular focus on phonics instruction and family engagement. The research was guided by the following questions:

1. How do first grade teachers perceive the instructional value and practicality of take-home decodable book bags in reinforcing phonics skills?
2. How do parents perceive the impact of take-home decodable book bags on their child's reading confidence, engagement, and phonics development at home?

To address these questions, this exploratory study employed a mixed methods approach, combining quantitative survey data with qualitative feedback. This design allowed for a comprehensive evaluation of the intervention, integrating measurable trends with rich, descriptive insights from participants.

Methods

Participants and Setting

Participants were selected through convenience sampling, as the school principal volunteered the site and invited the first grade teaching team to participate in the study. This approach was appropriate for the exploratory nature of the research and aligned with the school's commitment to strengthening home-school literacy connections. The participating team included three first grade teachers, each with 8–15 years of classroom experience, who implemented the take-home decodable book bag intervention within their classrooms during the first eight weeks of the school year.

The study was conducted at a suburban elementary school in northeastern Oklahoma with an enrollment of approximately 460 students in grades PreK–5. The student population is composed of 59% White, 15% Native American, 17% two or more races, 4% Black/African American, and 4% Hispanic. Of these students, 55% qualify for free or reduced-price lunch, 4.7% are English Language Learners, and 14.5% receive special education services. Schoolwide reading proficiency is reported as approximately 47%, and 36.2% of K–3 students receive reading remediation. These performance indicators underscore the school's need for effective literacy supports and make it an appropriate setting for investigating strategies to enhance early reading achievement.

The student participants were the first grade students enrolled in the three participating classrooms. Teachers identified students struggling with phonics based on beginning-of-year assessment data from the state-approved iStation screener and ongoing classroom performance. Students received

the book bags intervention based on instructional need; demographic information was not collected or used to determine bag distribution. Once identified, each student received a book bag aligned with their instructional needs and the phonics patterns currently taught in class.

Materials

Building on the identification of students' instructional needs, a set of take-home decodable book bags was developed to extend phonics instruction beyond the classroom and actively involve families in supporting early literacy. Eighteen bags were created to strengthen the school-to-home literacy connection and support first grade students' phonics development. The bags were aligned with early first grade phonics skills and included the following distribution:

- Two bags for each CVC short vowel (/ă/, /ĕ/, /ĭ/, /ŏ/, /ŭ/): CVC words are three-letter words with a consonant–vowel–consonant structure, such as *cat*, *pet*, *sit*, *top*, and *cup*. The vowel in these words produces the short vowel sound (e.g., /ă/ in *cat*).
- Two bags for CVC short vowel review: These bags provided additional practice with previously introduced short vowel patterns to reinforce mastery and fluency.
- One bag for each CVCe long vowel: CVCe words follow a consonant–vowel–consonant–e pattern, such as *cake*, *note*, and *tube*. In these words, the final *e* is silent, and the vowel produces a long vowel sound (e.g., /ā/ in *cake*).
- One bag for CVCe long vowel review: These bags provided extra practice for previously introduced long vowel patterns to consolidate student understanding and decoding accuracy.

Each book bag contained 4–7 decodable texts, carefully designed to align with the targeted phonics patterns, along with 2–3 phonics-based activities. Each bag also included a parent folder with an introductory letter, practical fluency tips, and clear, step-by-step instructions for using the materials at home. These instructional materials were selected to provide meaningful, research-based practice that reinforces classroom instruction, supports student mastery of phonics skills, and encourages active family engagement in early literacy development.

Central to these book bags are the decodable texts themselves, which are an essential component of phonics instruction. They allow students to apply their knowledge of letter–sound relationships in meaningful, connected reading (Ehri, 2020). Encountering words within complete sentences and coherent text reinforces decoding skills, helps students generalize phonics

rules to unfamiliar words, and builds confidence as independent readers (Blevins, 2021). Recognizing their importance, the book bags included ample decodable texts, featuring a mix of fiction and nonfiction. These texts varied in length, format, and publisher—some in black and white, others in full color—to provide meaningful choice, sustain engagement, and offer visual appeal that encourages repeated practice.

While the decodable texts supported connected reading practice, the accompanying phonics-based activities extended this learning by offering explicit, hands-on opportunities for students to manipulate sounds and letters, a critical element of effective phonics instruction (Ehri, 2020; McCandliss et al., 2003). These activities were carefully aligned with the targeted phonics patterns and grounded in evidence-based instructional practices. Designed to be user-friendly for families, they required no formal training, enabling caregivers to provide meaningful at-home support. Each activity offered engaging practice in decoding, word recognition, and spelling, reinforcing and extending classroom instruction. Examples include:

Word-Chains: Word chains are a structured approach to word-building in which students create a series of related words by changing one letter at a time while keeping the remaining letters constant (Burkins & Yates, 2021; Kemeny, 2023). This method actively engages students in analyzing and manipulating phonemes and graphemes, making it a highly effective strategy for strengthening both phonics skills and phonemic awareness. The seminal study by McCandliss et al. (2003) demonstrated that word-building interventions significantly improve decoding accuracy, and more recent research has confirmed these effects. Structured word study, including word chains, has been shown to produce measurable gains in word reading, spelling, and orthographic knowledge (Caines, 2022; Schaars et al., 2017), highlighting its value as an effective strategy for early literacy instruction. Book bags incorporating word chain activities contained 5–10 letter cards, step-by-step instructions for creating word chains through single-letter transformations, and decodable sentences using the words generated from the chain. The sequences were intentionally designed to draw attention to all positions within a word—initial consonant, medial vowel, and final consonant—while ensuring that letters appeared in multiple positions across different words. This design supports flexibility in decoding, reinforces phonics patterns, and encourages students to generalize their knowledge to new words, promoting stronger word recognition, fluency, and confidence in reading.

Word Sorting: Word sorting activities ask students to categorize words based on specific phonics patterns or features, promoting orthographic generalizations, critical thinking, and active engagement (Bear et al., 2023). Correctly sorting words demonstrates a student’s understanding of word relationships and underlying phoneme–grapheme correspondences (Bear, 2021; Bear et al., 2023). Research on word study approaches further supports this strategy: students who engage in word sorts and active word analysis show improved spelling, decoding, and generalization of phonics patterns (Furnes et al., 2023; Joseph, 2002; Zutel, 1998). Book bags containing word sorting activities included 15-to-20-word cards, a sorting mat, and instructions for multiple methods—buddy, blind, timed, and writing sorts—designed to provide variety, engagement, and reinforcement of phonics patterns. *Buddy sorts* involve students working with a partner to discuss and categorize words collaboratively, promoting oral language development and cooperative learning. *Blind sorts* require students to sort words without referencing the written categories, encouraging memory use and strengthening phonological awareness. *Timed sorts* challenge students to sort words accurately within a set time limit, supporting fluency and automaticity. *Writing sorts* ask students to write the words into the correct categories, integrating motor skills, spelling practice, and phonics reinforcement. Collectively, these sorting methods offer hands-on, engaging practice that can be implemented easily by families at home, extending classroom phonics instruction in meaningful ways.

Together, the decodable texts and phonics-based activities provided students with structured, meaningful opportunities to practice foundational reading skills at home. To help families confidently support these experiences, each book bag included a parent folder offering clear, research-informed guidance for reinforcing phonics instruction. The folder outlined practical strategies for practicing letter–sound correspondences, reading decodable texts together, and extending classroom learning in authentic, engaging ways. By providing accessible support and strengthening the school-to-home literacy connection, the parent folder empowered caregivers to take an active, informed role in their child’s reading development.

Procedures

This IRB-approved study was implemented over an eight-week period with 65 first grade students enrolled across the grade level. Of these, 32 students participated in the book bag rotation, with a total of 114 deployments during the intervention period. In this context, a *deployment* refers

to each instance a student took home a book bag for a two-day period of use, during which families were encouraged to engage with the decodable texts and accompanying phonics-based activities. While each deployment was designed to span two days, families were given the flexibility to extend the use of materials as needed to support additional practice, repeated readings, or continued engagement at home.

To ensure consistency between classroom instruction and home practice, teachers introduced each target phonics skill in class prior to sending the corresponding book bags home. All students participated in whole-group and small-group lessons focused on the same phonics pattern to ensure equitable access to instruction. For students identified as needing additional support, teachers selected and distributed one take-home bag aligned with the phonics pattern currently taught in the classroom. Families were encouraged to engage in shared reading with the decodable texts, complete one or two phonics-based activities, and reread the texts for fluency and confidence. Bags were then returned and rotated among participating students, allowing each child to experience multiple phonics patterns across the eight-week cycle.

Data Collection

Both quantitative and qualitative data were collected to evaluate the effectiveness and perceptions of the take-home decodable book bags. Data collection occurred at the conclusion of the eight-week implementation period and involved two main participant groups: first grade teachers, and parents of participating students. Using both types of data allowed the researcher to capture measurable trends in perceptions and engagement while also gathering rich, descriptive feedback to better understand the program's practical impact.

Teacher Surveys

All first grade teachers who implemented the take-home decodable book bags were invited to complete an anonymous perception survey. The teacher survey consisted of nine questions: eight closed-ended items using a five-point Likert scale (ranging from *Strongly Agree* to *Strongly Disagree*), and one open-ended question allowing for additional comments. Questions were designed to assess both the instructional value of the take-home materials and their practicality within classroom routines, such as ease of preparation, student enthusiasm, and observed improvements in decoding and reading fluency. Surveys were distributed directly by the researcher, and teachers returned completed forms electronically to ensure

confidentiality. This method minimized disruption to instructional time and encouraged honest, reflective responses.

Parent Surveys

To gather feedback from families, a parallel parent perception survey was distributed to the parents or caregivers of the 32 participating students. Because the researcher did not have direct access to parent contact information, classroom teachers facilitated survey distribution. The parent survey mirrored the teacher version in structure, including eight Likert-scale items and one open-ended question designed to capture qualitative insights. Items focused on family engagement, ease of use, and perceived effects on students' reading confidence and phonics skills. Parents were also asked to report how frequently their child used the materials at home and to describe any changes they noticed in their child's reading behaviors or motivation. This feedback provided valuable insight into how the materials functioned in a home setting and the extent to which families felt empowered to support early literacy instruction.

Data Analysis

Quantitative and qualitative data were analyzed to provide a comprehensive understanding of participant perceptions aligned with the study's research questions. Quantitative survey data from teachers and parents were analyzed using descriptive statistics, including frequencies and percentages, to summarize Likert-scale responses and identify overall trends in perceptions of the instructional value, practicality, and impact of the take-home decodable book bags (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). These analyses directly addressed Research Questions 1 and 2 by examining teacher and parent perceptions of the intervention.

Qualitative data from open-ended survey responses were analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Responses were reviewed multiple times to identify recurring patterns, key ideas, and common themes related to family engagement, ease of implementation, and perceived student outcomes. Codes were developed inductively and grouped into broader categories to support interpretation. These qualitative findings provided deeper insight into participants' experiences and helped explain trends observed in the quantitative data.

By integrating quantitative trends with qualitative insights, this mixed methods approach allowed for a more complete understanding of the intervention's effectiveness. This strengthened the interpretation of findings across both data sources (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018).

Results

Teacher Perceptions

A total of three first grade teachers ($N = 3$) participated in the study and completed the perception survey, resulting in a 100% response rate. Quantitative data revealed uniformly positive views regarding the instructional and relational impact of the take-home decodable book bags. All three teachers (100%) strongly agreed that the program improved students' reading confidence, motivation, and overall phonics skills. Likewise, all teachers (3 of 3; 100%) strongly agreed that the book bags strengthened the home-school connection by fostering greater family involvement in phonics practice. Two teachers (66.7%) strongly agreed and one (33.3%) agreed that the take-home materials helped parents more effectively support phonics practice at home.

Qualitative feedback further illuminated these positive perceptions. One teacher commented, "I had parents comment on the convenience of having the bag with all the items in it and how they liked that everything supported the same skill." This observation highlights the practicality of the book bags in creating a cohesive, easy-to-use learning experience that families could confidently implement at home. Teachers emphasized that the materials—combining decodable texts, phonics-based activities, and clear instructions—made literacy practice both structured and accessible for caregivers.

When asked whether they would like to continue using the take-home decodable book bags in the future, teacher responses were more divided. One teacher (33.3%) strongly agreed, one (33.3%) agreed, and one (33.3%) disagreed. While most teachers expressed positive attitudes toward the instructional value of the bags, concerns emerged regarding time and workload. As one teacher explained, "I think the phonics bags were a great idea, and I was very excited to use them. However, it became one more thing to keep up with on an already very full list of daily tasks as a teacher." This feedback suggests that while teachers recognized the academic and relational benefits of the book bags, its sustainability depended on finding efficient management systems to reduce teacher burden.

Overall, findings from the teacher survey indicate strong support for the instructional value and family engagement potential of the take-home decodable book bags intervention, balanced by practical challenges related to time and logistics. Future implementations may benefit from streamlined tracking and rotation procedures to improve feasibility and maintain high levels of teacher participation and enthusiasm.

Parent Perceptions

Of the 65 first grade students enrolled across the grade level, 32 participated in the take-home decodable book bag intervention during the eight-week implementation period. Perception surveys were distributed to the parents or caregivers of all 32 participants, and 22 were completed and returned, resulting in a 68% response rate.

Both quantitative and qualitative data from the parent surveys indicated overwhelmingly positive perceptions of the book bags. Parents reported that the take-home book bags provided structured, meaningful opportunities for their children to practice foundational reading skills outside of the classroom. Many caregivers noted that the book bags increased their child's engagement with reading at home, offered clear guidance for supporting phonics instruction, and helped foster confidence and enjoyment in reading. These findings suggest that the take-home decodable book bags not only support student learning but also strengthen home-school connections by empowering families to actively participate in their child's literacy development.

Reading Confidence and Engagement

Parents consistently reported that the book bags enhanced their child's reading confidence and engagement. A majority of parents (13 of 22, 59.1%) strongly agreed, and 7 of 22 (31.8%) agreed that the take-home materials increased their child's reading confidence, while 2 of 22 (9.1%) were neutral. Parents' comments reinforced these results: one parent shared, "I've noticed a big improvement in my son's confidence. He used to get frustrated with reading, but now he's excited to open the bag and show us what he can read," while another noted, "My child feels so proud when she can read these books by herself!" These responses suggest that the book bags not only supported phonics skill development but also fostered positive attitudes toward reading by giving students early, tangible experiences of success.

Hands-On Phonics Activities

Parents were asked to indicate whether the hands-on phonics activities included in the take-home decodable book bags had a positive impact on their child's phonics skills. All respondents (22 of 22, 100%) reported a positive effect, with 12 of 22 (54.5%) strongly agreeing and 10 of 22 (45.5%) agreeing.

Parents particularly appreciated the engaging, interactive nature of the activities, noting that they encouraged children to actively practice phonics

in a low-pressure, enjoyable way. One parent shared, “As a former teacher, I loved the Book Bags! On busy school nights, it was so nice to let my child ‘play’ and learn through these awesome activities.” Another commented that the activities helped maintain her child’s focus and motivation, stating, “My child really looked forward to these activities, and I could see him applying what he learned in school while having fun.” These responses underscore the value of hands-on phonics activities in reinforcing classroom learning, promoting skill generalization, and building confidence at home. The structured, playful activities engaged families in their child’s early literacy in an accessible, enjoyable way.

Motivation to Read

Parents also observed increases in their child’s motivation to read. In response to survey items on reading motivation, 9 of 22 (40.9%) strongly agreed, 9 of 22 (40.9%) agreed, and 4 of 22 (18.2%) were neutral. Qualitative responses elaborated on this trend: “My daughter often wants to read the books more than once, which is great for practice,” one parent wrote, while another shared, “She even reads to her little brother now.” These reflections highlight how the structure of the book bags encouraged rereading for fluency and nurtured authentic reading behaviors beyond school assignments.

Home Support for Phonics Development

All parents agreed that the take-home decodable book bags helped them better support their child’s phonics learning at home, with 16 of 22 (72.7%) strongly agreeing and 6 of 22 (27.3%) agreeing. Several parents commented that the experience deepened their understanding of phonics instruction. One parent wrote, “I didn’t realize how much phonics was involved until the bags came home—it helped me see how my son is learning to read.” Another noted, “Having access to these decodable books has been a blessing—we don’t always have the extra money to buy books.” A third reflected, “It’s so helpful to have books that focus on phonics. I feel like I can actually help my child instead of just listening to them guess at words.” Collectively, these comments emphasize how the book bags provided children with structured practice and empowered families to engage confidently and effectively in supporting literacy development.

Home–School Connection

When asked whether the take-home decodable book bags strengthened the partnership between home and school to promote phonics growth, all parents responded positively—11 of 22 (50%) strongly agreed and 11 of

22 (50%) agreed. Parents appreciated the alignment between classroom instruction and home practice, noting that the materials clearly reflected current phonics patterns being taught at school. One parent explained, “I really like that the books focus on sounds the kids are learning in school—it feels like we’re reinforcing the same lessons at home.” Another added, “The repetition and phonics patterns help reinforce what they’re learning in school.” These responses highlight the value of coherence across learning environments and underscore how transparent, skill-aligned materials foster shared responsibility for student growth.

Overall Perceptions and Sustainability

All parents believed the take-home book bags contributed to improvements in their child’s overall phonics skills, with 17 of 22 (77.3%) strongly agreeing and 5 of 22 (22.7%) agreeing. When asked if they would like to continue using the book bags, 16 of 22 (72.7%) strongly agreed, 5 of 22 (22.7%) agreed, and 1 of 22 (4.5%) was neutral. These results indicate strong parent endorsement of the book bag’s educational value. The overwhelmingly positive feedback suggests that the decodable book bag intervention offers a sustainable, family-friendly framework for bridging school-based phonics instruction with home reading practice.

Recommendations for Improvement

Despite the overall positive feedback, parents suggested several ways to further enhance the bags’ effectiveness. Including a reading checklist or log could help families track which books have been read, provide a clear sense of progress, and support goal setting for both students and caregivers. This addition would allow students to celebrate achievements, reinforce consistency in reading practice, and encourage self-monitoring skills.

Parents also recommended adding QR codes linked to short instructional videos demonstrating phonics routines or modeling book activities. This feature could make the materials more accessible and user-friendly, particularly for caregivers who may feel less confident in supporting phonics instruction. By providing visual and auditory guidance, QR codes could reduce barriers to at-home practice, increase caregiver confidence, and promote more consistent, independent engagement with the activities. Implementing these enhancements could not only strengthen the instructional value of the book bags but also further foster family involvement, motivation, and enjoyment of reading at home.

Discussion

The findings of this study align closely with a robust body of research supporting the role of explicit, systematic phonics instruction in early reading development. Consistent with the conclusions of the National Reading Panel (2000) and subsequent syntheses (Ehri et al., 2001; Castles et al., 2018), both teachers and parents perceived that structured opportunities to practice phonics skills, particularly through decodable texts and targeted word work, contributed to improvements in students' decoding ability, confidence, and motivation. The strong parent endorsement of decodable texts as a tool for independent reading at home further supports Blevins' (2021) assertion that decodable materials provide an essential bridge between phonics instruction and authentic reading experiences. In this study, the integration of decodable texts with hands-on activities such as word chains and word sorts appears to have reinforced orthographic mapping processes (Ehri, 2020) and facilitated the application of phonics skills in connected text, extending the benefits of classroom instruction into the home environment.

Importantly, these findings also extend existing research on family engagement in literacy development. Prior studies have consistently demonstrated that when families are equipped with clear guidance and accessible materials, they can play a meaningful role in supporting children's reading growth (Brown et al., 2019; Dahl-Leonard et al., 2025; Mol & Bus, 2011). The present study builds on this work by illustrating how alignment between classroom instruction and at-home practice, specifically through skill-targeted decodable book bags, can enhance both caregiver confidence and student engagement. Parents not only reported increased understanding of phonics instruction, but also described shifts in their role from passive listeners to active instructional partners. This finding supports Tran's (2014) emphasis on reciprocal home-school relationships and suggests that structured, teacher-designed materials can reduce common barriers to family involvement, such as uncertainty about instructional methods or lack of resources.

At the same time, this study offers a practical contribution by highlighting the importance of coherence and usability in family literacy interventions. While previous research has emphasized the value of home reading practices broadly (Cunningham & Stanovich, 1997; St. Clair & Jackson, 2006), fewer studies have examined how the design of take-home materials influences implementation fidelity and sustainability. Teachers in this study emphasized that the alignment of texts, activities, and instructions around

a single phonics skill made the book bags particularly effective for families. However, concerns about teacher workload echo findings from implementation research (Wanzek et al., 2018), suggesting that even well-designed interventions must consider feasibility within the realities of classroom demands. Thus, this study not only reinforces the importance of family engagement but also underscores the need for efficient, scalable systems that support teachers in maintaining such initiatives over time.

Finally, the results contribute to the growing emphasis within the science of reading on integrating multiple components of effective instruction into cohesive, applied contexts (Moats, 2020; Scarborough, 2001). Rather than isolating phonics practice as a discrete classroom activity, the take-home decodable book bags operationalize a more comprehensive model in which decoding, fluency, motivation, and family engagement intersect. By extending structured literacy practices beyond the classroom, this intervention represents a promising approach to intensifying early reading support, particularly for students at risk of reading difficulty, while fostering a shared responsibility for literacy development between schools and families.

Future Recommendations

The Scope and Variety of Phonics Skills

The current take-home decodable book bags focus primarily on foundational phonics patterns, including short vowels in CVC (consonant-vowel-consonant) words, such as *cat*, *bed*, *sit*, *dog*, *sun*, and long vowels in CVCe words, such as *cake*, *kite*, *home*, *cube*, *rope*. While these are critical early building blocks, expanding the collection to include more complex phonics patterns would better support students as they progress in their reading development. Examples of patterns that could be added include:

- **Consonant blends:** groups of two or three consonants where each sound is heard, e.g., *bl* in *blend*, *str* in *street*, *cl* in *clap*.
- **Digraphs:** two letters that make one sound, e.g., *sh* in *ship*, *ch* in *chop*, *th* in *thumb*.
- **Vowel teams:** two vowels together that create a single long vowel sound, e.g., *ai* in *rain*, *ea* in *seat*, *oa* in *boat*.
- **R-controlled vowels:** vowels followed by the letter *r*, which changes their sound, e.g., *ar* in *car*, *or* in *fork*, *er* in *her*.

Expanding the scope and variety of the book bags would provide sustained practice and reinforcement of newly acquired skills over time while promoting greater engagement, independence, and confidence among

young readers. This approach could help ensure that students continue to develop fluency and accuracy as they advance through the primary grades.

Enhancing Implementation and Sustainability

An additional recommendation involves leveraging school-based support personnel and community resources to improve the sustainability of the book bag system. Given that some teachers identified time and management demands as a challenge, schools might consider involving school librarians, paraprofessionals, or trained parent volunteers in organizing, maintaining, and rotating the take-home book bags. These individuals could assist with tasks such as replenishing materials, tracking circulation, and ensuring that bags remain aligned with current phonics instruction. Distributing these responsibilities across a broader support network would reduce the burden on classroom teachers while increasing the feasibility of long-term implementation. Moreover, involving families and school staff in the coordination process may further strengthen the home-school connection by fostering a shared investment in students' literacy development. This type of distributed support model aligns with broader calls for collaborative, schoolwide approaches to literacy improvement.

Study Limitations and Future Research

While the study demonstrates promising perceptions of the take-home decodable book bags, it is important to acknowledge several limitations. First, relying solely on parent and teacher feedback means the findings are based on subjective perceptions, which, while valuable, may not fully capture the book bags' impact on student literacy outcomes. Parents' and teachers' impressions could be influenced by factors such as prior experience with literacy strategies, expectations, or engagement levels at home.

Additionally, the study did not include objective measures of student progress, such as phonics assessments, reading fluency data, or comprehension scores. Without these data points, it is difficult to quantify the extent to which the book bags directly influenced student learning. Incorporating standardized or informal literacy assessments in further research would provide a more robust, evidence-based evaluation of program effectiveness.

Finally, the sample size was limited to students who participated in the program and parents who responded to the survey, which may affect the generalizability of the findings. Future studies could expand the participant pool, include control or comparison groups, and track literacy outcomes over a longer period to better assess the sustained impact of take-home decodable book bags. Combining objective student assessment data with

perception data would strengthen the evidence base, guide instructional improvements, and offer a more comprehensive understanding of how such interventions support early literacy development.

Conclusion

The take-home decodable book bags represent a promising and innovative approach to extending literacy instruction beyond the classroom and into the home environment. By providing structured, purposeful practice, the book bags support students in reinforcing foundational phonics skills while fostering engagement, motivation, and confidence in reading. They also encourage collaboration between families and schools, helping caregivers actively participate in their child's literacy development and creating a shared investment in learning.

With targeted enhancements, such as progress tracking tools or reading logs, QR codes linked to instructional videos, and expanded phonics content covering consonant blends, digraphs, vowel teams, and r-controlled vowels—the bags have the potential to become a more comprehensive, differentiated, and scalable resource for supporting early literacy growth. Incorporating these features could further strengthen student engagement, promote independent practice, and empower families to reinforce classroom instruction effectively.

Future research that combines perception data from parents and teachers with objective measures of student literacy outcomes, such as phonics assessments, reading fluency, and comprehension measures, will be essential to fully understand and maximize the impact of take-home decodable book bags. By evaluating both subjective and objective outcomes, educators can refine the program, tailor it to diverse learner needs, and ensure it continues to serve as a meaningful tool for building fluency, accuracy, and prosody in beginning readers.

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