PARENT-TEACHER COLLABORATION: SHARING KNOWLEDGE TO SUPPORT A CHILD’S LITERACY DEVELOPMENT

by

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Abstract
This qualitative study explores parent-teacher collaboration by examining the understandings and practices of parents and teachers, which contribute to the literacy development of children. Semi-structured interviews with parents and school personnel were used to explore the study questions:

1. How are parents involved in their child’s literacy development?
2. How do teachers support parents, and parents support teachers, in creating meaningful and engaging literacy opportunities for a child?
3. How are parents involved in the school’s collaborative process of offering additional help to a child?

Findings indicate that parents are unintentionally involved in various literacy activities with their children at home; however, parents place greater value on the literacy activities that come from the school than the literacy activities that naturally occur in the home. Teachers could support parents by recommending adjustments to everyday home activities to foster a child’s literacy development. Parents tend to view advocacy as being unsupportive of the school or teacher, and do not wish to communicate ideas the teacher may view negatively. The culture of school continues to reinforce this view, and traditional schooling does not offer parents a place to advocate for their child.

This study suggests that the school could empower parents in meeting the needs of a child through a family literacy initiative, and by creating a space for a parent to advocate for their child.
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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

“You may have tangible wealth untold; Caskets of jewels and coffers of gold. Richer than I you can never be – I had a Mother who read to me.” (excerpt from The Reading Mother by Strickland Gillilan, n.d.)

Parents\(^1\) are a child’s first and most enduring teachers. It is in the home environment, before a child even enters school, where the foundations for a child’s future learning are first established. Children learn how to communicate, form opinions, develop attitudes toward learning; and it is in the home context where literacy begins and continues to develop. Teachers expect children to enter school with skills in oral language, and some knowledge about books, letters, and phonetics; yet many children begin their journey of school already below the teacher’s expectations (Age of Learning Inc., 2011). In order to meet the diverse needs of children, educators need to examine their relationship with parents, especially those parents whose children require additional support in developing literacy.

**Personal Context**

For the past several years I have been professionally involved in early literacy through my roles as a Grade One teacher and Reading Recovery teacher. Reading Recovery is an intensive one-on-one reading intervention for the lowest achieving Grade One children, and the program’s objective is to accelerate a child’s literacy progress to the level of their peers through a series of carefully orchestrated individual lessons (Clay, 2005). In these capacities I developed knowledge

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\(^1\) For the purpose of this study, the term parent(s) refers to a child’s main caregiver(s) in the home, including guardians and foster parents.
about how young children develop skills in written language, and gained insight into the
difficulties some children face. By far, the greatest asset to a child becoming a reader and writer,
that I have observed, is having a parent who values literacy and is involved in their child’s
learning through traditional and non-traditional learning activities. This parent involvement leads
to a child gaining rich life experiences in written and oral language, along with a positive attitude
toward literacy and learning.

This past fall I sent my oldest child off to Kindergarten, and experienced the gravity of this
parental ‘right of passage’. This new chapter of life elicited many emotions in me – fear, worry,
hope, and excitement. As a teacher I expect the school to provide valuable educational
experiences, but as a parent I am not willing to simply hand over my son’s education to the
school. I imagine that parents whose children experience learning challenges would feel these
emotions even more poignantly than me. A great deal of trust is expected of parents to even
begin the journey of schooling. A partnership between families and the school, and its
implications for literacy development, seems an important area for exploration.

**Problem**

It is well established that parental involvement in a child’s education increases student
engagement and achievement at school, and can offer both academic and social gains for students
(Bower & Griffin, 2011; Driessen & Sleegers, 2005; Epstein, 1995; Hornby & Lafaële, 2011;
Sormunen, Tossavainen, & Turunen, 2011; Timmons, 2009; Wearmouth, 2004). Although
involving parents has great potential to impact student achievement, this practice is not
happening as much as schools or parents would like. Many studies have indicated that most parents want to be more involved in their child’s education, and most schools want parents to be more involved than they are (Sormunen, Tossavainen, & Turunen, 2011; Stacer & Perrucci, 2012; Stahl & Yaden, 2004; Wearmouth, 2004). The question is no longer why should educators involve parents in their child’s schooling, but how to involve parents in a meaningful way that will enhance student learning.

Examining this gap between the actual and desired level of parental involvement for both parents and schools reveals complex and varied barriers to parental involvement and advocacy (Hornby & Lafaele, 2011). There may be a discrepancy between the views of a parent and a school regarding the role of schooling and the role of families in the broader context of a child’s education and development. A school may assume ultimate responsibility and authority over a child’s education and expect parents to support the school’s mandate, while a parent may believe they are primarily responsible for their child’s learning and development, and expect the school to play a supportive role. A parent and a teacher may not share an opinion about who is responsible for a child’s education, which leads to differing ideas and expectations regarding advocacy. These beliefs are rarely discussed between school personnel and families, and a discrepancy in understandings can create a complex barrier between a parent and a teacher.

Although there is great diversity among Canadian families, those parents with a similar background to that of teachers (e.g. white, female, middle class) tend to be more involved in the school community than parents of a different cultural or socio-economic background (Wearmouth, 2004). Families of children who have an exceptionality or intellectual challenge
may feel excluded from the dominant school culture (Harry & Klingner, 2006). Lupart (2009) points out, “Our institutions are organized in ways that support the majority, and those students who are different from the norm have little choice but to try to fit” (p.15). Educators need to consider how to close the gap between school culture and family culture in order to enhance the learning of students with diverse needs.

In connecting family and school culture, educators must give careful consideration to the perspectives and experiences children bring to school. “...learning is not only about taking on new knowledge structures, but it is about personal transformation – about becoming” (Nasir & Hand, 2006, p.467). In this sense, “cognitive development becomes fundamentally intertwined with culture” (Nasir & Hand, 2006, p. 461). Each child brings their own unique life experiences, interests and abilities to school; and a child’s new learning is oriented from this perspective. In order for learning to occur, children must connect new knowledge and skills to what they already know and understand. Building upon a child’s experiences that teachers do not share, or even understand, can pose a great challenge. Timmons (2009) suggests a “family-centered” school model where educators view families with dignity and respect, using practices that are individualized, flexible, and responsive. The practice of listening to families to inform teaching can promote agency for families of children who are exceptional learners, and foster student learning.

In considering the inclusive classroom context, it is critical that parents as well as schools accept, value, and promote inclusion in its fullest sense. Parent involvement enhances the learning experiences of all children, and it is the responsibility of the school to engage all parents
deliberately and creatively. When teachers and parents form an authentic partnership, transformative learning can be orchestrated for a child. Some children need more careful and/or individualized orchestration than others; and for these exceptional learners, a parent-school partnership may be the critical factor in a student’s development of literacy.

Family Literacy

An environment that is literacy-rich provides many diverse opportunities for a child to explore and experience oral language and written language. The term family literacy pertains to the home environment in which a child’s literacy develops, and family literacy programs seek to improve the parents’ ability to support literacy development for their children within the home (Executive Summary of the European Commission, 2011). Family attitudes toward literacy are an important part of family literacy, as adults and other children in the home are powerful role models for a child (Parr, 2013). Family literacy programs are more commonly offered to families of pre-school aged children, perhaps because there tends to be more flexibility in government funding for children before they enter the school system. However, family literacy programs that target families of school-aged children have had a large impact on literacy acquisition, along with other socio-emotional benefits for both children and adults (Executive Summary of the European Commission, 2011; Timmons, 2009). Timmons (2009) notes that “parents want to support their children’s learning” “many parents are seeking direction from their children’s schools about how to help their children at home, and they want to feel valued and respected” (p.39). This suggests that a family literacy initiative could be an effective means of meeting the needs of families of school-aged children.
PARENT-TEACHER COLLABORATION AND LITERACY DEVELOPMENT

**Parental Involvement in School**

All children benefit socially and emotionally from positive parent involvement in schooling (Bower & Griffin, 2011; Driessen & Sleegers, 2005; Epstein, 1995; Hornby & Lafaele, 2011; Sormunen, Tossavainen, & Turunen, 2011; Timmons, 2009; Wearmouth, 2004), and it is the students who are at risk of experiencing learning difficulties who have the most to gain from an authentic parent-teacher partnership. Parents may offer the school insight into their child’s unique background, personality, interests, and past experiences upon which new literacy skills can be built; and the school may offer the family strategies and insights into literacy development that might be useful in the home environment (Wearmouth, 2004). Pushor & Murphy (2004) describe how student home visits can provide a meaningful and authentic context for teachers and parents to share knowledge that may benefit a child. Although the home and the school will always be two unique environments, it is important that each environment reflects a shared understanding of what literacy is and how it develops. To examine this possibility, a deeper understanding is needed of how each partner facilitates literacy development in young children.

**Overview of Study**

This study is situated in the fields of early literacy and parental involvement in school. It explores the differences and commonalities that exist between parent and teacher perspectives and practices regarding literacy development in the home and school environments. This study provides insight into how the home and school learning environments are connected for children.
within a small community, and suggests a place of common understanding from which literacy learning experiences for children could be more unified.

_Research Questions._ Each question pertains to supporting children in grades K-3 who require additional support in learning literacy skills.

1. How are parents involved in their child’s literacy development?

2. How do teachers support parents, and parents support teachers, in creating meaningful and engaging literacy opportunities for a child?

3. How are parents involved in the school’s collaborative process of offering additional help to a child?

_Methodology._ This study is qualitative in nature, and a semi-structured interview method was used over four months to examine the home-school partnership in a small school community, looking specifically at the literacy experiences of Kindergarten to Grade 3 students whom the school believes are experiencing difficulty in learning literacy skills. This methodology seeks to triangulate and interweave the data found with other forms of data to build its capacity (Smith & Shepard, 1988). Through interview, the beginnings of interpretive validity were developed, as the meaning participants shared was interpreted through recording, transcribing, and reviewing. Cadence, tone, and behaviours were observed and recorded, through observations during the interview and in reviewing the audio-recording. Validity is extended through connecting the research questions and findings to the broader research theory (Gay, Mills, & Airasian, 2009).
Data Collection. All data was collected using semi-structured interviews (Gay, Mills, & Airasian, 2009; Kvale, 1996). This method involved the creation of questions, which were used to elicit the same understanding for each group of participants. Interviews have the ability to reach aspects of understanding that are often unnoticed in observations alone. Both open-ended and closed-ended questions were included. The questions were reviewed by the university professor advisor of this study and the Research Ethics Board (REB) of Vancouver Island University.

Strauss (2005) outlines the benefits of using an interview method, including:

- Thought and its expression are the conduit for the underlying taken-for-granted shared assumptions that are at the core of what is meant by culture.

- Social discourses are the explicit articulated ideologies that are presented in people’s talk among the awareness of competing ideologies.

- Public ideas can become so powerful that those who hold beliefs that are contrary may voice them in a defensive manner or censor them in public settings.

Participants. Two main groups of participants were recruited for this study, parents and school personnel; a total of six people participated, three parents and three school personnel. The participating school personnel included a K-3 classroom teacher, the special education teacher, and the school administrator. Focal participants were parents of Kindergarten to Grade 3 students who require additional support in learning literacy skills at the K-3 level. The interview questions (Appendices D, E, F, G) focused on the personal experiences, understandings, and
beliefs of both parents and school personnel regarding the literacy development of children, and examined the home-school relationships that exist.

Conceptual Framework

This study contributes to the fields of parent involvement and early literacy by offering a deeper understanding of the connection between children’s literacy experiences at home and at school in a particular school community. Although it cannot be generalized to another school context, this study may describe similar experiences and understandings of teachers and parents in other school contexts, and may offer a starting point from which to consider family literacy as an initiative to support early literacy development.
CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

This review will begin by discussing literacy development, and explain how families impact this process. Next, research pertaining to parent involvement in schools will be reviewed. Recent research involving parents in an educational program to enhance a child’s literacy development will then be discussed. Lastly, I will outline school collaborative processes in offering a student additional support in learning literacy skills.

This is the perspective chosen for this study. When a child is born, they are not a ‘blank slate’, as was earlier assumed, with a dichotomy between nature versus nurture. Bronfenbrenner’s (1994) bioecological theory of human development suggests that we are born with a genetic code of biological attributes into a particular environment, and we develop through the continuous interaction between biological factors and environmental factors (Bronfenbrenner, 1994; Damon & Lerner, 2006; Hinton, Miyamoto, & Della-Chiesa, 2008). The interactions, or ‘proximal processes’, of biological attributes within the environmental contexts (e.g., family) in a particular historical period of time in a particular society shape and mold a child’s development throughout their life (Damon & Lerner, 2006). These interactions are two-way, as “...we are both shaped by and shaping our environment” (Hinton et al., 2008, p. 87). The Bio-Ecological Systems Theory describes the enormous impact the family and school environments have on a child’s learning and development, but also that the most optimal learning environment is not the same for every child.

**Literacy Development**
PARENT-TEACHER COLLABORATION AND LITERACY DEVELOPMENT

Literacy is the ability to read and write in a particular language, but literacy development is far more complex than this definition implies. It is believed that a child’s literacy emerges through a variety of experiences and opportunities to engage in oral and written language. Over time, a child develops skills, knowledge, and attitudes pertaining to literacy (Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998). The concept of emergent literacy describes literacy development as a personal process, and involves great consideration of a child’s environment and experiences within that environment (Farver et al., 2013; Honeyghan, 2000).

A child’s path to literacy ultimately begins with the start of language development, as speaking and listening engage the cognitive processes upon which reading and writing are founded. After only ten months, a child’s brain is already wired to hear the particular phonemes of their family’s language (Hinton, Miyamoto, & Della-Chiesa, 2008). A child’s language structure increases in complexity, and their vocabulary expands, as they engage in conversations with their adult caregivers, siblings, or others that are in their environment. Even after a child has developed skills in using written language, speaking and listening continue to be important processes to develop further sophisticated language abilities that contribute to reading comprehension and written expression (Allington, R.L., 2012; Stahl & Yaden, Jr., 2004).

Although our brains are hard-wired to learn language at birth (Hinton et al., 2008), reading and writing skills are not inherent, and the brain must activate a variety of cognitive functions in order to perform written language activities (Kirby, 2009). Literacy development in the English language has an added complexity because of the language’s inconsistent letter patterns in words, also known as deep orthography (Hinton et al, 2008; Kirby, 2009). An important implication of
this is that readers and writers in English must use various strategies simultaneously and flexibly, such as: noticing if the words make sense in the context of the text, considering sentence structure, recognizing whole words in their entirety, and recognizing phonemes or smaller word parts when reading a word (Clay, 2005). In reference to the complexity of reading and writing tasks, Clay (1995) describes literacy as a two-fold problem-solving system - reading being a message-getting system, and writing as a message-sending system. These systems include skills in oral language, and may be more generally termed ‘receptive’ and ‘expressive’ communication.

With relatively recent scientific advancements in brain research, researchers have been able to explain some of what is happening in our brains while we read. Kirby (2009) describes two different directions of mental processing that occur when we read, top-down and bottom-up. When we start at the top we consider meaning or context first, then move down to the details of words and letters to get the exact meaning of what is written. When we start at the bottom, we begin by looking at the specific details in the text, such as letters or words, and use this visual knowledge to construct the broader meaning of the text. Proficient readers process information in both directions quickly and flexibly, without conscious awareness, and the letter and word level processing lends itself to an automaticity that enables higher-level thinking processes (Clay, 2005; Kirby, 2009). As a child’s literacy develops, it is beneficial for a child to have many varied experiences and opportunities that encourage processing in both directions - top-down (e.g., discussing a book, retelling a story) and bottom-up (e.g., phonemic awareness activities, identifying letters in the alphabet) (Kirby, 2009; Stahl & Yaden, Jr., 2004; Wearmouth, J., 2004).
In considering bottom-up processing of text (i.e., at the word or letter level), the dual route theory describes two different pathways one may use to read a word (Hinton et al, 2008; Kirby, 2009). A word may be recognized in its entirety, also known as the orthographic route, or knowledge of phonemes and syllables may be used to work through a word, also known as the phonological route (Kirby, 2009). Although children should ideally use both of these routes efficiently, this understanding is important to consider for children who have dyslexia, or other learning disabilities (LD), and may be able to use only one of these routes to read (Hinton et al, 2008; Kirby, 2009).

In accordance with the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), and with the hopes of raising national literacy rates, the U.S. Congress initiated The National Reading Panel (2001). The panel was made up of 14 people who were reading scientists, educators, educational administrators and parents. The panel rigorously reviewed all experimental or quasi-experimental research studies since 1966 that were relevant to children’s literacy development from pre-school to Grade 12, and only included studies that used well-defined instructional procedures on a large enough sample size to be considered significant. Along with reviewing research studies, the panel consulted with the public and leading educational organizations to gain knowledge of the needs and understandings regarding reading problems. Out of their work, the National Reading Panel recommends ‘5 Pillars’ on which to base reading instruction. These include: phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension.

Clay (2005) and Allington (2012) believe there is another important aspect of literacy development, which the National Reading Panel did not emphasize in their ‘5 Pillars’. That is,
the reciprocal relationship between receptive and expressive language. Just as speaking and listening are related skills as language develops, reading and writing should not be considered in isolation of one another (Clay, 2005; Allington, 2012). Some children may have a strength or interest in writing or reading, and this relative strength can serve to support a child in developing further skills in literacy. Children may connect what they know about one aspect of literacy to make new discoveries (Clay, 2005).

Clay (2005) refers to a child’s “self-extending system” as a problem-solving system that develops and improves as a child independently engages in reading and writing activities. This is the ultimate goal for all children whose literacy acquisition is still developing. Most children eventually develop a system of reading and writing that extends learning, but some children require different methods or additional support to do so (Clay, 2005). When a child is experiencing difficulty in becoming literate, it is important to offer intensive support as soon as possible, drawing on the individual child’s strengths and past experiences, in order to accelerate learning and prevent further failure and frustration for the child (Allington, 2012; Clay, 2005).

Becoming literate is a much more complicated process than merely learning a set of skills. Children need to be immersed in literacy-rich social environments where the purpose of reading and writing is evident (Stahl & Yaden, Jr., 2004). As with oral language, written language is socially and culturally constructed (Cairney, 2002; Gosse & Phillips, 2008), and literacy instruction must be meaningful and relevant to a child in content and purpose. A child’s personal life experiences and interests offer a solid foundation upon which to build new learning as a child develops written and oral language skills. Although there may be some common patterns among
children, the specific path of literacy development is unique to each child (Clay, 2005; Stahl & Yaden Jr., 2004).

**Family Literacy**

Because literacy is socially and culturally constructed, a child’s literacy development is rooted in the context of the home (Goose & Phillips, 2008). The frequency, duration and type of literacy activities in which a family engages, along with family attitudes toward reading and writing, shape and mold a child’s literacy acquisition. Many family literacy programs seek to enable caregivers of pre-school aged children, as the first five years of life lay important foundations for later literacy development, but family literacy programs can enhance literacy development from birth up to age 7 (Timmons, 2008). Family literacy programs for school-aged children have been successful at empowering families and complementing classroom learning, while positively affecting classroom behaviour (Executive Summary of the European Commission, 2011; Timmons, 2009).

**Parent Involvement in Schools**

Parental involvement benefits students academically and socially (Bower & Griffin, 2011; Driessen & Sleegers, 2005; Epstein, 1995; Hornby & Lafaele, 2011; Sormunen, Tossavainen, & Turunen, 2011; Timmons, 2009; Wearmouth, 2004), and these positive effects may extend as far as age 20 and beyond (Sormunen, et al., 2011). Because this idea is widely accepted, many provinces, districts, and schools aim to increase parental involvement as a strategy to increase student achievement. Perhaps surprising to some educators, the vast majority of parents want to
help their kids succeed at school, and wish to be more involved in their child’s education (Sormunen, Tossavainen, & Turunen, 2011; Stacer & Perrucci, 2012; Stahl & Yaden, 2004; Wearmouth, 2004). It is important to examine this gap between the actual and desired levels of parental involvement from the perspectives of both the school and parents.

Researchers argue that most invitations for parental involvement continue to be one-sided, in that they are intended to meet the school’s needs (Klingner & Harry, 2006; Pushor & Murphy, 2004; Sormunen et al., 2011). “Carrying out the tasks the staff determine to be needed is the common story being lived by parents in schools” (Pusher & Murphy, 2004, p. 222). Another criticism is that many school personnel do not view parents as significant partners in education, and this educational ‘partnership’ is sometimes mere rhetoric. Pusher & Murphy (2004) believe that “until the agenda becomes reciprocal and we begin to explore how both schools and families can benefit from parental participation, we will be caught in reliving the ‘old story’ of parents, just in new ways” (p. 232).

An authentic partnership between families and teachers has the potential to significantly impact a child by adding meaning and purpose to a child’s learning experiences, but there are many complex barriers that prevent this type of home-school partnership from occurring. Hornby & Lafaele (2011) offer a useful model from which to consider barriers to parental involvement in schools. The authors offer four sets of factors:

- Individual parent and family factors – beliefs and perceptions regarding parental involvement, life context, class, ethnicity, gender
• Child factors – age, learning profile, school behaviour

• Parent-teacher factors – differing goals, personalities, attitudes, language

• Societal factors – historical, political, economic

In further considering culture as a barrier, Donovan & Cross (2002) report that the contributors to the disproportionality of minority or English Language Learners (ELL) in special education are the home and community contexts, and the school contexts.

“For students having difficulty in school who do not have a medically diagnosed disability, key aspects of the context of schooling itself, including administrative, curricular/instructional, and interpersonal factors, may contribute to their identification as having a disability and may contribute to the disproportionately high or low placements of minorities…” (Donovan & Cross, 2002, pp. 25-27).

In addition, teachers typically transmit a culture of literacy that is traditional and somewhat inflexible. When families do not share a teacher’s understanding of literacy, a cultural barrier may exist (Cairney, 2002).

As part of the societal factors, there is a ‘culture of school’ that exists, and poses a barrier to parent involvement (Donavan & Cross, 2002; Pushor & Murphy, 2004). The institution of public education has historically and traditionally been in a position of power over families, especially those families who are of a different demographic than the dominant culture (Cairney, 2002; Wearmouth, 2004). Individual schools have a culture that impacts the human interactions and the
type of opportunities that are offered to parents and students (Donavan & Cross, 2002). When parents or teachers feel frustrated because of a lack of partnership in a child’s education, it is important to examine and acknowledge the barriers that may exist. Without acknowledging the barriers, teachers and parents may be prone to blaming the other, causing harm to the parent-teacher relationship. Navigating around the barriers allows for meaningful parental involvement opportunities to be accessible to more families.

Joyce Epstein (1995) has contributed considerable research and practice to the field of parental involvement in schools. Her work is based on the notion that there are three overlapping spheres of influence on a child – home, school, and community; and the more these spheres overlap, the greater opportunity a child has to be successful in school and later in life. She believes that when forming a school-family partnership, schools should become more family-friendly and families should become more school-friendly. Epstein’s (1995) framework of parental involvement depicts six types of parental involvement for schools to consider:

1. Parenting – establishing a home environment that supports children as students
2. Communicating – from school-to-home and home-to-school
3. Volunteering – recruiting and organizing parent volunteers to support the school
4. Learning at Home – supporting families in helping students learn at home
5. Decision-Making – developing parent leaders to help make school decisions
6. Collaborating with the Community – integrating community resources to support school initiatives, family activities, and student learning

Although Epstein’s (1995) framework may be a useful starting point for schools in evaluating parental involvement opportunities, critics suggest that her model is still one-sided in its emphasis on parents supporting the school, and may not accurately reflect the diverse ways that parents are, or want to be, involved in their child’s education (Bower & Griffin, 2011; Pusher & Murphy, 2004). Pushor & Murphy (2004) comment, “We are struck by the fact that we are involved in most, if not all of the parent involvement roles Epstein outlines, and yet we are not feeling like partners in our children’s schools.” (p. 224). Epstein’s framework may not be adequate in considering how to involve parents in meaningful ways.

Wearmouth (2004) cites the four common types of parent-school partnerships described in Dale’s (1996) work. These include:

1. Expert model – a traditional teacher-parent model, similar to a doctor-patient relationship

2. Transplant model – teachers offer parents skills to use with their children

3. Consumer model – power is shifted from teachers to parents in acknowledging that parents know their child best. Parents may choose which services are needed.

4. Empowerment model – teachers respect the rights of parents, as in the consumer model, but teachers offer valuable support to parents in helping them meet their child’s needs.
Dale’s (1996) model acknowledges the power differential between parents and teachers that must be mitigated if parents are to be viewed as significant partners in education (Wearmouth, 2004). Using an overarching empowerment model could enhance each of Epstein’s (1995) six types of parental involvement.

**Recent Research**

The Executive Summary of the European Commission (2011) published a report on how parent involvement may enhance early literacy development, after examining numerous quantitative studies, qualitative studies, and meta-analyses. The researchers compared the effect sizes of various educational interventions, of which almost all occur in schools. Based on these findings, they highly recommended family literacy initiatives, as “family literacy interventions have a greater impact than most educational interventions” (European Commission, 2011, p.2). The report (2011) describes family literacy as having many possible descriptions including book gifting programs, training for parents, parent-child book sharing programs, and initiatives that impact family attitudes toward reading. The large benefits of family literacy programs extend well beyond the literacy acquisition of young children, and both children and adults in the family experience long-term benefits (e.g., employment outcomes, parent empowerment, greater social-emotional support) (European Commission, 2011).

In order for a family literacy program to have a significant impact on a child’s literacy development, the authors recommend the program contain activities for families that are culturally relevant and easy to implement at home, and be facilitated by a well-qualified
professional. Relying on volunteers can negatively impact the quality of the program, which further impacts the sustainability of the literacy initiative. Family literacy programs need to be tailored to meet the needs of the targeted group, and be continually evaluated for effectiveness in meeting the participants’ needs (European Commission, 2011).

Even though there is ample evidence suggesting the efficacy of family literacy programs, this type of initiative is not widespread, especially for families of school-aged children (European Commission, 2011). Public schools receive most of the public funding designated to educating children, and could use a family literacy initiative as part of a classroom literacy program. However, there are complex barriers that limit this practice from happening. “In many countries parents are acknowledged in principle as the ‘first teachers’; however, in practice, school systems are often indifferent or even hostile to the potential of family literacy interventions to complement school-based literacy strategies” (European Commission, 2011, p. 6). There is some ambiguity as to which government budget should be responsible for policies and funding for family literacy. The report (European Commission, 2011) recommends cross-departmental policy-making and funding to address the complexities associated with programs developed to support families.

In her article, White (2009) describes a family literacy initiative she offered to the parents of the children in her Kindergarten to Grade One classroom. The author describes a ‘Back-to-School’ night where she used a non-traditional approach. Instead of telling parents how their children would learn in her class, she showed them using videos, sharing observations and sharing children’s dialogues. The parents stated that they wanted more of this type of information, and
before the evening was over the teacher agreed to host monthly meetings. As a result of these meetings, strong relationships were formed among parents and between parents and the teacher, and parents gained skills in helping their children at home. White’s (2009) article gives an in-depth example of a non-traditional family literacy event that empowered parents, and was facilitated by a qualified professional.

Timmons (2009) describes a family literacy initiative that was designed to meet the needs of families in a small rural community. Before planning the program, extensive research was conducted to learn the specific challenges of parents and children. Researchers interviewed local families, educators, and community leaders. The resulting family literacy program consisted of 10 modules, and took place one night per week. Parents and children attended the event together, learning skills separately for one hour, and practicing their new skills together for half an hour. Parents evaluated the effectiveness of the program, offering valuable feedback on content and format. Reading scores of children whose families participated in the program were compared with the reading scores of children whose families who would later participate in the program. The results indicated that the program was correlated with improved scores of reading achievement, and parents reported enhanced family relationships.

School Collaborative Processes

Some districts are using a Response to Intervention (RTI) initiative to support students who are experiencing difficulty in learning literacy skills. RTI refers to a school-wide framework that is becoming increasingly popular worldwide in addressing student needs more quickly and
effectively. RTI began as a strategy to increase literacy achievement, and literacy continues to be a main goal in an RTI framework. An RTI framework consists of three tiers that are typically displayed using a triangle to demonstrate that Tier One supports all students, Tier Two supports some students, and Tier Three supports only a few students. Students may move between the Tiers as student needs change, and the goal of all interventions is for students to return to Tier One. Key processes within all three tiers of an RTI framework are effective use of evidence-based methods for instruction and assessment, and collaboration (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006).

The school district in which this study is located requires each school to develop an RTI framework, and the district has currently completed year two of a three-year implementation plan. The district’s documents describe the collaborative process, and recommend using a problem-solving inquiry model to support vulnerable learners. Although the document mentions the inclusion of classroom teachers, special education teachers, educational assistants, district staff, school administrators, and counselors, there is no mention of parents. Considering the potentially large achievement gains for students when parents are involved in a child’s learning, it seems imperative to consider a parent’s role as their child moves from Tier One to Tier Two to Tier Three within a collaborative RTI framework. The absence of parents on these district documents demonstrates the importance of this study.

A collaborative process established in this particular district, and pre-dates the district’s initiative of an RTI framework, is the ‘School-Based Team’ (SBT). When a teacher notices a child is having difficulty, the teacher refers the student to the SBT, which consists of the special education teacher, the school administrator, and any other specialized district staff. The team,
along with the classroom teacher, discusses the student’s needs using a problem-solving approach, and makes any recommendations. A referral to the SBT is generally the first step towards a student receiving additional support within the school. Parents are not typically invited to SBT meetings, but are usually contacted by the classroom teacher before and after a SBT meeting. Depending on the individual teacher’s approach, this contact could provide an opportunity for a parent to advocate for their child.

**Gaps in Knowledge**

Many studies demonstrate the importance of schools providing meaningful opportunities for parents to be involved in their child’s education, and opportunities that are intended to support families in helping their children be successful at school. Though current research has found a strong correlation between meaningful parent involvement and student achievement, there is little research from the parent perspective that explores how parents are already involved or wish to be further involved in their child’s literacy development. “There is significant research about ways in which schools can support children who are experiencing academic challenges. There is also considerable research about how families can support their children in their academic pursuits. Often these two areas of research are disconnected, leading to a gap in information about ways in which schools can enable families to support their children’s learning” (Timmons, 2009, p.29).

This study explores the understandings and practices, pertaining to early literacy and parent involvement, of parents and teachers of K-3 students in a particular school community. It suggests how knowledge might be shared between parents and teachers to enhance a child’s
literacy learning, and how teachers might empower families to support their child in learning literacy skills. Empowerment is particularly important for concerned parents whose child is experiencing difficulty in learning to read or write. This study could be useful to other school communities, as it could promote more meaningful collaboration between teachers and parents in supporting children in Kindergarten to Grade Three who require additional support in developing literacy skills.
CHAPTER THREE: METHOD

Research Location

This study takes place in a small rural community within a public school district on Vancouver Island. The context of this particular school is unique to other schools in the area because of the small population size, which contributes to the intimate setting of the small elementary school. This particular school is more flexible in meeting student needs, and students seem to be viewed more holistically, compared to school communities in larger settings. Because personal connections and relationships naturally exist between the school and community, the school offers different opportunities for parent involvement in comparison to a larger and more industrious place, and these opportunities will be spoken of later in this study.

Researcher-Participant Relationship

As the researcher, I am closely situated in the context of this study. I am a resident of the community where this study takes place, and my child attends the community school. My personal connection to some participants may have caused some personal information to be withheld, such as thoughts and experiences they believed I would view negatively; or it may have caused a participant to feel more comfortable in offering a more thorough and authentic response. Although I have an obvious researcher bias, my involvement in the study may have added depth and insight that would have otherwise been lost.

My close proximity unintentionally allowed me to be a participant observer in some aspects of this study, which may have caused the data to be more authentic and in-depth. “Interview can be
complex and difficult undertaking when gender, culture, and life experiences of the interviewer and participant are quite different” (Gay, Mills, & Airasian, 2009, p. 371). However, looking deeper into this study has also allowed me to be a non-participant observer, as I do not share the specific roles or responsibilities of the participants within and outside of the school (Gay, Mills, & Airasian, 2009). Keeping an awareness of my own biases, and the biases embedded within traditional educational structures, lessens any contradictions that may arise, and allows them to be viewed within a broader theoretical context.

**Method**

An interview-based qualitative research method was used to explore how parents and teachers each offer children valuable literacy learning experiences in one particular school community. This seemed to be a well-suited method to explore the research questions, because qualitative research can “catch unique features that may otherwise be lost in large scale data (e.g. surveys); these unique features might hold the key to understanding the situation” (Cohen, Manion, & Morrision, 2013, p. 293). The flexible approach of semi-structured interviews allowed the numerous and unique factors (e.g., environmental, personal) that impact parental involvement in a child’s literacy development to be explored and considered.

This study explored how parents and teachers support children in developing literacy skills, and was conducted from a strengths-based perspective, rather than a problem-focused perspective. This positive approach may have helped to maintain the study focus, and may have served to
build upon the existing teacher-parent partnership. A deficit model may have been more likely to cause harm to the already sensitive relationship between schools and families.

**Participants**

A total of six people participated in this study - three were parents of children in K-3 who attend the community school and experience some difficulty in learning literacy skills, and three were school personnel. Of the three school personnel who participated, one was a K-3 classroom teacher, one was the school’s special education teacher, and the third was the school administrator.

Although all five K-3 classroom teachers in the school were invited to participate, only one gave consent. The recruitment script (Appendix A) and consent letter (Appendix C) were e-mailed to each teacher two or three times, along with a personal note. One teacher declined, and three teachers did not respond. Classroom teacher participation may have been limited due to the small close-knit community in which this study was located, the sensitive nature of literacy and special education, a teacher’s unfamiliarity with research in general causing feelings of apprehension, or the reality that classroom teachers are extremely busy. The school administrator and the special education teacher were recruited through in-person conversations, and this recruitment method may have contributed to these participants’ decision to participate in this study. Interesting to note, all three of the school personnel who consented hold Master’s degrees, and are therefore familiar with research and the research process. The three participating school personnel were all female, presumably of Caucasian descent, and between mid-30s and mid-50s in age. These
demographic descriptors are consistent with the vast majority of elementary educators (Hornby & Lafaele, 2011; Nasir & Hand, 2006). Participants were not asked demographic questions because this information was not part of the research design in addressing the study questions.

Parents were recruited through the special education teacher, and all three recruited parents chose to participate. The criteria for the parent participants were: having a child in K-3 in the school whom the school had already identified as requiring additional support in learning literacy skills. The special education teacher chose three parents who met the criteria, and gave these parents the recruitment script (Appendix B) and consent letter (Appendix C). The parents then mailed the signed consent letters directly to the researcher, along with contact information, using the self-addressed envelope enclosed in the recruitment package. Upon receiving a signed consent letter, the participant was contacted by phone to answer any questions about the study, and to schedule the interview. The parent participants were all female and presumably of Caucasian descent, which connects to the research describing parents who tend to be involved in schools (Hornby & Lafaele, 2011; Nasir & Hand, 2006). One parent participant works inside the home, two parent participants work outside of the home, one of which is a single parent.

Data Collection

Each of the six participants participated in one individual semi-structured interview, lasting 30-60 minutes. Interviews were audio-recorded, all verbatim was transcribed, and non-verbal data was recorded. The wording of the questions and the question sequences (Appendices D, E, F, G) were prepared in advance, and all questions were framed using positive language to encourage
constructive responses. Questions were re-worded, and prompts and probes were used in order to acquire more specific information.

The information sought from parents included:

• family values and beliefs pertaining to literacy

• how literacy is intentionally or unintentionally encouraged or developed in the home environment

• how parents are involved in their child’s literacy development – through home and school activities

• how knowledge is shared between school and home

The information sought from school personnel included:

• how the school involves parents in the literacy development of students

• how parents are involved in the school’s process of providing additional literacy support to students in K-3 who are experiencing difficulty

Semi-structured interviews allowed information to be gained that is complex and in-depth, making it subjective and qualitative in nature. Open-ended interview questions allowed a participant to offer in-depth responses to complex issues (Cohen et. al, 2013). Interviewees were able to provide additional details that were unanticipated, which greatly contributed to the research questions.
Data Analysis

After all interviews were conducted and transcribed, the expressed ideas were itemized into categories using five of Epstein’s (1995) Six Types of Parental Involvement (parenting, learning at home, communicating, volunteering, decision-making) as a framework in answering the three research questions. Although collaboration with the community represents significant and meaningful ways for parents to be involved in a child’s literacy development, especially in a small community, time did not permit this type of involvement to be addressed in this study.

It was necessary to summarize the large quantity of data as a preliminary stage of analysis in order for themes to be revealed (Gay, Mills, & Airasian, 2009). The perspectives of the respondents (parents and school personnel) were maintained throughout analysis and interpretation to maintain the holistic meaning of the data. The data was analyzed using the techniques outlined by Strauss (2005):

- Data was examined for the implicit assumptions within the participant narrative to find the personal meaning of the taken-for-granted shared assumptions.

- Data was examined for traces of social discourses in participants’ talk, and how a participant internalized and expressed conflicting social discourses.

Examples of involvement through parenting were organized around three themes: parents’ trust of the school, parents’ desire to help their children succeed at school, and modeling. Learning at home was an emphasis in this study, and there were numerous examples of this in the parent responses. Five themes under this category emerged from the parent responses including: play,
meaningful/personal literacy, functional/purposeful literacy, homework, and one-on-one literacy support. For volunteering, the theme of availability emerged. Communication between parents and school personnel was organized into the three categories described by Graham-Clay (2005): one-way communication, two-way dialogue, and communication through impressions. Responses pertaining to decision-making revealed a theme of advocacy.

After organizing the data from parents and school personnel, the data was examined for any shared understandings or conflicted issues between the two groups of participants.

The implications and applications of the findings will be discussed in the final chapter.

**Validity**

The validity of this study is the natural setting, the rich descriptions of the participants’ point of view through interview, and the holism that I bring as a researcher being intimately connected to the research topic and study location. I am unintentionally a participant-observer as a parent of a child learning to read, a member of the small community, and as a teacher of early literacy. This knowledge was informally triangulated with the interpretive knowledge gained through semi-structured interviews, and these two sources of knowledge were further triangulated with the theoretical knowledge of a large research base. The triangulation of various sources of knowledge strengthened the validity of this study (Gay, Mills, & Airasian, 2009).

Interview as a sole approach in and of itself can be more formally triangulated with other forms of data collection such as observations within the classroom and the home, as well as observation of documentation or artifacts. This was done informally through interview observations and
exclusively as a parent of a child in the context being investigated. To seek a broader perspective one would engage in all of these, though this was not feasible due to time constraints. Despite this limitation, the present study reveals aspects of a school-home dynamic. Further investigation is needed to more thoroughly triangulate the data, which will bring added reliability and possibly some transferability (Wolcott, 2009).

The knowledge created from this research study is subjective and situated in the particular school community where the study takes place, but the findings may be transferrable to another school context in a similar setting. In addition, the understandings of the parent or teacher participants in my study may resonate with parents and teachers elsewhere.

**Significance**

The findings in this study could have a significant impact on my own professional practice as an educator of early literacy wishing to promote meaningful parent-teacher collaboration. This study may be useful to the school community in which the study takes place, and could inform educators in planning an initiative to involve parents in their child’s literacy development in authentic ways. This study may serve as a starting point for schools outside of this community that wish to explore the relationship between parents and the school, and how this relationship impacts literacy development. The understandings described in this study may resonate with individual parents of young children or offer insight to individual educators, possibly impacting a child’s literacy development.
CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Five of Epstein’s (1995) Six Types of Involvement (Parenting, Learning at Home, Communicating, Volunteering, Decision-Making) were used as a framework within each of the three research questions. Collaboration with the community was not part of this study, as this study focuses on the parent-teacher relationship. Epstein’s (1995) framework was chosen because it is frequently cited within the parent involvement literature.

Within this analysis, oral language and written language were not considered separately. As is the case when a child is developing literacy, all four strands of literacy (listening, speaking, reading/viewing, writing/representing) are woven together.

PARENTS

For the purposes of confidentiality, the pseudonyms Clare, Dawn, and Faith will be used when referring to each of the three parent participants. Clare is a parent who works at home, Dawn and Faith are parents who work outside of the home, and Dawn is a single parent. The life context of a family is an important factor when considering how parents and teachers work together (Hornby & Lafaele, 2011).

How are parents involved in their child’s literacy development?

Parenting. In reviewing the parent responses for values and beliefs that may impact how a parent is involved in their child’s literacy development, three themes emerged. One theme was the parents’ trust and support of the school and of teachers in educating their children. The other
theme was a strong desire to help their child succeed at school, and a willingness to make sacrifices and significant effort toward this goal. The third theme was parents modeling literacy behaviours in everyday life.

Parents trust the school. All three parents expressed trust of the school and of their child’s teacher. Each parent communicated a belief that teachers are incredibly busy and doing all they can, and the teacher’s role is extremely challenging and difficult. All three parents believe that teachers cannot put any more effort into their child’s learning than they are currently. Each parent mentioned an appreciation for the knowledge and expertise of teachers, and spoke of their parental role as reinforcing classroom instruction and following the teacher’s lead. Clare and Dawn spoke of valuing the resources the school provides. These views expressed by the parents may depict the views of many parents (Pushor & Murphy, 2004).

All three parents referred to the challenge of teaching their own child. Clare and Faith expressed a lack of skills. Clare and Dawn spoke about the parental relationship being a barrier to teaching their own child, as their child is inclined to work harder for the teacher at school than the parent at home.

Although participants were not asked directly about why their child experienced difficulties in learning literacy skills, no parent suggested that the school or a teacher could be responsible. Participants implied possible causes of their child’s reading difficulties. Faith spoke of their family culture in saying they are not a ‘reading’ family; Clare described her child’s medical
background, and mentioned several times that literacy is not her own strength; Dawn suggested her child may have a learning disability.

Parents’ desire to help their child succeed at school. All three parents expressed concern for their child’s lack of reading progress, and a willingness to do ‘anything’. As Dawn stated, “If it’s offered I’ll take anything [to help my child].”

Clare and Faith expressed feeling great satisfaction in seeing their child enjoy reading on their own initiative, and believe learning to read builds a child’s self-confidence.

Clare and Faith referred to teaching their children behaviours or attitudes conducive to learning. Clare described the importance of teaching her child to view mistakes as learning opportunities, particularly when getting a spelling test back with several x’s. Faith mentioned the importance of telling her children that she is proud of how hard they work, especially on writing activities that they find difficult. She also stated that her child becomes more motivated when she gets excited about a homework activity.

Modeling. The common everyday activities that children see parents engage in contribute to a child’s concept of literacy (Parr, 2013; White, 2009). All three parents mentioned that their children see them, or another parent, read the newspaper and write lists or notes. Clare and Dawn noted how their children see them write more on the computer than on paper.

Clare mentioned reading and editing papers; work and volunteer related activities such as scheduling, making posters, making handouts, or reading to research a theme; exposure to other languages through extended family and travel experiences; and exposure to scientific literacy
used in the home. Clare believes her younger child loves everything about school because she watches her older sibling do homework, and wants to do everything she does.

Faith mentioned purposeful literacy activities such as paying bills and filing. She also discussed how the emotions or opinions she displays toward an activity influence her child’s motivation in doing the activity. Faith is sometimes intentionally positive when helping her children with particular homework activities for this reason.

*Learning at home.* Research describes a misconception commonly held by teachers that some parents, particularly working parents or single parents, are too busy to help their children (Wearmouth, 2004). The two working parents, Faith and Dawn, did describe their lives as being extremely busy. However, despite this reality, all three parents manage to spend time each day engaging in literacy activities with their child. These literacy activities include meaningful conversations that build oral language skills, along with reading and writing activities.

All three parents are committed to reading aloud to their child each day, and know that teachers generally recommend this practice. However, all three parents expressed a desire to help their child in more ways than this. Clare commented, “…there’s many parents, including myself…I don’t know how, other than read with my child, that I can further help my child except, ‘I know my child needs help’ and ‘this is what I’m willing to do...’”. The parents described various literacy activities that occur in the home, many of which were not considered important by the parent, and required prompting for the parent to even mention. Literacy activities occurring in the home were organized according to five themes, which emerged from the data: play, personal/
meaningful literacy activities, functional/purposeful literacy activities, homework, and one-on-one literacy support.

*Play.* Play is an important part of early literacy development in young children (Roskos & Christie, 2011). To be considered play, the behaviour must include each of the five criterion: voluntary; loosely structured; repetitive; relaxed; and not fully functional (Roskos & Christie, 2011). A child’s home environment impacts how a child plays, and literacy-related materials in the physical space where a child plays and learns can promote engagement in literacy activities (Farver, et al., 2013; Honeyghan, 2000).

All three parents indicated the presence of a large quantity of books in the home, and mentioned that a variety of writing materials are always accessible to their children.

Clare commented that there are books everywhere and in every room, including the bathroom; and their book collection includes a wide variety of book levels, including magazines. Clare mentioned how her children will pick up huge textbooks and pretend to read by looking at the pictures, and her older child will actually look at the words. She went on to describe how her children play ‘school’. The older child will write words, letters, or a directed drawing on a chalkboard for the younger child to copy. Sometimes the older child staples together a construction paper workbook for the younger child. Her children even arranged an old wooden children’s desk in front of a chalkboard to facilitate this activity.

Dawn described her children choosing to write in their little books, and telling her stories in the garden about what happened at school that day. She added that her children feel more
comfortable and relaxed outside in the garden, which suggests that these behaviours are play-based. Dawn also mentioned a television show promoting literacy skills that her children enjoy watching.

Faith described children’s poems and a calendar on the wall used to organize family events.

*Personal/meaningful literacy activities.* Hinton et al. (2008) discuss brain research demonstrating how emotions are intertwined with learning, and how these emotions contribute to interest and motivation. This research suggests that literacy activities that are meaningful to an individual have a greater impact on literacy learning. Johnson (2010) describes the literacy activities that naturally occur in one particular family, including interactions with family members and reading or writing for enjoyment. Johnson (2010) and Cairney (2002) believe that because each family is unique in the way members interact, each family is unique in how they participate in literacy activities. Some of the literacy activities mentioned by the parents are meaningful and/or personal to the child or individual family, and offer a glimpse into the unique way a family participates in literacy activities.

All three parents mentioned reading aloud to their children, usually before bed. Each parent spoke of supporting of their child’s interests and preferences in books, even if the child’s preference was different than the parent’s. Dawn mentioned a book series her child enjoys, and added, “…which is not fun reading, but it’s what he likes to read…” Clare mentioned how her child connects with non-fiction books about animals, and loves National Geographic, but is
frightened by fairytales. Faith mentioned her child’s enjoyment of reading magazines, comics, and school library books.

All three parents described storytelling activities involving personal non-fiction stories or imaginative fiction stories. Sometimes the parent tells the story while the child listens, and other times the stories are told by the child. Clare mentioned how the children’s father is good at telling imaginative stories, but when the children beg her to tell a story, she reaches for a book. Dawn spoke about her children telling stories in the garden about the school day. Faith described her family’s enjoyment in telling stories around a campfire when camping, and reviewing the day’s events during dinnertime conversations.

All three parents talked about their children occasionally choosing to write or read on their own initiative. Clare mentioned how her child’s ‘Learn-in-Depth’ topic is meaningful, and her child is motivated to write at home in order to work on this project. (‘Learn-in-Depth’ is a program where each child in the class is assigned a different topic for further independent study.) Dawn talked about her kids doing crossword puzzles, in addition to praying and reciting Bible verses before bed each night. These are examples of personal and meaningful activities unique to a particular family’s context.

*Functional/purposeful literacy activities.* In her article, Johnson (2010) describes literacy activities that naturally occur in a family to manage everyday life. Because these activities have a clear purpose, they may increase a child’s motivation to learn literacy skills (White, 2009). All three parents talked about cooking from a recipe in a cookbook and making cards on special
occasions. Faith talked about her children or an adult reading aloud: their family events calendar, community events in the newspaper, the message board at the community grocery store, and the classroom newsletter together.

Homework. When designed carefully, homework activities can support and extend classroom activities, and must respect family time (Carr, 2013; Epstein, 1995). All three parents expressed an appreciation of homework in providing information about what their child is doing at school, how their child is doing, and what the parent can do to help their child be successful at school.

Clare talked about how homework allows her to reinforce what her children are doing at school, and Faith mentioned keeping her children on the pattern initiated and established by the school. Dawn mentioned how she helps her child with any homework that comes home, as she believes the school is really helping her child.

Both Dawn and Faith talked about having to coax their child into doing their homework, and how reminding their child of the teacher’s expectations helps to motivate their child. Faith mentioned how her enthusiasm toward a homework activity causes her child to feel more positive emotions about the activity.

Faith talked about another important aspect of homework. Some nights her children are awake until 9:30 p.m. finishing their homework. This same parent expressed concern over her other child having very little homework, and worries that he may not be getting everything he needs for the subsequent grade. Faith described a homework dilemma experienced by many parents
Parents have a strong desire to help their children succeed at school, yet homework activities may cause stress on family life and relationships.

All three parents mentioned various homework assignments, some of which their children enjoy, some that feel more like work. All three parents mentioned weekly spelling words and a ‘show-and-tell’ writing activity. Dawn mentioned extra activities (e.g., puzzles, crosswords) the teacher sends because the child enjoys them, short stories, and weekly sentences. Faith mentioned home reading, book reports, and projects. Clare mentioned the Learn-in-Depth homework described above, which she feels is meaningful to her child. Carr (2013) emphasizes that any homework assigned must have a purpose that is clear to students and parents, and not be assigned merely to follow a routine.

One-on-one specific literacy support. Parents may greatly impact their child’s literacy development through parent-tutoring when effective strategies are used that increase their child’s engagement in literacy (Axford, 2007). All three parents regularly assist their children with homework activities one-on-one.

Faith and Dawn expressed a belief that literacy activities occur indoors, and therefore the family engages in fewer literacy activities in the summer months when the family prefers to be outside. Some parents may consider literacy in a more traditional sense, and discount non-traditional literacy activities, which could serve to enhance literacy development (Johnson, 2010; White, 2009).
Clare believes that one-on-one time with parents builds confidence, and spoke of the value in everyday learning opportunities that occur in the home. Clare reinforces the school learning of which she is aware. She views herself as the assistant who can provide the one-on-one support that is so valuable to her child, and added, “I’m bridging the gap between home life and school… what she’s learning at school, she’s getting at home.” This quote reiterates the overarching idea of Epstein’s (1995) framework of parental involvement. Clare removed her child from school one day per week to reinforce classroom learning at home in a one-on-one setting. Recently Clare’s friend offered to tutor her child, and to teach Clare how to help her child. Clare mentioned one example of how she supports her child in reading by explaining the meaning of new words that come up in books. She assists her child each day in reading books that are at her child’s specific reading level.

Dawn helps her children learn high frequency sight word using commercially produced word cards. Dawn even hired a tutor to work with her child one-on-one for several months outside of the school, but the high costs and travel demands caused Dawn to discontinue this support.

Volunteering. In reviewing the parent responses pertaining to volunteering in the school, it was evident that a parent’s availability of time was the main factor contributing to a parent volunteering.

Clare is the parent with the most flexible schedule, and is the only parent of the three participants who is able to volunteer in the school. Clare volunteers with reading groups once a week for one hour. During this time, she reads with the group of children that are one level higher than her
own child. Clare feels that she is ineffective at helping these children learn to read, and expressed that she is not skilled in teaching literacy. Clare feels she is able to follow a teacher-assigned activity, but finds managing student behaviour to be a challenge. At the same time, Clare believes parent volunteers are needed to support children in literacy, as there are not enough public funds allocated to the school to provide adequate support without parent volunteers. She acknowledges that because most parents need to work, it is difficult for the school to find volunteers.

Clare believes volunteering gives her a sense of what is expected at her child’s specific grade level. Clare explained that she gains a better understanding of how to help her child by “watching the teachers and seeing what kind of homework there is, what books their kids are reading, and it gives me a real guideline.” Additionally, volunteering allows her child’s home and school contexts to overlap. “[My child] sees me at school volunteering and helping, so she sees what is at home is in the classroom at the same time...so school’s not just what you learn at school, it’s her life.”

Clare sometimes volunteers in various classrooms helping teachers teach science topics, as she has a science background. Although she finds teachers are open and receptive to this idea, she adds that you have to approach the teacher at the right time, before a project or unit of study is already planned.
Faith is aware that some parents volunteer to support children in reading groups. She appreciates that parents volunteer their time, so that her children have the opportunity to read in a small group with an adult.

How do teachers support parents, and parents support teachers, in creating meaningful and engaging literacy opportunities for a child?

**Communication.** Communication is a critical component to any collaboration, and as Clare commented, “There’s so much we can all learn from each other.” The parent responses are organized into the types of communication outlined by Graham-Clay (2005), which are: one-way, two-way, and impressions. Although impressions were not emphasized in this study, communication is greatly impacted by this non-verbal form of sharing information (Graham-Clay, 2005), and is therefore worth mentioning. Graham-Clay’s (2005) article was useful in considering this type of involvement, because she writes specifically about teacher-parent communication.

**One-way communication.** One-way communication tends to be in written form, and the goal is to convey information to parents effectively and efficiently (Graham-Clay, 2005). All three parents appreciate the information shared in weekly and monthly newsletters from teachers, and Faith added that posting events and schedules in the classroom is helpful to those parents who are able to be in the school building on a regular basis. All three parents appreciate the role of homework in providing information about what their child is doing at school and how they are doing at it.
Dawn and Faith appreciate the efficiency of gaining information in written form, as their time is limited, due to work schedules. Dawn added that information in written form allows her to read it with her child.

Clare commented that she expects communication to be more one-way because she believes education and learning is the teacher’s field of knowledge. She feels it is important for parents to share their child’s needs and background information with teachers, but that it is appropriate for more information to come from the teacher than from the parent. Pushor & Murphy (2004) challenge the typical teacher-school communication where the teacher voice is emphasized, and believe both parents and teachers have expertise and knowledge that is valuable. The authors suggest, “laying parent knowledge alongside that of teachers.” (Pushor & Murphy, 2004, p. 234).

In terms of newsletters, Faith mentioned that although a newsletter is informative, it does not give a child’s ‘personal’ level. Faith expressed how working full time is a barrier to gaining valuable information, and it is important to her to know what her children do at school.

Two-way dialogue. Effective dialogue consists of trust, mutual concern, and an appreciation for different perspectives; and teachers should strive to make these interactions productive (Graham-Clay, 2005).

All three parents talked about informal, face-to-face conversations initiated by either the teacher or the parent. All three parents mentioned the importance of sharing any background information with their child’s teacher, or any other information that may impact student learning. Clare talked about the importance of sharing her child’s attitudes toward reading and writing, and her concerns
as a parent. She added that the information shared by teachers generally pertains to the classroom environment and how a child is doing in comparison to his or her peers.

Clare believes that she engages in meaningful dialogue with her children’s teachers, and values this good rapport. Clare stresses the importance of humanizing communication and frequent communication. She is able to check-in with her children’s teachers when picking up or dropping off her children at school. Clare believes that one-on-one conversations with the teacher are valuable, and that this is the best way to get ideas or resources to help her child at home. Clare appreciates receiving guidance from teachers to help her help her child at home. Although she never used the word empowerment, this concept is implied.

Clare spoke about the importance of both teachers and parents being open to the other perspective. “It [parent-teacher collaboration] also helps parents, teachers to understand their kids more, but the parents have to also be very open. If a teacher has something to suggest or say, sometimes it may not be what you want to hear. You have to be really open, because kids, you know, they behave differently at school too.” (laugh)

Faith talked about there not being enough conversations between herself and her children’s teachers, because she (herself) is so busy. Many times the brief informal conversations with her children’s teachers are about her children’s behaviour, and if they mention anything pertaining to literacy, it is usually a reminder to study for a spelling test. These parent-teacher discussions could be more intentional in sharing knowledge about what literacy is and how it develops, and discussing meaningful learning opportunities for a child at home.
Faith referred to formal discussions occurring in a scheduled conference, where parents and teachers discuss student goals. Clare mentioned formal discussions occurring about once a month in a scheduled meeting with her child’s teacher.

‘Back-and-Forth folders’ and student planners are really appreciated by Dawn and Faith, the two parents who are working outside of the home. Both parents talked about relying heavily on this two-way communication system, and feel they can send their child’s teacher a note about anything using this mode. However, the ‘Back and Forth’ folder was not effective in clarifying a homework assignment for Faith. She and her child’s teacher sent several notes back-and-forth, and Faith was not able to understand the assignment well enough to help her child complete his homework.

*Communication through impressions.* Impressions are created and expressed in the way an environment is arranged, and in a person’s non-verbal communication (Graham-Clay, 2005).

All three parents have the impression that the school is doing everything they can, and any extra support makes a significant difference. Dawn seems to hold the belief that ‘no news is good news’, and commented, “I don’t know where he’s at. There’s no concerns right now, doesn’t seem to be.” She trusts that her child’s teacher would contact her if there were any concerns. Clare expressed a definite preference for face-to-face communication, and added, “I find phone calls, e-mails, there’s a lot of communication that you miss.”

**How are parents involved in the school’s collaborative process of offering additional help to a child?**
Decision Making. Within the scope of this study, advocacy emerged as a theme within the responses pertaining to how parents may impact school or teacher decisions. Parents who are skilled in advocating for their children can improve the educational supports their child receives (Burke, 2013).

Clare strongly believes in advocating for her child, and offered numerous ideas within this theme. “If I was not involved as I was and, because for one reason or another, something that would hinder [me] from being as involved, my daughter would definitely be going through life being intimidated, lacking self-confidence. Even though she loves to draw and is very friendly, there’d be aspects of her education, her life, of who she is, that she’s not good enough, or not as good as the others...and that carries through, and it gets worse when you’re older. So that’s why I stepped in.”

Clare advocates for extra services for her child, and believes it is really important to meet face-to-face with teachers, especially at the beginning of the year, or if new concerns arise. Clare believes parents need to be open to what their child needs, and to acknowledge any difficulties early on. “And if you don’t say anything and assume the school will take care of everything, it’ll just slip through the system. And not by anybody’s fault…it’s really difficult for any teacher to do it with like, 22-30 kids.”

Clare has chosen to remove her child from school one day per week to give her child additional one-on-one support. Later in the year, her friend offered to tutor her child at this time. She described how she explained this to the school, “My daughter desperately needs help. This is the
age at which she needs the help. And what can we do? This is what I want to do - I want to give her as much of one-on-one as possible.” Then she added, “and the teacher has been in full support of this.” Clare has found some teachers to be more flexible than others in accommodating her needs.

Dawn does not wish to have any influence over any classroom activities, but appreciates that the school asks for her parental permission before giving additional support to her child outside of the classroom.

Faith believes she does not have any valuable information to share with teachers that could impact their teaching. She added that if she had information that was of value she would want it to have impact, but she is content to follow the teacher’s lead. Over the course of our conversation, Faith expressed that she probably should share her perspective as a parent more often (e.g., her preference for weekend homework rather than homework during the week, the impact of her child’s homework on family life, her worry that her other child’s learning may be impacted by a lack of homework).

SCHOOL PERSONNEL

Each participant’s perspective was maintained in discussing each of Epstein’s types of involvement relevant to this study. The pseudonym ‘Alice’ will be used when referring to the special education teacher, ‘Beth’ for the school administrator, and ‘Ellen’ for the classroom teacher.
How are parents involved in their child's literacy development, and how do parents support teachers in creating meaningful and engaging learning opportunities for a child?

**Parenting.** Each participant’s responses have been analyzed in terms of beliefs about how parents impact a child’s literacy development.

Alice believes the love, intimacy, and security that are typically present in a parent-child relationship help a child develop literacy skills. “[In the home, children can] be themselves and know that they’re going to be totally loved no matter what happens. So I think that when it comes to literacy, being brave about things happens in the home in ways that it doesn’t happen in school.” Alice believes the home can cultivate a love of literacy in “that nurturing way as opposed to an academic way”. Alice described how reading at home can provide comfort to a child, and be a special bonding time between a child and a family member. Alice fondly described her own mother reading aloud to her, long after Alice learned to read independently. Alice included extended family members in her description of how family can impact a child’s literacy development.

Alice expressed concern about anxious parents buying too many worksheets and poor quality leveled books, and added that children can sense when a parent feels anxious. A child’s literacy development can sometimes become a focal point in the home, especially if a child is experiencing difficulty in this area. Alice added that this approach could cause a child to become reluctant to engage in any literacy activities, even at school.
Beth mentioned modeling as an important piece parents provide in supporting their child’s literacy development.

Like Alice, Ellen emphasized that the safety and comfort of the parental relationship can have a large impact on a child’s literacy development. She spoke about how parents can expose their child to a large variety of environmental print, and provide a rich life context from which to approach a literacy activity.

**How do teachers support parents, and parents support teachers, in creating meaningful and engaging literacy opportunities?**

The responses of school personnel pertaining to learning at home mainly pertain to the first part of the question; that is: how teachers support parents in creating meaningful and engaging literacy opportunities for children.

**Learning at home.** The responses of the school personnel included four of the five themes, which emerged in the parent responses – personal/meaningful literacy, functional/purposeful literacy, homework, and one-on-one literacy support. The school personnel did not mention play, although it was inferred when Alice mentioned the learning environment.

Alice’s specific recommendations to parents depend on a child’s learning needs, but Alice generally encourages: “explorative learning, like go label things in your house together…you know, doing things actively…reading a recipe, making food together…actively involved in reading and writing that…don’t look like school, don’t feel like school. That help them be excited…and help them connect with what they already know.” Alice recommends activities that
are enjoyable and imbed reading and learning into home life. Alice tells parents to model
different ways of reading a book, expose children to quality literature, show the joy in reading,
search for certain words in a book, and really get into the book by interacting with it.

In speaking about home reading programs, Alice is aware of the significant benefits, and believes
children need a large quantity of books when learning to read. Alice believes the school’s limited
supply of books is the main reason there is not a school-wide home reading program, but also
mentioned some logistical challenges in organizing a home reading program. Last year, while
teaching in a classroom, Alice sent home one book per week that reinforced specific classroom
reading activities. Alice has also used worksheets as home reading programs, which included
ideas for parents to use at home. When teaching in a classroom, Alice took her students for a
library visit before the end of the year, and promoted the summer reading club.

When she was a classroom teacher, Alice asked her students to bring items from home to school.
These items provided the basis for a class discussion, and connected the student home lives to a
learning activity (e.g. a dad showed his child a Douglas Fir tree, so the child brought in a branch).
“…so things that are in their life, and they become the sources of knowledge in the room”. At the
end of a school year, Alice sends home activities her students have worked on during the year,
with additional copies of activities they may want to continue over the summer. (e.g., mini-
books, worksheets, spelling program). These summer activities were optional, and Alice is
careful not to overwhelm parents by sending too many activities. Alice tries to convey to parents
the importance of keeping their children connected to their school learning, so newly learned
skills are not lost over the summer.
Beth believes in the school supporting parents, and a family-centered approach. She states that parent participation with many parents is important. “...in terms of trying to support our parents, that’s really key here....in any way that we can.” Beth further comments that teachers work hard to support parents, especially at the younger levels. Her question is not why to involve parents, instead she asks, “How do we connect parents into helping their children at home?”

Beth believes a barrier to parent involvement may be a parents’ lack of time and skills, but also believes the school needs to support families. “Many parents don’t feel they’re skilled enough to do that, and other parents are so busy...so the children don’t have the support at home...the more that you could support your children, and be involved in their education, the research shows, that the more successful your children are going to be.”

Beth believes it is important for teachers to make parents aware of the skills their children are working on. “I would say we would try to provide resources for them...or suggestions of what they could do...and lots of it’s just read. Read and expose your child to print.” In terms of home reading, Beth mentioned that each classroom teacher has a different program in place.

Ellen mentioned some general learning activities that she believes frequently occur in most homes, such as reading at bedtime and being immersed in environmental print. Ellen does not generally give homework to students, unless a student requests it or a member of the SBT specifically recommends something. Ellen generally tells parents, “Read, read, read!”, and tries to say this gently in her newsletters. Ellen wishes she could send home four to five books per week, in addition to the two school library books. When teaching in other schools, she has
sent home three to four books per week. The school’s limited book supply prevents a home reading program from being implemented in all classrooms.

Ellen gives parents general ideas that can be implemented at home to support a child’s literacy development. She recommends public library use, lots of singing, and nursery rhymes. “School is still based on understanding those concepts as they go into higher grades…they’re assuming that they already have been introduced to Cinderella or the Gingerbread Man, or the Three Billy Goats Gruff”. Fairytales are inherently cultural, and demonstrate the cultural model of school described by Donavan & Cross (2002). Ellen also recommends that parents “talk with your kids, walk and talk.” If students are away on a holiday during the school year, Ellen recommends they write in a journal. “I make them a little journal, so if they’re going to Disneyland, I make them a Disneyland journal. I want those students writing.” She added, “…even if they don’t use it, at least I’ve given them the tool.”

**Volunteering.** Alice spoke about organizing reading groups and coordinating parent volunteers for this activity. She talked about there being lots of parent volunteers in the school for various literacy activities, including the ‘Learn in Depth’ program. Some parent volunteers have an area of expertise or interest, which is motivating for students. Parents volunteer to assist with various activities such as an art project, a garden project, or physical education activities.

Beth believes this particular school has a lot of volunteers because of the unique combination of teachers who are willing to have volunteers come into the school, and volunteers who are willing and available. “So I’m not sure if the word is out there in the community, that the school is more
than welcoming to come in, because I’ve never seen such a response in a school, and I’ve worked at quite a few schools…”

Ellen spoke of the reading groups she has organized in her classroom, as one group reads with a parent volunteer from the students’ individual book bins. Ellen utilizes parent volunteers for the ‘Learn in Depth’ program. She appreciates having extra people in the classroom at this time to help students read challenging vocabulary. Ellen invites parents to stay in the classroom for a few minutes of reading time in the morning, and students whose parents are unable to come in at that time “cuddle up next to another parent who’s reading a story, and it’s not the teacher.” In past years, Ellen has had parent volunteers compiling memory books or helping with a cooking program.

**Communication.** As with the parent responses, the responses of the school personnel will be organized and analyzed using the three types of communication described by Graham-Clay (2005), which are: one-way, two-way, and impressions.

**One-way communication.** Alice sent out a newsletter to all students at the beginning of this year to introduce herself to new parents, and to clarify her role in the school as a special education teacher. She also includes recommendations in a child’s report card. As a classroom teacher, Alice has used weekly home communication journals to inform parents of the class activities. She spoke about her concerns with written communication, and has experienced some communication difficulties with e-mail. Alice mentioned how a teacher’s minor concern can be misunderstood by a parent as a significant concern, and it can take a long time to explain a simple
observation. She spoke of the importance of noticing and clarifying a misunderstanding early on, and that misunderstandings are of particular concern when discussing vulnerable learners.

Beth mentioned that many teachers write class newsletters on a weekly and/or monthly basis. The newsletters often contain reminders to parents pertaining to literacy such as, ‘don’t forget to read’ or ‘these are the books that we’re reading’.

Ellen gives specific recommendations in report cards to individual parents, and includes anything the SBT recommends for a particular child. She sends home a general monthly newsletter describing what the children have been learning about in the classroom and what they are about to learn. Ellen’s weekly newsletters contain more detailed information than the monthly newsletters, such as a list of all of the books that have been read in the classroom that week. In both newsletters, Ellen includes information pertaining to literacy.

*Two-way dialogue.* Alice believes time does not allow for enough communication, particularly face-to-face conversations. Alice uses the phone for emergencies and planning meetings, but added “[A phone call] doesn’t tend to be the form of communication to move things forward.”

Alice believes that parents have so much information about a child, and commented that a child’s background information (e.g., preceding situations, other environments) provides a foundation in understanding a child. She believes parents can deepen a teacher’s understanding of a child, such as how a child feels in a particular situation. Alice noted that many children who suffer from fears or anxieties do not appear to struggle at school, yet these emotions significantly impact learning. Alice stated, “that’s where my teaching changes, because a parent will come and say,
‘there is an anxiety around this’. And I’ll think, ‘Wow, that child smiled all the way through that lesson.” Alice’s views are reflective of Pushor & Murphy’s (2004), in valuing the personal and practical knowledge held by parents.

In conversations with parents, Alice suggests ways to make learning fun and meaningful for their child. If parents are using a particular resource at home, she likes parents to bring it in so she can see it and discuss the pros and cons of it, or recommend something else. She noted how some literacy websites on the internet can be intimidating or misleading. Alice frequently shares resources and ideas with parents, particularly with concerned parents. “Once we start talking, they get better ideas than I have!” Alice noted that home learning activities should be tailored for a particular child, and that the child must enjoy doing it.

When discussing a particular child’s difficulties with a parent, Alice mentioned the importance of discussing the child’s thinking processes, and not just the level at which the child is working. Alice believes the child’s difficulties in literacy need to be pinpointed very specifically, and it is important to consider why a child is experiencing difficulty. She added that this investigation is much easier when parents are involved in the discussion.

Alice talked about showing a child’s work samples to the parent, or using modeling to demonstrate how a child is progressing. Although this ‘show and tell’ strategy can add meaning to a discussion, Alice feels it does not happen enough.

Alice mentioned that even face-to-face communication sometimes presents barriers. Parents are sometimes intimidated by the conferencing process, and are reluctant to speak in those settings.
The language teachers use to discuss literacy is not familiar to all parents (Klinger & Harry, 2006). Alice believes more meaningful conversations happen during informal interactions, such as after school while watching children play on the playground. Alice seeks out these opportunities to connect with parents, reassure parents, get information from parents, or share successes with parents. “I think often times they’re only hearing, ‘Oh, you know, this is very difficult’…so when I’ve had a really successful moment, to be able to catch them on that day and say, ’You know, so and so read a chapter book for the first time today and it was so exciting!’” Alice finds these moments with parents enjoyable and rewarding.

Alice believes teaching has a lot to do with building relationships - between parent and teacher, between teacher and student, between children, and even between parents. She spoke passionately about her vision “to build a parent community of learners in that room.” Alice referred to the many relationships that already exist in the small community, but that there are still people who feel isolated. “Helping parents share knowledge with each other…to connect with each other…in this small community it happens a lot for a number of parents, but I think that’s something I would like to see more…like the school could help to create that.” Alice believes this type of event could result in more comfort around teacher-parent relationships. Alice noted that the parent-teacher relationship can sometimes be quite stressed, and wonders if meaningful opportunities to interact with one another could make this relationship more authentic.

Alice has brought parents together for performances or field trips that were social events to some parents. “We’ve done it at the end of the year, and the parents are like, ‘you know, it would have
been so great if we’d known each other at the start of this school year, to know what it’s like being a parent of a child in this grade level at this time.” She mentioned another example of a teacher in the school who invites parents to stay at the beginning of each morning to read with their child, but this opportunity is not available to those parents who need to work at that particular time.

Therefore, Alice envisions these literacy events to occur near the beginning of a school year and in the evening. She believes a literacy evening could provide a fun and informative space for teachers and parents to support one another by sharing knowledge, celebrating successes, and discussing challenges, all oriented around literacy development. Alice mentioned, “the excitement of, you know, what it’s like to go from somebody who just writes letters all over a page to somebody who writes stories that are, you know, cohesive stories, and just sharing that creative energy.” A teacher may introduce a strategy, brings someone in to speak, or show a video that would stimulate literacy in the home. Alice described these events as being social and informal where conversations would naturally occur, so parents can be part of a community.

Alice stated she has not initiated these literacy events she described because she feels overworked, and does not have time. This is a common challenge of special educators who wish to explore less traditional ways of supporting vulnerable learners (Cook & Schirmer, 2003).

Ellen frequently dialogues with parents in writing through the ‘Back and Forth folder’. Both parent and teacher can share information, or set up a time to meet or call.
Ellen mentioned how she gets information “casually from the parent, because it all informs my knowledge of what this student is giving me as output.” Ellen mentioned phoning parents to discuss a child’s difficulties, or to inform parents when their child is doing particularly well so parents can celebrate that success.

*Communication through impressions.* Ellen invites parents to stay in the classroom for a few minutes of reading time in the morning so that parents feel welcome in the classroom. She described this reading time as “just a lovely, community feel.” She added, “And parents are welcome all the time, anytime. They know that. They can stop by if they’re in the vicinity, if they just want to see how they’re [child is] doing, if they want to just be part of our community.” Ellen stated that she has an ‘open door policy’, where parents can feel free to come in and ask anything.

Ellen receives valuable impressions from parents that impact her teaching. For example, she will observe how parents interact with their children, particularly when she may be having difficulty managing a child’s behaviour. She may use the same language or strategy that she observes a parent using with their child, or the observation may deepen her understanding of the child.

Beth mentioned the importance of the school communicating a welcoming impression to the community.

Alice prefers face-to-face communication with parents, and mentioned the importance of noticing a parent’s response, especially if the response is non-verbal, such as a facial expression.
How are parents involved in the school’s collaborative process of offering additional help to a child?

**Decision-making.** The theme of advocacy emerged in the responses of school personnel, as in the responses of parents. In the school personnel responses, this theme mostly pertained to the role of the parent in the school’s collaborative process of supporting a child who may require extra support.

Alice spoke of parents occasionally being invited to SBT meetings, especially if the purpose of the meeting is to get the greatest amount of information as possible, but parents are not traditionally invited; the meetings are attended by the special education teacher, the school administrator, the classroom teacher, and any district personnel who are able to attend (e.g., counselor, speech-language pathologist, educational psychologist). Alice spoke of SBT meetings being sensitive conversations, and to involve or not involve a parent is a delicate matter. Alice noted, “these meetings are meant to be safe places for everyone to speak their mind, and so, sometimes what needs to be shared initially would want to be shared in confidentiality without parents. And then it's a matter of choosing how to involve parents in a way that...sometimes the parents are vulnerable themselves as well...some parents are very intimidated by these things...”.

Alice added, “We would never refuse a parent to come to a meeting. It just might be a different type of meeting...more information based...It amazes me how delicate these conversations are, really.” Alice mentioned that many parents do not necessarily want to attend a SBT, as some parents have had negative school experiences themselves, and may find the whole process intimidating.
Alice believes that most teachers contact parents prior to an SBT meeting, and there is a place on the SBT referral form for teachers to indicate that the parent has been contacted. However, Alice was not certain whether or not this practice occurred consistently. She spoke of how teachers need to be careful of the language they use, especially the language used to express their concerns.

Like Alice, Beth expressed that parents are invited to SBT meetings only on occasion, and also referred to the discussion that usually occurs between a teacher and parent prior to a SBT referral, “just to identify it to the parents...and encourage them to work on some of the skills at home as well. That extra support...we can’t do it all at the school, right?”

Ellen stated that if she notices a student is having a problem, she will refer the student to the SBT, and the team will recommend how to offer further support to the student. If more information is needed, Ellen mentioned that she gains information through informal conversations with parents. Ellen spoke about the discussion she has with parents before referring a student to the SBT. She will typically phone the parents to see what is happening at home, and mention what she has noticed in the classroom. She commented that she has “always been in touch with the parent, just to try and glean some history. Like, maybe they were dyslexic in their life, and that’s a huge clue...or they didn’t like school, or they don’t enjoy reading.”

Ellen believes that the knowledge parents share with her impacts her teaching practice, and stated, “We’re always learning”. Ellen sometimes asks parents if they have a strategy to solve a
specific difficulty with their child, and appreciates when parents share resources with her, such as books that their child loves.

**SHARED UNDERSTANDING AND CONFLICTED ISSUES**

All participants expressed a strong value of parental involvement in education, and believe it significantly impacts student learning.

**How are parents involved in their child’s literacy development?** All participants emphasized the importance of reading at home, which demonstrates a strong belief among both parents and teachers that parents need to read with their children at home. It is surprising that a home reading program is not consistently in place at this school. It seems as though both parents and teachers would be in support of a home reading program, yet funds are not allocated to purchasing leveled reading books for this purpose.

Both parents and teachers seem to have the impression that the largest aspect of parent involvement is volunteering in the school. A strong value of parent involvement equates to a strong value of volunteerism in the school, and both parents and teachers expressed feelings of guilt around not enough volunteerism. There is a long-standing perception that good parents volunteer in their child’s school, and good teachers organize parent volunteers (Pushor & Murphy, 2004; White, 2009). Ellen and Alice seemed to regret not organizing more parent volunteers this year, and seemed happy to tell me about the examples where they had. Faith expressed feelings of guilt because she is unable to volunteer in the school, and this lead her to feel she is less involved in her children’s education because of this.
The parent participants mentioned storytelling as an enjoyable literacy activity that happens in the home; yet of the school personnel, only the special education teacher briefly mentioned this activity.

All participants expressed strong beliefs about the importance of parents reading to children at home, but the parent participants expressed a desire for more ways to help their children than this. Research (Timmons, 2009; White, 2009) suggests many parents share this desire.

**How do teachers support parents, and parents support teachers, in creating meaningful and engaging literacy opportunities for a child?** The school personnel expressed a strong value of supporting parents in helping children learn, and the parents expressed a strong desire to help their children succeed at school. Among the participants in this study, there seems to be a mutual attitude of respect, and a desire to support children in both the school and home environments.

All participants mentioned the importance of parents providing background information and relevant personal information about a child.

Face to face two-way dialogue is highly valued by the special education teacher and one parent, and these participants believe this form of communication is essential in building relationships. However, as these participants noted, time prevents parent-teacher conversations from happening frequently and with all parents. There is a challenge in finding the time to build relationships between parents and teachers to share understandings.

Homework seems to present a conflict. All three parents value homework activities in providing information about what their child is currently learning in the classroom, how their child is doing
at it, and how they can help their child succeed at school. Yet, as Faith expressed, homework can cause stress on family life, and stress on family relationships when a child is reluctant to complete homework. The parent responses in this study reiterate the importance of teachers providing meaningful homework that is respectful of family life and student needs (Carr, 2013; Epstein, 1995). The school personnel mentioned very few structured homework activities. The special education teacher spoke of giving parents lots of ideas of what they could do with their child to support literacy development, but parents may view these activities as not specific enough in directly helping their child succeed in that particular classroom at that particular time (Carr, 2013; Epstein, 1995).

How are parents involved in the school’s collaborative process of offering additional help to a child? Although parents providing background information to the school was considered important to both parents and teachers, parents as advocates for their child seemed to be under-emphasized by both groups of participants. Only one parent in this study spoke of deliberate advocacy, or collaborating for their child, even though advocacy may result in more support for students (Burke, 2013). The other two parents seemed to view advocacy as being unsupportive of the school. None of the school personnel mentioned advocacy when discussing what a parent can offer a child, or when considering the school’s collaborative process of offering additional support to students.

All three of the school personnel spoke about classroom teachers contacting parents before a SBT meeting, because parents are typically not invited to SBT meetings, and many parents may not wish to attend these meetings. Because classroom teachers are the conduit between the parent
and the SBT, these conversations are extremely important opportunities for parents to advocate for their child. There seems to currently be a lack of definition pertaining to this parent contact regarding what information should be gained from the parent, how these parent-teacher discussions should be conducted (e.g., in-person, two-way dialogue, one week before SBT meeting), and if the teacher is required to share this information at the SBT meeting. In the absence of a definition, this parent contact could be anything from a simple note sent home the day before the meeting to several face-to-face parent-teacher discussions where valuable information and understandings have been shared.
CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION

Creating a supportive school community that promotes the literacy development of children begins with the parent-teacher relationship. Parents and classroom teachers are the adults who spend the majority of time with a child whose literacy is developing, and are therefore responsible for creating the environments in which a child learns and plays.

Implications

Even though the culture of this particular school community is unique in its openness to parents, the school is situated within a broader cultural context of schooling (Cairney, 2002; Donavan & Cross, 2002), and this traditional model was reflected in many of the participant responses. This study contributes to the understandings of how the culture of school can impact relationships between parents and teachers and between parents. There were examples of contradictions in participants’ talk, which revealed dissonance in social discourses (Strauss, 2005); for example, Faith expressed two different opinions about homework; and Clare contradicted her initial view that volunteering in the school is valuable. It seemed the parent understandings of literacy development were impacted by a general culture of schooling, as many non-traditional literacy activities (e.g., storytelling) were considered less significant than the activities assigned by the teacher (e.g., weekly spelling lists). It is important to acknowledge and challenge this strong cultural model (Cairney, 2002; Donavan & Cross, 2002), as it can prevent a child from engaging in authentic learning experiences at home or at school.
There seems to be a perception among participants that literacy is work, and feelings of insecurity around literacy instruction, even though all participants were presumably literate themselves. This may stem from a fear of a child’s failure or fear of a child’s illiteracy. Amidst these feelings of insecurity, the parent participants in this study readily engage in authentic literacy activities, without realizing that these activities serve to develop a child’s literacy. A dissonance emerged between the perception of literacy as being difficult or unpleasant on one side, and engagement in authentic and enjoyable literacy activities that were unintentional on the other. It is critical for both parents and teachers to share a common and accurate understanding of what literacy is and how it develops in children, in order to create meaningful learning opportunities for children at home and at school.

Alice, the special education teacher, shared many understandings of literacy and learning that are beyond traditional understandings. Perhaps her role of working with students who do not fit easily into the school system lends her a type of thinking that is more open, and causes her to challenge the well-established cultural model (Donavan & Cross, 2002). Expectations within the school community may prevent Alice from working with students and parents in new ways that are outside the norms of her role, but may impact student learning in significant ways. As teachers have a limited amount of time and energy, it is difficult to implement new initiatives without replacing old initiatives. It takes more than one teacher to change how teachers and parents work together, and special educators hold a unique position amongst a staff consisting mainly of classroom teachers (Cook & Schirmer, 2003). Although both the school administrator
and special education teacher described an empowerment model in speaking about the school supporting parents in helping their own children, policy and practice need to reflect this value. Parents’ advocacy of their child’s needs was not mentioned by school personnel as part of the school’s collaborative process, yet Clare talked about how her advocacy has an impact on the school providing additional support to her child. Advocacy may result in extra support, or at the very least may cause further investigation into a child’s needs (Burke, 2013). An empowerment model is difficult to implement in a school system that cannot provide additional resources or support for every child in need of it, and advocacy is therefore discouraged. However, the resulting system unintentionally empowers those families who are already empowered in society, as only the empowered parents advocate for their children. Offering parents a place in the collaborative process to advocate for their child could serve to empower a wider range of parents in meeting the learning needs of their children.

Applications

School personnel explained how student needs are identified through classroom assessments, teacher observations and class reviews; and teachers refer students to the SBT as an early step in the school’s collaborative process in offering additional support to students. Teachers typically contact parents before SBT meetings, but this parent-teacher discussion lacks a definition, and could be an important opportunity for parents to advocate for their child. Perhaps a tool (e.g., a form with general questions that the parent and teacher fill out together) could be developed that would encourage a dialogue between the teacher and parent well in advance of a SBT meeting,
and the information gained could be shared by the teacher at the SBT. In giving all parents a space to advocate for their children, especially those parents whose children are experiencing difficulty, schools could empower parents and increase student achievement.

Many schools lack relationships and authentic connections (Harry and Klinger, 2006), but this particular school community seems to have more personal relationships and connections than is typical. This relative strength should be built upon and expanded to reach a wider range of parents. Alice mentioned the idea of intentionally creating community among parents by connecting parents to other parents of children who are learning literacy skills. The idea of bringing parents together was highly recommended by Bower & Griffin (2011) in empowering groups of parents who are not typically involved in schools. This could be achieved through a family literacy program. A family literacy program could have a positive impact on various relationships - between parents, between parent and child, and between parents and teachers (Timmons, 2008).

It is important for a family literacy initiative to have an overarching goal of empowering parents. This empowerment begins by conducting a needs assessment to find out what parents need or want to help their children be successful in learning literacy skills (Timmons, 2008), and this information should inform a program’s format and content. The parents in the present study were already aware of the importance of reading to their children, and are seeking more ways to help to their children. As Timmons (2009) mentions, “many parents are seeking direction from their children’s schools about how to help their children at home, and they want to feel valued and respected.” (p. 39).
All parents of K-3 children in the school could be asked specific questions pertaining to preferred times and location, and broader questions about what parents want to gain from teachers. Parents and teachers would need to give consideration to how many sessions are needed and how frequently, as too few sessions may not allow relationships to develop.

A family literacy program could provide parents with general information about how literacy develops in children, and specific information, such as strategies to use when reading with their children (Axford, 2007). For example, Wearmouth (2004) describes a ‘Pause, Prompt, Praise’ technique that parents found useful. A family literacy program could provide time for informal conversations between parents and between parents and teachers. Conversations could be partially structured to allow ideas to be shared amongst the group pertaining to literacy development at home and at school. Children could attend some of the sessions with their parents in order to practice new strategies, or parents and children could attend sessions separately. The program design should reflect the needs of the participants (Timmons, 2008).

To reach a wider range of parents, all information shared by teachers and parents during a family literacy session could be compiled and shared in written form, such as in a newsletter or online blog. Providing childcare is another consideration that may allow more parents to attend these sessions.

A home reading program could be part of a family literacy program to increase student learning and empower parents in helping their own children. The parents in this study expressed a strong desire to know what their children are doing in school, how their children are progressing, and
how they may help their children succeed at school. A home reading program could be meaningful to parents in providing the information they are wanting, and an opportunity to help their child be successful at school. A home reading program should consist of a large quantity and variety of quality books to enable each child to select books they find engaging and at an appropriate reading level (Allington, 2012).

**Significance**

This study may have challenged the views of some participants, as unexpected realizations came up naturally during moments of authenticity in the interviews. For example, Faith did not consider advocacy as part of her role as a parent. Her child’s teacher assigns homework only during the week, presumably to allow families to enjoy their weekends without worrying about homework. For Faith’s family, this creates stress during the week, and Faith would have more time to assist her children with homework on the weekend. Though our interview took place in May, Faith had never mentioned this to the teacher, even though this would be a simple accommodation. It seemed Faith held the impression that any feedback offered to the teacher would be viewed negatively, yet even the most understanding teacher cannot know each family’s perspective unless a parent communicates this type of information. Faith eventually stated, “And I probably should do it [speak out] more, but I don’t think I do, maybe enough as I should.”

The interviews with parents may have challenged their perceptions around literacy. The parent participants seemed to have the perception that literacy activities resembling school activities have the greatest impact on a child’s learning, and disregard the meaningful literacy activities
occurring naturally in the home. All three parents spoke about storytelling as an activity to be enjoyed just for the sake of it; and this very aspect of storytelling is what makes it so powerful. Faith seemed to feel guilty that she does not do enough at home to help her children learn to read and write. She later described the large family events calendar and poems displayed on the walls of her home, the dinnertime conversations the family engages in, and how each day she reads with her children and helps them with their homework. When I commented on how those activities are very important in promoting literacy, she seemed to feel relieved and encouraged. Our conversation seemed to help Faith realize that her family activities were valuable in developing literacy in her children.

This study may provide educators with valuable information and insight pertaining to parent advocacy and family literacy initiatives, and may be particularly useful to the school community where the study is located.

_Limitations_

By its nature, this study is subjective and contextual and the knowledge generated is based on the experiences and interpretations of the researcher and the participants.

The chosen methodology limits this study, as qualitative interview-based studies are not generalizable. However, the knowledge that is generated may be transferable to other similar situations, and the findings may provide insights.

My personal biases as the researcher limit this study. I am intricately connected to this study topic as a teacher of early literacy, a parent of young children, and a member of the small
community where this study took place. I was acquainted with most of the participants, and the classroom teacher was my own child’s teacher.

Another limitation lies in participant recruitment. The parents whom the special education teacher chose to recruit may not represent the understandings all parents. The parents whom the school personnel perceive as being less involved in their child’s education may not have been recruited.

The residents of the community where this study takes place are predominantly of Caucasian decent. It is difficult to know the predominant economic status of the young families in the school community, as the general statistics that are published by Statistics Canada are skewed by the community’s large portion of retired residents. However, the demographics of this small community cause the findings in this study to be less transferrable to another community context with more diverse demographics.

Further Research

More research incorporating a wider range of parent perspectives is needed to more fully address how an authentic parent-teacher partnership could promote a child’s literacy development. Future research should seek to reveal the perspectives of those parents who appear to be less involved in their child’s schooling, and who are of a different demographic than is typical of the vast majority of teachers (i.e., Caucasian decent, middle class, female) (Wearmouth, 2004).

Research that investigates how pre-service teacher training programs are designed may serve to promote parent-teacher collaboration within early childhood and elementary literacy programs.
Teachers and administrators are not necessarily prepared to engage with parents in meaningful ways, yet authentic parent involvement may be the key in a child’s academic and social development (Bower & Griffin, 2011; Driessen & Sleegers, 2005; Epstein, 1995; Hornby & Lafaele, 2011; Sormunen, Tossavainen, & Turunen, 2011; Timmons, 2009; Wearmouth, 2004).

Conclusion

This study used interviews to investigate how parents are involved in the literacy development of children, how parents and teachers support each other in providing children with meaningful opportunities to develop literacy, and how parents may be involved in the school’s process of offering additional help to a child. The results of this study may benefit the local community where the study took place by providing valuable knowledge upon which a family literacy program could be created. This study strengthens the research base of parent involvement and literacy development in emphasizing the parental perspective, which tends to be under-represented in current research. This study may contribute to the body of research that informs decisions in educational policy and practice, and serve to promote more authentic opportunities for parents to be involved in their child’s literacy development. Meaningful collaboration with parents reveals layers of complexity, and it is difficult to transfer personal understandings to the broader perspective of policymakers. However, these processes must not be reduced to rhetoric, because a child’s ability to read may be dependent on the authentic partnership between their parent and teacher.
References


White, C.L. (2009). ‘What he wanted was real stories, but no one would listen’: a child’s literacy, a mother’s understandings. *Language Arts, 86*(6), 431-439.


Appendix A: RECRUITMENT SCRIPT – SCHOOL STAFF

I am a Master of Education in Special Education student at Vancouver Island University, and have designed a research project as a partial requirement for this degree. My project is entitled ‘Parent-Teacher Collaboration: Sharing Knowledge to Support a Child’s Literacy Development’, and I would like to conduct this study in your school.

I am interested in examining and considering how parents/guardians and teachers share their unique knowledge and expertise to support students who are experiencing difficulty in learning to read and write. I am hoping to collect data through open-ended interviews of 2-3 parents/guardians, 1-2 teachers, the principal, and the school support teacher.

Each interview will take about 30-40 minutes, and will take place in a quiet private setting. With permission, I will audio record all interviews. My questions for parents/guardians and classroom teachers are about children’s literacy experiences at home and at school, communication between parents/guardians and teachers, and how parents/guardians and teachers view each of their roles in helping children learn literacy. My questions for the principal and the school support teacher are about the school wide framework of supporting students, and school practices in collaborating with parents/guardians.

I am inviting you to participate in my study, as classroom teacher of grade K-3, school support teacher, or principal. Your participation would include participating in one interview; and I am also asking the classroom teachers who consent to help me recruit parents that fit my criteria. I would like to recruit parents:

a. who have a child in grade K-3
b. whose child is experiencing difficulty in learning to read and write, according to the classroom teacher’s literacy assessments
c. who have already been informed by the school of their child’s difficulties

I am asking the classroom teachers, who give consent to participate in this study, to distribute an information sheet to the parents/guardians who meet the above criteria. Parents/guardians who are interested in participating may contact me for further information.

All participation in this study is completely voluntary. All participants may choose not to answer any questions, or may choose to withdraw consent for any reason up until the data analysis begins, which will be approximately April 15, 2014. Should you choose to withdraw consent, your interview responses will be removed from the study and not included in the research results.

The information gathered from the interviews will be organized and analyzed, then written in a final thesis, which will be available for participants to read.

There are no known harms within this research study. All data will be kept secure in a password-
protected file on my computer, and in a locked filing cabinet in my supervisor’s office. The location of this study and the participants’ identities will remain confidential in my final thesis report through the use of pseudonyms, though there is a possibility that participants may be identifiable because of the small and local nature of the study population.

If you would like to participate in my study, please read over and sign the enclosed consent form. The consent form can be mailed using the stamped and self-addressed envelope provided.

Do not hesitate to contact me if you have any questions. I can be reached by phone (250-247-7457) or e-mail (ajdewarle@gmail.com).

Thank you for your interest in this study.

Sincerely,

Jessica Dewarle
Master of Education in Special Education student
Vancouver Island University
Appendix B: Recruitment Information Sheet – for Parents/Guardians

Dear parents/guardians,

I am a Master of Education in Special Education student at Vancouver Island University, and have designed a research project as a partial requirement for this degree. I am inviting you to participate in my research study entitled ‘Parent-teacher Collaboration: Sharing Knowledge to Support a Child’s Literacy Development’. Children receive significant benefits when parents/guardians and teachers work together, and I am interested in examining how parent-teacher collaboration provides a literacy support for children who require extra help in learning to read or write.

I am hoping to explore and consider how parents/guardians and teachers share their unique knowledge and expertise so that students might have an easier time learning to read and write. I am particularly interested in talking to those parents/guardians whose child is experiencing difficulty in the area of literacy.

I will gather information through interviews with parents/guardians, teachers, and school staff. The interview will take about 30-40 minutes of your time, and will take place in a quiet private setting. With your permission, I will audio record your responses so that I do not miss any important information you provide. My questions will be about your knowledge of how literacy is taught at school, communication between you and your child’s teacher, how you view your role as a parent/guardian and the role of the teacher in helping your child learn to read, and what types of reading and writing experiences your child enjoys at home. There are no right or wrong answers.

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. If you decide to participate, you may choose not to answer any questions, or you may withdraw your consent for any reason up until the data analysis begins, which will be approximately April 15, 2014. Should you choose to withdraw consent, your interview responses will be removed from the study and not included in the research results.

The information you provide will be organized and analyzed, then written in a final thesis, which will be available for you to read. The location of this study and your identity will be kept confidential through the use of pseudonyms in my final thesis report, though there is a possibility that participants may be identifiable because of the small and local nature of the study population.

If you would like to participate in my study, please read over and sign the consent form. The consent form can be mailed using the stamped and self-addressed envelope provided. Although your child’s teacher has conveyed this invitation to you, your decision to participate or not participate in this study will be kept confidential.

Do not hesitate to contact me if you have any questions. I can be reached by phone (250-247-7457) or e-mail (ajdewarle@gmail.com).
Thank you for your interest in this study.
Sincerely,
Jessica Dewarle
Master of Education in Special Education student, Vancouver Island University
Appendix C
RESEARCH CONSENT FORM - PARENTS/GUARDIANS AND SCHOOL STAFF
Parent-Teacher Collaboration: Sharing Knowledge to Support a Child’s Literacy Development

Researcher: Jessica Dewarle, Master of Education in Special Education student, Vancouver Island University, 250-247-7457, ajdewarle@gmail.com

Supervisor: Amina Turton, Faculty of Education, Vancouver Island University, amina.turtion@viu.ca, 250-753-3245 (Local 2008)

Purpose of the study: To complete a Master’s Degree in Education in Special Education, I am required to design and conduct a research project. I have chosen to explore how parents/guardians and teachers share knowledge to benefit students who are experiencing difficulty in learning literacy. The results will be used in my graduate thesis, as a partial requirement for a Master’s Degree in Education in Special Education from Vancouver Island University.

Procedures: You are being invited to participate in this research because you are either: a teacher, a parent of a child who is having some difficulty in learning to read or write, the principal of the school, or the school support teacher.

Your participation will involve one interview, which should take between 30-40 minutes of your time. Once I receive your signed consent form, I will contact you to schedule the interview.

School staff – I would like to ask you about general school procedures in teaching literacy skills, offering additional support to students, and working with parents/guardians.

Parents/guardians – I would like to ask you about the literacy activities your child enjoys at home (including listening and speaking), what you know about how reading and writing are taught at school, communication with your child’s teacher, and how you see your role in supporting your child’s learning and how you see the teacher’s role.

Each interview will be audio-recorded, and I will later transcribe (type out) the interview responses. The recordings and transcriptions will only be accessible to my supervisor and me. After organizing and analyzing the information from the interviews, I will report my findings in a final thesis, which will be available for you to read. There are no known harms associated with your participation in this research.

Confidentiality: The interview will take place in a quiet private space to ensure confidentiality. The location and identities of all participants in this study will be protected through the use of pseudonyms in my final report, though there is a possibility that participants may be identifiable because of the small and local nature of this study. Electronic data will be stored within password-protected files, and paper data will be stored within a locked filing cabinet in my supervisor’s office. All data will be shredded or deleted approximately May 2017.

Your participation is completely voluntary. You may choose not to answer any question for any reason, and you may withdraw your participation for any reason up until the data analysis begins, which will be approximately April 15, 2014. Should you choose to withdraw your consent, your interview responses will be removed from the study and not included in the research results.

Concerns About your Treatment in the Research: If you have any concerns about your treatment as a research participant in this study, please contact the VIU Research Ethics Officer, by telephone at
250-753-3245 (ext, 2665) or by email at reb@viu.ca.

If you have any questions about this research project, or would like more information, please feel free to contact me by phone or e-mail. See contact details above.

**Consent:** I have read the above form, understand the information read, understand that I can ask questions or withdraw at any time. By signing this form, I consent to participate in this research study.

☐ parent  ☐ classroom teacher  ☐ school support teacher  ☐ principal

Participant’s Signature:  Date:

Phone:  
e-mail:
Appendix D: Interview Questions for Parents

Literacy involves not only reading and writing, but also speaking and listening. Every home takes part in literacy activities, even if the activities are not the ‘traditional’ type of literacy activities, like those promoted at school. I’m hoping to examine this wide range of literacy experiences children have.

Remember, you can choose not to answer any question for any reason.

At Home

What is your own experience with reading and writing activities? (Prompt: fiction, non-fiction, prefer to read or listen to the news) Which reading and/or writing activities does your child see you do?

Does your child have access to books that they are able to read easily and find interesting? (At home, at school, through the library, on electronics?) What types of books does your child enjoy? (Fiction, non-fiction, magazines?)

Does your child read or write at home, on their own initiative? (Making cards? Writing stories? Writing for a specific purpose, like writing a list?)

What are some things you and your child do at home that help your child become a reader and writer? (any conversations, stories, telling family stories....) What items are in your home environment that encourage reading and writing? (cookbooks, any print around the house – notes, lists, a calendar, writing materials like a pen or paper accessible to your child)

When children learn to read and write, parents and teachers can each offer children something different. What do you believe teachers and the school environment offer? What can parents and the home environment offer? (beliefs about parent involvement in education)

At School

What does your child do at school to learn to read and write?

Are you involved in any classroom activities?

Do you know which specific aspects of literacy your child is good at? (prompt: recognizing letters and knowing their sounds, vocabulary, fluency (how their reading sounds), comprehension (understanding what they read or hear, talking about books), writing)

Are there any specific aspects of literacy that your child finds difficult? What has been the result of these difficulties? (prompt: Extra help? Are they less motivated to learn to read or write, or reluctant to do these activities?)

Does your child receive extra support in literacy from the school? Outside the school? Are you involved in this extra support? Have you offered ideas to make this support more meaningful?

Teacher-Parent Relationship
How do you and your child’s teacher communicate with each other? (newsletters, phone calls, meetings, e-mails, etc.) How often?

What type of information is communicated? (How your child is doing in reading and/or writing, reading/writing goals?)

Do you share information with your child’s teacher? Do you feel your child’s teacher knows your child’s interests and strengths?

Do you feel you have any influence over classroom literacy activities? (Content? Book choice? Show and tell routines? Home learning options? Feedback to teacher about your child?)

Ideally, how could you and your child’s teacher work together to improve your child’s experience in learning to read and write?

Are there ways the school could support you in helping your child learn to read and write? (resources, skills, strategies, knowledge?)

If so, how would you prefer to gain this knowledge? (face-to-face parent group with other parents wanting the same information, online forum, written newsletter/pamphlet on specific strategies, one-on-one conversations with teacher, e-mail group....)

Is there anything else you wish to add?
Appendix E: Interview Questions for the Classroom Teacher(s)

Tier 1 – Universal Instruction and Assessment

What are some of the main routines, strategies, or resources you use in your classroom to teach students how to read and write. (Instruction at Tier 1, evidence-based?, differentiated?)

Approximately how much time (per day or per week) do your students spend reading or re-reading books? Writing independently?

When children learn to read, they need books that are at an appropriate level (not too hard, not too easy), and also engage the child. Do you feel you have enough books, and a variety of books (fiction and non-fiction, etc.) at all reading levels accessible to use with your students? Magazines?

With the resources you have in your classroom, how many students in your class (percentage) are you able to provide ‘just right’ books for (good level, interest student)?

Vulnerable Students (Tier 2, 3)

How do you know if a student is experiencing difficulty in reading and writing, or perhaps requires an intervention? (How do you assess? How often?)

What do you do when you notice a student is experiencing difficulty? (Tier 2 support, additional collaboration?)

Parent Involvement

In terms of literacy development, parents and teachers can each offer children something unique. What do teachers and the school environment offer to children? What can parents and the home environment offer? (beliefs about parent involvement in education)

Do you involve parents in your students’ learning of literacy? (home-reading, other homework, communication of what is being taught)

Do you involve parents in a different way if their child is having difficulty learning to read or write? If so, how? (parents in RTI)

What do you recommend parents do to assist their children in learning to read and write? Do you have any recommendations over the summer months or other times when on a break? Do you give more specific recommendations to parents of children who are experiencing difficulty in reading or writing? (beliefs about influence of parents on learning)

How do you communicate with parents? (What types of information are communicated? How often?) Do parents share knowledge with you? (A child’s interests and strengths?) If so, how does that knowledge impact your practice? (Examples?)
Is there anything else you wish to add?
Appendix F: Interview Questions for the School Administrator

What characteristics make this school open to parental involvement?

I am aware that this school district is going through a process of change in terms of how students will receive support in their learning. And although an RTI model is the vision, it may not be fully implemented at this point. Please tell me about the process of how your school currently supports primary students who are having difficulty learning to read and write.

Specifically:

How are vulnerable students identified?

What happens once students are identified as having difficulty?

How are students selected to receive additional support? How far behind do they need to be?

Who may be involved in the collaborative process, and when do they become involved?

What is the parent’s role in this process?

Do you think most parents are aware of the potential role they may have?

Is this process expected to change with a new RTI model? If so, how?

Is there anything else you wish to add?
Appendix G: Interview Questions for the Special Education Teacher

What characteristics make this school open to parental involvement?

*Parent Involvement*

In terms of literacy development, parents and teachers can each offer children something unique. What do teachers and the school environment offer to children? What can parents and the home environment offer? (beliefs about parent involvement in education)

How do you communicate with parents? (What types of information are communicated? How often?) Do parents share knowledge with you? (A child’s interests and strengths?) If so, how does that knowledge impact your practice? (Examples?)

What do you tell parents to do to help their children have an easier time learning to read and write? Do you have any recommendations over the summer months or other times when on a break? (beliefs about influence of parents on learning)

Do you involve parents in their child’s learning of literacy in other ways? (collaboration, beliefs about parent involvement)

With the resources you have available in the school, are you able to provide appropriate books for all of the students you teach? (good level, interest student)

This school district is going through a process of change in terms of how students will receive support in their learning. Although an RTI model is the vision, I am aware that it is not fully implemented at this point. I want to know about the process of how your school currently supports primary students who are having difficulty learning to read and write.

Specifically:

How are vulnerable students identified?

What happens once students are identified as having difficulty?

How are students selected to receive additional support? How far behind do they need to be?

Who may be involved in the collaborative process, and at what point do they become involved?

What is the parent’s role in this process?

Do you think most parents are aware of the potential role they may have in this process?

Is this referral process in the school expected change with the district’s emphasis on the RTI model? If so, how?

Is there anything else you wish to add?