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Encouraging parent-student literacy conversations: hosting an upper elementary family literacy event

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**ENCOURAGING PARENT-STUDENT LITERACY CONVERSATIONS:
HOSTING AN UPPER ELEMENTARY FAMILY LITERACY EVENT**

by
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and
Lisa Remchuk

A Thesis

Submitted to the
Department of Reading Education, Language, Literacy, and Special Education
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In partial fulfillment of the requirement

For the degree of
Master of Arts in Reading Education

at
Rowan University
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Thesis Chair: Susan Browne, Ph.D.

Dedication

We would like to dedicate our thesis to our families, for their continued love and support.

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We would like to express our gratitude to Dr. Susan Brown for her knowledge, guidance, and support throughout this journey.

Abstract

Morgen Lehr and Lisa Remchuk

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AN UPPER ELEMENTARY FAMILY LITERACY EVENT

2014/15

Susan Browne, Ph.D.

Master of Arts in Reading Education

The purpose of this qualitative research study was to explore how a partnership might be forged between parents and teachers to develop the literacy skills of upper elementary school students in grades 3-5. The family literacy event used in this study consisted of two sessions held at the students' school. The first session was a parent-only learning experience, and both parents and students were invited to participate in the program's second session. The content of the family literacy event used in this study focused on encouraging critical, high-quality literature conversations at home to benefit students' literacy development. Teacher researchers collected data using parent surveys, attendance records, anecdotal observations, and teacher research journals. Careful analysis of this data suggests parents want to be involved in their children's development and value support from teachers to help them strengthen that role. Parents understood and could independently compose inferential questions, and they shared an intention to implement the strategies presented at the event in their literacy conversations at home. Benefits from both parent-only and parent-student structures were observed, suggesting both structures can be used to support literacy development. Implications for hosting family literacy events and opportunities for further research in family literacy are discussed.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Lisa's Story

Throughout my experience as an elementary school teacher I have searched for ways to support my students' literacy development. I have refined my use of research-based practices proven to promote higher levels of literacy achievement. With the publication of research from organizations such as The Report of the National Commission on Teaching & America's Future (1998), I have learned that an effective teacher is a major factor contributing to student success. Keeping this in mind, I have strived to improve my practice. Year after year, however, a percentage of my students perform below average in literacy for their grade level. With the current culture of education increasing the standards and expectations for students in the area of literacy, getting all of my students to meet the criteria is becoming more and more difficult.

I have noticed a lack of parental involvement from many of the parents I have encountered through the years. Of course all parents love their children and want what is best for them, but why weren't they more involved in their child's literacy learning? I started to come to the conclusion that maybe parents wanted to help their children, but did not know how. With only a few scheduled parent-teacher meetings a year, there are very few opportunities to communicate with parents. In addition, these meetings are very short and one-sided. The meetings usually consist of a report from the teacher about the child's performance, but rarely time for anything more.

I started a class website that included tips and strategies for parents to utilize when working with their children, but found it only had minimal effects. Again, this

website was one-sided. There was no way for me to know who was accessing the website (or even who had the technological resources needed to access it). There was also no way for parents to relay difficulties they may have been having with the suggested activities, and no way for them to get help. I knew there was more I could do to encourage parent involvement, but struggled to discover exactly what that was. This is what led me to consider family literacy as a topic for inquiry.

Morgen's Story

In my eighth year of teaching, I find that I simultaneously look forward to and dread lunchtime conversations in the faculty room. The daily discussion inevitably centers on our most struggling students. Sharing our concerns can be helpful. We talk about instructional strategies and behavior management systems we have tried, and colleagues brainstorm alternative teaching methods. We share and celebrate our students' successes, sometimes bringing in samples of student work, or sharing quick anecdotes: "Jennifer is really starting to break out of her shell! You'll never guess what she said today in read aloud..."

Similarly, however, we also despair when our students do not respond to our efforts. These students dwell in our thoughts the most, and their struggles tend to dominate the conversation. Inevitably, a teacher will bring up the child's home life, observing a parent's lack of participation or understanding of how to create an academic support system at home. While teachers often share instructional strategies to try in the classroom, I rarely hear teachers offer suggestions for how to improve upon a parent's knowledge of the curriculum or how they can support their child at home.

This is not to say that the teachers in my school do not communicate with parents. Many teachers, including myself, use websites and weekly updates to keep parents informed of what their child is up to in school. We stay in touch with parents through email, notes, and phone conversations, and the district schedules two 15-minute parent-teacher conferences a year, along with a Back-to-School night in early September. During American Education Week in November, parents are also invited to observe their child's classroom for thirty minutes.

Similarly, I know parents in my school are eager to support their children's literacy development. They sign assignments books and check off daily reading logs, but our brief meetings and exchanges do not provide sufficient time or structure to converse deeply about literacy instruction. Through our conversations I *have* found, however, that parents are often unaware of or unsure of how to engage their child in conversations about books. While they ask their child *what* they are reading, they do not probe further to ask *what they think* about what they've read. Instead of joining the faculty room diatribe of this deficit, I began looking toward practices in family literacy for a remedy.

Story of the Question

As we shared our interest in family literacy, an inquiry began to take shape. We decided a family literacy education night could target and broaden the one-sided nature of our previous attempts at improving parent involvement in literacy learning. Such a program could be a vehicle for sharing literacy activities for parents to use with their children at home. We wanted to host the program at a convenient time and location to ensure maximum attendance, and we needed to design the program to promote the immediate transferal of strategies to use at home.

Reading existing literature and research in the area of family literacy helped us refine our inquiry. We noticed a disproportionate amount of research on parental involvement in literacy learning past the primary years. Several studies demonstrated the importance of family literacy in young children, but family involvement does not stop once students reach the upper elementary grades. We became interested in learning more about how teachers in grades 3-5 could help parents engage their children in literacy activities at home.

Purpose Statement

Children who engage in literacy activities at home, such as parental modeling of literacy behavior and having conversations about books, have shown to be more prepared for school literacy and classroom discourses (Snow, et. al., 1991). Unfortunately, many parents remain uninvolved in activities designed to promote their children's reading development. One contributing factor to this problem is parents' life contexts, which include their personal knowledge and skills, parents' time and energy, and family culture (Whitaker & Hoover-Dempsey, 2013). Parents may have deficits within their own literacy knowledge which may inhibit their ability to provide meaningful literacy experiences at home. Work schedules and time constraints could also limit parent-child literacy interactions. The growing diversity of the population of schools increases the chances of a teacher's expectations and practices differing from those of the child's family members (Powell, 1998). Family culture and the value each family puts on literacy education has a role in determining the level of parental involvement in literacy experiences in the home.

While teachers hope parents are doing their share of literacy activities at home, some parents may believe it is solely the role of the school to teach their children to read. Furthermore, some parents do not always feel what they do at home matters to their child's literacy development. Professionals developing family literacy programs must overcome these perceptions. Teachers must help parents believe they are valuable to their child's literacy education and must establish relationships of mutual respect and trust (Day, 2013).

Parents who want to be involved in the literacy development of their child can make a significant impact on their achievement. However, in order for their impact to reach its highest potential, they must know the most effective ways to support their child. This can be difficult for parents outside of the field of education, who may be unfamiliar with evidence-based approaches to literacy development. In addition, differences in parental beliefs may lead to incongruence between how teachers and parents expect children to learn to read (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997).

Another major problem in regards to parental involvement in their children's literacy development is the level of communication between parents and teachers. The current structure of communication in many elementary schools is inadequate. A few designated parent-teacher meetings a year and inconsistent emails and phone calls are not enough to foster constructive communication. Additional interactions and efforts from both parents and teachers to collaborate are needed to create continuity between a child's two primary spheres of influence: home and school (Izzo, Weissberg, Kasprow, & Fendrich, 1999).

Commonly, family literacy programs with good intentions do not result in significant positive changes to parental involvement. Teachers feel their attempts at reaching out to parents for more involvement in literacy fall flat. Many family literacy programs struggle to achieve the level of attendance desired. Powell (1998) noted parents often do not or cannot attend for a variety of reasons, including childcare, transportation, time off work, other time pressing commitments, recruitment techniques, and a belief that their attendance will not have a positive effect on their child's achievement. A major challenge family literacy programs face is developing ways of engaging parents that reflect families' interests and life circumstances (Powell, 1998). When parents are not engaged in the material, they will not alter their at-home practices. Furthermore, parents need practice and support implementing new literacy activities at home. Many family literacy programs present literacy strategies to use at home, but do not always scaffold responsibility to the parents to support their eventual self-efficacy.

Family literacy intervention programs tend to focus on young children, especially students in preschool, kindergarten, and first grade (Jordan, Snow, & Porche, 2000). There are some studies that investigate the implementation of family literacy programs in adolescents (Wiseman, 2009), but there is little research in the area of family literacy intervention programs targeting upper elementary school students, specifically grades 3-5. Most students at this level no longer need assistance reading the words on the page. Instead, they need support to comprehend the text, and think critically about the societal issues within. For example, the Common Core State Standards Initiative (2014) requires students to think deeply about characters, settings, and events in a story in addition to engaging in collaborative discussions. Family literacy programs for students in these

grades must support parents with strategies to improve their interactions with their children and the books they are reading.

The nature of a literacy event can encourage or hinder family participation. Students play a pivotal role in their families' involvement, because they are often the vehicle for communication between home and school. Students can encourage parent participation, and they can also discourage it. In some cases, students can even choose to misinform parents or simply not inform parents of important parent-teacher communications and events happening at school (Wiseman, 2009). Other research (Doyle & Zhang, 2011) has shown parent attendance to be greater in parent-child events because it is more convenient for parents and they enjoy direct learning experiences with their children. With this in mind, we wondered how student participation in a family literacy event might improve its effectiveness. If students are participating in such a program, will they encourage their parents to participate as well?

The intention of this research study is to explore how a partnership might be forged between parents and teachers to develop the literacy skills of upper elementary school students. To build a partnership with parents, this study will employ the practices identified by previous researchers in the area of family literacy. The Family Reading Program used in this study will consist of two events held at the students' school. Research (Doyle & Zhang, 2011) suggests parents who register for parent-only events see themselves as learners, and are thus more willing to incorporate information about high-quality language interactions into their at-home literacy practices, so the first event will be a parent-only learning experience. Doyle and Zhang (2011) also show that parent attendance is greater in parent-child events due to conveniences and the desire for a direct

learning experience for their children, so both parents and students will be invited to participate in the program's second event to encourage involvement. Finally, the content of the Family Reading Program used in this study will focus on encouraging critical, high-quality literature conversations at home to benefit students' literacy development. It is hoped that this study will lead to development and implementation of more family literacy programs across grade levels, including upper elementary school grades, and what is learned may contribute to the field and future family literacy research.

Statement of the Research Problem and Question

Considering the need for increased parental involvement in upper elementary students' literacy development, the questions we address in this study are as follows: What happens when students from grades 3-5 and their parents participate in literacy activities as part of family literacy education nights? How does the involvement of both students and parents affect participation in these activities? How can this promote the engagement of parents and students in literacy activities at home?

Organization of the Paper

Chapter two of the study reviews the literature in the area of family literacy and its impact on student literacy achievement. Chapter three discusses the design and context of the study, including our plan for implementing two family reading events and a description of the school and district where the study took place. Chapter four provides an analysis of the data collected in the study and a discussion of the study's findings. Chapter five presents the conclusions of this study, its implications for teaching and learning, and applications for future research in the area of family literacy.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

Chapter two of this study presents a review of literature in the area of family literacy. The first section begins by discussing research promoting the collective understandings of family literacy theory. The two sections that follow review the roles schools and teachers can play in encouraging parent involvement in student literacy development. Next, the importance of critical literacy discussions is examined. Finally, the application of family literacy theory in upper-elementary school grades is reviewed. The chapter ends with a summation of the literature and ways this study may contribute to the use of family literacy programs.

Research in Family Literacy Theory

Family literacy theory investigates the link between family involvement and literacy achievement. Researchers guided by this theory explore the implementation of programs designed to encourage literacy development in the home, the ways literacy is used at home, and its relationship with student achievement (Tracey & Young, 2002). Researchers in this field agree the most powerful contribution to a child's literacy development is a literacy-rich home environment (Jordan, Snow, & Porche, 2000).

To explore family literacy programs and reading achievement, Jordan et al. (2000) investigated the effects of the intervention program, Project EASE (Early Access to Success in Education). This year-long intervention targeted parents of kindergarten students by focusing on improving high-quality language interactions. Parents were instructed in monthly units focused on engaging their children in discussions during reading and at the dinner table, and they were given scripted activities to practice with

their children. Each session was followed by a parent-child session to provide parents with practice and support. Snow et. al. used parent surveys and evaluations, along with pre-and post-testing on students' vocabulary and comprehension abilities, to measure the success of the program. The parent surveys and evaluations showed that parents appreciated being invited to participate in their children's education, and they valued the instruction provided to them. Furthermore, children of parents who were strongly involved in the program showed greater gains in reading achievement. The improvement was especially significant among students who had initially been identified with literacy weaknesses.

To investigate literacy practices at home, Tracey and Young (2002) recorded and analyzed the conversations of 76 third graders reading with their mothers. They found below-average readers received frequent error corrections. They also noted that conversations between mothers and daughters held greater verbal engagement than conversations between mothers and sons. Additionally, mothers with a high school education made significantly more corrections than college-educated mothers, even though there was an equal number of above-average and below-average readers in each group. Mothers with a high school education also made more comments, while college-educated mothers asked more questions, including high-level inferential questions. Based on these results, Tracey and Young make a number of recommendations for family literacy practices. First, they recommend the use of instructional-level texts instead of grade-level texts to decrease the amount of error corrections received by below-level readers. They also suggest mothers with sons be instructed in ways to enhance their conversations in light of the findings of this study. In addition, high-school-educated

mothers can also be taught to use more high-level, thought-provoking questions, while college-educated mothers can be encouraged to utilize commenting as an instructional strategy during their children's reading.

Doyle and Zhang (2011) studied the implementation of programs designed to encourage literacy development in the home. They compared two program models, a parent-only model and a parent-child model. Parents of pre-school children were invited to participate in one of the eight-week-long programs of their choice. As a result of the study, Doyle and Zhang conclude participation structure has an impact on parents' decisions to enroll and remain in family literacy programs. First, the parent-child program had a greater enrollment than the parent-only program. In addition, perception of the parents' roles in family literacy varied between the two groups. The parent-only group viewed themselves as central to their child's learning, while the parent-child participants emphasized the importance of direct experience with their child. Participants in both program models, however, reported positive changes in the literacy activities they implemented at home. Doyle and Zhang suggest practitioners, where possible, give parents a choice of program type and consider parents' expectations and beliefs when planning and implementing family literacy programs.

While many literacy theories refer to a unified theory developed by a single researcher, family literacy theory refers to the collective understandings proposed by several researchers in the field. Tracey & Young (2002) explored the ways literacy is used at home. Jordan et. al. (2000) studied a family literacy program's effect on student achievement. Doyle and Zhang (2011) investigated the implementation of family literacy programs. These studies, along with the studies that follow in this literature review, seek

to explore and explain the nature of literacy engagement in the home, its effect on literacy achievement, and how educators can encourage high-quality literacy interactions among parents and children to support literacy development.

School's Actions to Encourage Parent Involvement

Research suggests collaboration between parents and school results in better student performance (Izzo, Wiessberg, Kasprow, & Fendrich, 1999). Forming a partnership between teachers and parents is ideal for establishing a working relationship. In this partnership there is some separation of roles between teachers and parents. Some activities and functions are the teacher's responsibility and take place at school, while others are the responsibility of the parents and must take place at home (Keyes, 2002). For example, it is the teacher's responsibility to utilize the content standards and curriculum to instruct a student with grade-level appropriate material. In turn, it is a parent's responsibility to utilize knowledge of the individual child to provide guidance on a very personal level (Keyes, 2002). This partnership, however, also includes areas where the roles of teachers and parents overlap. Teachers can help parents by providing information about how to best support a child in specific subject areas, and parents can help teachers by providing information about the uniqueness of their child and how to best reach him or her. In these areas, school becomes an extension of the family, and the two interact throughout the academic life of the child (Powell, 1998). However, the degree of success teachers have in developing a partnership with parents depends heavily on the 'fit' between parental cares and concerns and those of the teacher. This can be a problem, because the parent-teacher relationship is one that is typically initiated by assignment and not by choice (Keyes, 2002).

Conflicts in the perception of roles and understandings of literacy learning techniques can arise. In other words, parents may have very different ideas about what they should be doing at home in regards to their child's literacy learning. According to role theory (Biddle, 1986), individuals take on roles within a particular social structure or relationship. In this case, the social structure is the parent-school relationship. Because roles are developed through experience, they depend heavily on the parents' own family experiences. For this reason, role construction will vary greatly from one parent to the next. However, role development is also dependent on members of the student's school. This indicates there is something schools can do to affect the role construction of parents. Research suggests the actions schools take to engage parents' involvement can encourage positive parental beliefs about what they can do at home to support their child's learning (Whitaker & Hoover-Dempsey, 2013). Anderson and Minke (2007) point out specific invitations by teachers as a leading factor in parents' decisions to become involved in their child's education. This means the simple act of inviting parents to attend a family literacy event can result in increased involvement.

Hosting a Family Literacy Event

Wiseman (2009) worked with 22 students in an eighth-grade urban public middle school participating in weekly poetry workshops and bimonthly coffeehouses. For many students, the program provided a positive and effective avenue for communication with their families. Other students did not wish to involve their parents due to the emotional content of their poetry. Finally, some students chose not to inform their parents because they felt it would create too much stress in their parents' already busy lives. Wiseman concludes that the nature of a literacy event can encourage or hinder family and student

participation. Educators should have a clear understanding of the goals of the program and align it with how families will interact. Students play an important role in their families' involvement, so their input into the family literacy program can improve its effectiveness. To encourage participation, Wiseman suggests the event should be both relevant and accessible to students and their families.

The Family Reading Program used in this study will attempt to build a parent-teacher partnership by inviting parents and students to participate. Students will be encouraged to use texts of their choosing to keep the event relevant to their interests. During the event, teachers will take on a coaching role to help parents extend the literacy learning occurring in school to conversations held at home.

Working with Parents

Participation in a family literacy program serves as a positive academic experience in and of itself, but the main goal of a family literacy program should be the transfer of strategies to home practices. Research has shown parent involvement within the home is more effective than other types of parental involvement (Darling & Westberg, 2004). In their longitudinal assessment of parent involvement in children's education and school performance, Izzo, Wiessberg, Kasprow, & Fendrich (1999) found participation in academic activities at home predicted academic performance more significantly than any other parent involvement variable.

There is much schools can do to support parents to engage in academic activities at home. First, teachers can demonstrate specific strategies proven to help with reading achievement and provide opportunities for parents to use the strategies under their guidance. Giving parents this support improves their ability to replicate the same

research-based literacy activities that occur in the classroom at home with their children. Snow, Barnes, Chandler, Goodman, & Hemphill (1991) report that the strongest family environments for fostering literacy had features in common with those of the strongest classrooms. These features include shared experiences and conversations between adults and children about books. By practicing these skills with their children, parents will not only support their child's literacy development, but will improve their own abilities as well.

In addition to teaching parents effective strategies for them to use with their children, teachers who provide instruction on literacy skills might also improve the literacy skills of the parents involved. Research has shown literacy activities that help improve parents' knowledge of literacy development is more effective than strategies that do not strengthen parent knowledge (Darling & Westberg, 2004). Improving parents' literacy knowledge while teaching strategies parents can use with their children creates the optimum environment for a successful family literacy program.

When training parents, teachers should use instructional strategies that are evidence-based, just as they would when teaching children. Acting as a coach, the teacher can provide instruction following the model of gradual release of responsibility. Instruction begins with teachers assuming all responsibility while modeling the at-home strategies. Gradually, the teacher will release more responsibility to the parents until they are able to use the strategies independently. This will ensure the learning is optimal as the teacher coaches the parents toward self-efficacy in the new approach (Duke & Pearson, 2008). This follows Vygotsky's (1978) social-constructivist theory. Teacher-coaches scaffold learning for parents, who, in turn, will be more capable of scaffolding learning

for their children. Coaches act as the more knowledgeable other until the parents' learning becomes secure enough to allow them to act as the more knowledgeable other at home.

A family literacy program in which the teacher takes on a coaching role increases the level of parent engagement when compared to programs that are structured more like a presentation. Parent engagement is a factor in the overall effectiveness of the program (Doyle & Zhang, 2011). The teachers leading the Family Reading Program in this study will act as teacher-coaches, because coaching leads to more parent engagement in at-home activities, which is a predictor of academic achievement.

High Level Critical Thinking

When parents do engage in literacy activities at home, are the activities producing the most effective outcomes for their children? It is common practice for students to improve their reading abilities by reading more often. Teachers often stress the importance of reading at home, and may even require at-home-reading as a homework routine, because it can positively influence reading development (National Reading Panel, 2000). However, there is more that can be done to improve the quality of reading activities at home.

Literacy achievement can be improved when parents engage their children in high-level, critical thinking discussions. Literacy achievement is tied to students' abilities in both print and language skills (Jordan, Snow, & Porche, 2000). At-home activities that focus support only on word-level reading skills leave students with an imbalance in their literacy learning. In addition, research has shown that children who spend time in conversations with adults have an advantage over students who spend most of their time

in conversations with siblings or peers. Dialogue with an adult is more likely to challenge the child linguistically than dialogue with another child (Snow, et al., 1991). When parents engage in conversations about reading they help address the language development necessary for literacy achievement. Support for language development is essential for even the youngest students, but once basic word reading skills are in place, it can be argued that language development is of highest priority. Research has shown a positive association between the number of words a child says during at-home reading, the number of general questions and high-level, critical thinking questions asked by parents before, during, and after reading, and the amount of positive feedback given to the child (Tracey & Morrow, 2002). High-quality language interactions prepare students for the language demands of text-comprehension (Jordan, Snow, & Porche, 2000). Furthermore, extended discourses expose children to more sophisticated vocabulary, which is a predictor for vocabulary and reading achievement (Weizman & Snow, 2001).

In order to raise the bar for literacy conversations, parents must be aware of the type of questions they are using to engage their children. As Applegate, Quinn, and Applegate (2008) explain in their analysis, comprehension involves the ability to remember what has been read, the ability to think about it, and the ability to respond to what has been read. There are three levels of questioning that can be used to assess these types of thinking within children. Text-based questions call for information stated in the text. Asking these types of questions urges children to remember elements of what the author said without needing to look back at the text. Inferential questions require children to draw on their own experiences to draw logical conclusions about the text. Finally, critical response questions require children to analyze, react, and respond to the text. In

these high-level, critical-thinking questions, there can be more than one correct answer as long as the child is able to provide a rationale for his or her thinking (Applegate, et. al., 2008). Parents must ask a variety of questions to ensure children are being engaged in comprehension across all three levels.

Family Literacy Interventions in Upper Elementary Grades

The Family Reading Program in this study will target upper elementary school students in grades 3-5. Research in family literacy intervention programs has traditionally focused on its effect in young children, especially students in preschool through first grade (Jordan, Snow, & Porche, 2000). While some studies have investigated the implementation of family literacy programs in adolescents (Wiseman, 2009), or the literacy conversations between mothers and third graders (Tracey & Young, 2002), there is little research in the area of family literacy intervention programs and upper elementary school students, specifically grades 3-5.

The recent implementation of the Common Core State Standards Initiative (2014) demonstrates a shift in literacy demands for upper elementary students. Text complexity increases and comprehension expectations become more rigorous. For example, by the end of grade 5, students should be able to “Quote accurately from a text when explaining what the text says explicitly and when drawing inferences from the text” (2014, p. 12). Research (Ruddell & Unrau, 2004) shows increased reading is important for these students, but it still does not provide enough practice with comprehension strategies students will need to explore the deeper meanings of texts. The National Reading Panel (2000) points to explicit instruction to help students develop a variety of comprehension

strategies as most effective. Parent-teacher partnerships in these upper grade levels could greatly support students' development of these comprehension strategies.

In a correlational study, Katzir et. al. (2009) examined “the role of child and family literacy practice and reading self-concept in fourth graders’ reading comprehension” (2009, p. 265). Fourth grade students from an urban school district were studied using a reading comprehension assessment, a student-completed self-concept survey, and a parent-completed questionnaire. The results suggest child and family literacy practices and a reader’s self-concept play a role in reading comprehension. The study also called for further research in family literacy practices for this age range, as family literacy research often focuses on early childhood interventions. Much of the research in family literacy theory focuses on early childhood practices, but there is a need to study the upper-elementary age range due to the transition toward increasingly complex comprehension work that occurs during these grade levels.

Conclusion

Upon reviewing literature related to family literacy, it is clear student literacy achievement grows when parents are actively involved. Encouraging this involvement requires educators to understand the complexities of parent-teacher partnerships. Research suggests schools can support parent involvement by encouraging positive parental beliefs about the actions they take at home to support their child’s learning (Whitaker & Hoover-Dempsey, 2013). When the teacher takes on a coaching role in a family literacy program, the level of parent engagement also increases, leading to more parent-child literacy activities at home (Doyle & Zhang, 2011). As Wiseman (2009), notes, students also play an important role in their families’ involvement, so their

participation in family literacy programs can improve its effectiveness. Anderson and Minke (2007) also suggest that specific invitations from teachers are a leading factor in parents' decisions to become involved in their child's education.

Research in family literacy interventions has traditionally focused on its effect in young children or adolescent middle-schoolers and high-schoolers. Considering the transition toward increasingly complex comprehension work that occurs during grades 3-5, there is a need to study the impact of family literacy programs in upper-elementary school students. Jordan, et. al (2009) note high-quality language interactions prepare students for the language demands of text-comprehension, and Weizman & Snow (2001) find these extended discourses expose children to more sophisticated vocabulary, a predictor for vocabulary and reading achievement. This suggests high-quality, extended, critical-thinking conversations among students and parents will promote the development of reading comprehension strategies needed in upper elementary grades.

This study will further explore the ways in which teachers can work with parents and students to strengthen knowledge of literacy, encourage engagement in more literacy activities at home, and promote higher quality conversations between students and their parents. The next chapter of this thesis will examine the context of the study and the design and methodology of the research.

Chapter 3

Methodology

Part 1: Context of the Study

This study was conducted in a suburban town with an estimated population of 13,850 people, according to the United States Census Bureau (2014). Of this population, 77.5% are White, 9.7% are Hispanic, 9.1% are Black, 2.2% are Asian, and 2.6% are multi-racial. 8.5% of the town's population is foreign-born, and 13.1% speak a language other than English at home. About half of the households are family households, with 24.5% having children under 18 years of age. In family households with children, 15.3% are led by married couples, 6.9% are led by a single female, and 2.2% are led by a single male. The town has an employment rate of 67.3%. 92.5% of the adults over 25 are high school graduates or higher, and 40.6% of adults over 25 have a Bachelor's degree or higher. The median household income is \$61,399. 8.3% of families are living below the poverty level, and 13.9% are families with children under the age of 18.

The school district teaches students from pre-Kindergarten through twelfth grade in a total of seven schools: five elementary schools (grades Pre-K-5), one middle school (grades 6-8), and one high school (grades 9-12). As of the 2011-2012 school year, the district's enrollment was 1,875 students (National Center for Education Statistics, 2013). With 165 full time teachers, the student to teacher ratio is 11 to 1. Thirty students in the district are considered English Language Learners, and 284 students have an Individualized Education Plan.

The elementary school where the study was conducted is one of the five elementary schools in the school district. As of the 2012-2013 school year, 130 students

were enrolled (NJ School Performance Report, 2013). The staff to student ratio is 10 to 1. 54.6% of the students are White, 21.5% are Hispanic, 11.5% are Black, 5.4% are Asian, and 6.9 % are multi-racial. 32% of the students are considered economically disadvantaged.

The school houses the district's elementary English as a Second Language program. According to the NJ School Performance Report (2013), 84.7% of the students speak English at home. 6.1% speak Spanish, 3.1% speak Burmese, 2.3% speak Flemish, 1.5% speak Bengali, 0.8% speak French, and 1.5% speak another language at home. 6.9% of students at the school have a disability. Child Study Team services are provided in three of the other elementary schools in the district. Students qualifying for special services other than counseling, occupational, or speech and language therapy are sent to one of those schools instead. The school does offer K-5 Basics Skills services in mathematics and language arts/literacy as well as a K-5 enrichment program. Title 1 resources funded the Basic Skills services until the 2011-2012 school year, when the school no longer qualified as a Title 1 school. According to 2012-2013 state testing results, 68% of students are proficient in Language Arts, and 86% are proficient in Math.

The town is a walking school district, because students typically attend their neighborhood schools. Less than 5% of the students are bused to the school, because it is not their neighborhood school. Parent involvement varies. Over half of the students' parents attend Back to School Night in September, more than 75% attend their child's parent-teacher conferences, but only 10 parents regularly attend monthly PTA meetings. 10% of the students are chronically absent.

Eleven students and thirteen parents from grades three through five volunteered to participate in this study. Six students were in third grade, two students were in fourth grade, and three students were in fifth grade. The students' ages ranged from eight to ten years old. Five students were female and six students were male. Six students were White, one student was Black, one student was Hispanic, and three students were biracial. All students spoke English as their primary language. One student had an Individualized Education Plan for speech and language services.

Part 2: Research Design

Qualitative research paradigm. The research paradigm used in this study is qualitative. This is the typical framework used in teacher research. In this type of research we collect data in the form of observations, surveys, journals, and artifacts. We use this data to learn more about our topic of inquiry. This is dissimilar to quantitative research, which uses numbers and figures to prove or disprove an idea. In quantitative research there is an emphasis on tests and other forms of assessment data to improve achievement, and the goal becomes the effective use of data (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009). Qualitative research, on the other hand, places emphasis on strengthening the knowledge of the teacher researcher and creating knowledge that is “usable in, and often beyond the local context-by other practitioners, policymakers, higher education faculty-and many other contexts” (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009, p.56). Qualitative research does not attempt to find a definitive answer to an inquiry question. Instead, it is a quest for understanding (Peshkin, 1993). In this study we are not attempting to find truth, but rather increase our knowledge of our inquiry topic. Using the qualitative framework we understand that our research will not bring an end to the questioning of our topic. We

believe that our research will inspire more and better questioning that will, in turn, perpetuate more and better understandings.

In our research we are participant and include ourselves as part of the study. Because this study heavily includes the aspect of “self,” the research is subjective. The qualitative framework allows the work to be subjective without penalty. It does not hide its subjectivity, but rather exposes it for all to see. The subjectivity is viewed as a benefit of this type of study. Using the qualitative framework, our own perspectives are documented throughout the study. We are able to ask questions of ourselves, interpret data in different ways, express changes in views, document themes, and express hardships that may have occurred during the study (Cochran-Smith, & Lytle, 2009).

Working within our own classrooms, we are considered the knowers of our profession and of “issues related to teaching, learning, and teacher development” (Cochran-Smith, & Lytle, 2009, p. 46). Using this qualitative framework empowers us as teachers to be the creators of our own knowledge without needing to exclusively rely on statistical information and numbers. Through qualitative research we can obtain knowledge that might not be measurable in the numerical sense, but is indeed important.

In this study of family literacy education and its effects on parental involvement in literacy activities at home, we will use several qualitative inquiry strategies. These strategies include parent interest surveys, parent literacy surveys, teacher research journals, observations and anecdotal data.

Teacher research. This study is an example of teacher research as it was performed by two K-12 teachers in collaboration with Rowan University (Cochran-Smith, & Lytle, 2009). Teacher research is initiated and conducted by real teachers in

their classrooms, schools, and school districts (Shagoury & Power, 2012). Teachers perform this research as insiders, investigating their own practices in order to deepen understandings. As teacher researchers we are using this study as an opportunity to examine our assumptions that parental involvement within our school community would benefit from increased support from teachers. Teacher research is well suited for this study because it allows us as teachers to create an inquiry to find answers to our questions within the context of our own environment. In teacher research inquiry topics are home-grown, ensuring their relevancy to the investigators. Teacher research is also highly relevant to its audience, consisting of other teachers and professionals within the investigators' own communities. These communities are not necessarily physical communities, and can be school-based or cross-school, real or virtual, and may consist of pre-service teachers, administrators, parents, and more (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009).

Teaching can be a very isolated profession. At times we feel as though our struggles are our own burden to bear. Through communication and collaboration with others in our communities we often learn that our struggles are shared by others. Teacher research allows us to investigate our struggles and search for methods to better our teaching practices. Shagoury and Power (2012) state,

...research helps us to gain control of our world. When we understand the patterns underlying the language we use or the interactions we have with others, we have a better sense of how to adjust our behaviors and expectations (p. 2).

We can then share the understandings that teacher research illuminates to support others in the educational community. Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2009) explain that the sharing of teacher research helps to:

foster deep intellectual discourse about critical issues and thus to become spaces where the uncertainties and questions intrinsic to practice can be seen (not hidden) and can function as grist for new insights and new ways to theorize practice” (p.37).

Through teacher research we become agents of change within our school community. Teacher research helps teachers, “work for social justice by using inquiry to ensure educational opportunity, access and equity for all students” (Cochran-Smith, & Lytle, 2009, p. 40). Through this study we want to find effective ways to promote literacy achievement for all students regardless of the level of education, role perceptions, or resources available to families.

This study examines the effects of a family literacy education event on parental involvement in literacy activities at home. The purpose is to promote an atmosphere of collaboration and support between parents and teachers to improve the frequency and effectiveness of parent-child literacy interactions. The teacher research framework will be used in order to implement the study and collect, interpret, and analyze the data. Using the teacher research method, we will look closely at parent attitudes, understandings, feelings, and questions, and track changes and evolutions over time. We will use this information to refine the way we interact with parents.

Procedures of the study. Parent participation would play a large role in the study, so we began by introducing the research study to parents at a PTA meeting. We introduced ourselves, shared the purpose of our research, and explained our plans for conducting the study. All parents of students in grades three through five were invited to participate. We distributed an interest flyer, with which parents could share the nights and

times that worked best with their schedules. This flyer was also sent home with all students in grades three through five at school the following day.

As students returned the flyers to school, we used them to determine the most popular evenings and times amongst the parents interested in participating in the study. Once dates and times were arranged with the school facilities department, a flyer was sent home to interested parents to let them know the dates and times of the Family Reading Program. Childcare was also arranged for both sessions to accommodate the family responsibilities of the participating parents.

The first event in the Family Reading Program was a parent-only session. When parents arrived for the event, they were greeted and asked to complete a questionnaire about their current family reading practices at home. Parents sat in small groups while we read *The Naked Mole Rat Gets Dressed* by Mo Willems (2009). As we read, we stopped often to pose critical thinking questions to encourage discussions about the social issues occurring in the text. Some questions were posed as whole group discussions, while others were posed as small group discussions. In this way, parents were experiencing the interactive read aloud conversations their children participated in daily at school.

Following the interactive read aloud, we led a discussion about the different types of questions that can be posed to children during their reading. We prepared a digital presentation reviewing three levels of questions to consider for discussing books: text-based, inference, and critical response questions (Applegate, et. al., 2008). During the discussion, parents noted the differences between the levels of questions. Next, the questions asked during the interactive read aloud were re-examined. Parents worked together in small groups to categorize the questions based on their new understandings.

Following this activity, a handout of “question starters” was distributed. The purpose of this handout was to provide parents with a template of questions they might use to engage their own children in a conversation about reading. To give parents practice with the template, they formed small groups of three or four and selected from books we had provided. Both picture books and chapter books were made available to address the range of literature parents might encounter with their children at home. Parents worked with their group to use their question template to compose critical thinking questions based on their selected text. As parents worked, we circulated the groups to provide guidance and instruction as necessary. To conclude the evening, some of the groups shared the questions they had composed for the books they selected.

The second Family Reading Program event was held for both parents and students. Students were asked to bring a self-selected text, and parents were asked to bring the “question starter” handout they were given at the first session. Another interactive read aloud was used to begin the second session. This time, we chose to read *The Man Who Walked Between the Towers* by Mordicai Gerstein (2003). As we read, we stopped to engage students and parents in discussions about the social issues and historical references addressed in the text. This time, parents were encouraged to discuss the questions with their child before engaging in whole group discussions.

Next, the three levels of questions were reviewed along with the question template that was distributed in the first session. Parents then began reading with their child, using the self-selected text they were asked to bring. We asked students to bring their own texts to create authentic reading experiences similar to what parents would encounter when reading with their child at home. As parents read, they were encouraged

to engage their child in critical thinking conversations using the question template as a guide. The teachers circulated the classroom as coaches to provide guidance as necessary. To wrap up the activity, parents were invited to share their thoughts about the experience, and some of the questions they used successfully. Before leaving, parents completed a final questionnaire in which they reflected on the effectiveness of the Family Reading Program and its effect on their family literacy practices at home.

Sources of data. A variety of qualitative research techniques were utilized to establish data for this research study. The parent interest survey was used to both recruit parent volunteers for the study and to help schedule the event to accommodate parents' and students' busy schedules. Attendance at both events was also taken to keep a record of parent and student participation. At the beginning of the first event, parents were asked to complete a questionnaire to collect information of their current family literacy practices. Responses to this pre-survey were compared to the post-survey parents completed at the conclusion of the study. During both sessions, we recorded anecdotal observations of parent responses in whole-group, small-group, and parent-child discussions. Throughout the study, we also kept research journals to reflect on our own emerging understandings of teacher research, our behaviors and decisions made as partners in the parent-teacher relationship, and our thoughts and feelings about the data collected at each session.

Data analysis and interpretation. The data collected during this study was used to make inferences about parent-child literacy interactions, the effectiveness of family education events, and the impact these events have on literacy interactions at home. We used the parent interest survey to estimate the level parental interest in participating in a

family reading program. We also used this survey to learn more about the availability and childcare needs of interested parents. This information was used to develop a program that adhered to the essence of a respectful parent-teacher partnership by making the program most convenient to parents.

The pre-parent literacy survey gathered information about both parent attitudes toward reading and their perception of their children's attitudes. We also learned about the current parent-child literacy practices that were taking place at home. We analyzed this data to look for trends among parental attitudes toward reading and how they may impact their literacy interactions. We also looked for themes that arose within the activities and conversations parents described using with their children. Furthermore, the data collected from this questionnaire gave us a baseline to gauge the impact the family reading program had on parent-child interactions.

Observations and anecdotes were used throughout this study to track comments, actions, and reactions of the parents and students involved. We examined our observations to find commonalities among and between parent and student responses and actions during the two family reading nights. This gave us insight into what the participants understood about the program's purpose and the strategies that were taught during the program. We analyzed our observations to look for both positive and negative reactions to the program's components. We examined our observations for information about how the parents perceived the program's value. Finally, we looked for trends in how parents suggested they planned to implement the strategies presented in the programs at home.

We analyzed the post-parent literacy survey to identify changes that occurred in the parents' attitudes toward their own reading. We then looked for changes in the types of interactions they had with their children during reading activities. We also examined the post parent literacy survey for changes in how well the parents knew their children as readers. We looked for trends that suggested the parents' literacy knowledge had strengthened since the pre-parent literacy survey. Lastly, we used this survey to discover how parents intended to use the strategies identified in the family reading program to improve upon their literacy activities at home.

Finally, our teacher research journals allowed us to analyze our thoughts and reflections throughout the course of the study. Starting with our journal entries from the PTA meeting where we announced our study, we looked for trends among our reactions to parent comments. This analysis continued with our reflections throughout the entire process. We were able analyze what affected us as investigators, and how it guided our decision making. During the analysis process, we capitalized on the benefit of performing this study as a collaboration of two teacher researchers. We compared our individual entries to look for similarities and differences between our reflections.

Chapter 4

Data Analysis

Chapter 4 reviews the results of our study as we answer the question, “What happens when students from grades 3-5 and their parents participate in literacy activities as part of family literacy education nights?” As we analyzed our data sources, including our teacher-research journals, attendance records, survey results, and anecdotal observations, four major themes emerged. We noticed trends in attendance, parents’ perceived value of the program, parents’ abilities to apply the strategies discussed, and structural effects on parents’ involvement.

Revisiting the Study

As discussed in chapter 3, data was collected throughout the implementation of the two-part family literacy education event. First, a parent interest survey was used to recruit participants, and attendance was taken at both events to record parent participation. The attendance at the events was compared to the number of parents who signed up using the parent interest survey to identify trends in parent participation. Second, parents were asked to complete questionnaires to collect information about their current family literacy practices. Responses to this pre-survey were compared to a similar post-survey parents completed at the conclusion of the study to identify changes in parent understandings and attitudes as a result of the family literacy event. We also recorded anecdotal observations during whole-group, small-group, and parent-child discussions. Parent responses and conversations documented through these observations were sorted and categorized to better understand how parents applied the information shared with them at the family literacy events. The research journals we kept throughout the study

helped us reflect on the structure of the events, our behaviors and decisions made as partners in the parent-teacher relationship, and our thoughts and feelings about the data collected at each session.

Attendance

To recruit participants in the family reading program, a parent interest survey was sent home with third, fourth, and fifth grade students. 23 parents returned this survey to volunteer to participate in the program. Thirteen had children in third grade, five had children in fourth grade, three had children in fifth grade, and two parents had children in multiple grades. When we look closely at this data, it shows that 71% of third grade parents, 55% of fourth grade parents, and 27% of fifth grade parents signed up to participate in the program.

To coordinate our efforts to keep participation high, we also used the interest survey to ask parents to share information about their schedule to make the program convenient. We used the responses to hold the program during the most popular days and times to accommodate as many parent schedules as possible. A number of parents also indicated on the interest survey that they would need childcare to attend the event, so babysitting services were coordinated through a volunteer organization in the district's high school. Once the dates were established, "Save the Date" flyers were sent home two weeks prior to the family reading program. A second, reminder flyer was also sent home a week before the program.

The first event of the family reading program was a parent-only session. Thirteen parents participated in this event. Seven had children in third grade, three had children in fourth, three had children in fifth grade, and one had children in multiple grades (third

and fourth). This means 38% of third grade parents, 27% of fourth grade parents, and 20% of fifth grade parents participated in the parent-only session of the family reading program.

The second event of the family reading program was a parent-student session. Eleven parents participated in this event. Six parents had children in third grade, one had a child in fourth, three had children in fifth grade, and one had children in multiple grades (third and fourth). This means 29% of third grade parents, 18% of fourth grade parents, and 20% of fifth grade parents participated in the parent-student session of the family reading program.

In our teacher research journals, we noted some parents contacted us to let us know they would not be able to attend the family reading program. Two parents could not attend due to scheduling conflicts. Another parent attended the first session, but she could not attend the second because she became ill. A fourth parent contacted us after the program to apologize for not participating due to an illness as well. In our teacher research journals we also observed the unseasonably cold weather during the program. The first session was held on an especially cold and rainy evening, which may have deterred some parents from leaving their house at all.

To summarize the attendance data, it can be observed that more parents signed up for the family reading program than attended it. This may be due to schedule conflicts, weather, illness, lack of interest, or lack of knowledge of the event. While attendance did drop from the parent-only session to the parent-student session, it cannot be concluded this was due to the change in participation format. The attendance only decreased by two participants, one of which was ill, so this change is not significant enough to draw

conclusions from. In addition, it should also be noted that when the percentage of parent participation from each grade level is compared across the attendance, the highest participation came from the youngest grade level, while the higher grade levels had lower parent participation.

Parental Perceived Value of a Family Literacy Education Event

We began this study by presenting the family reading program to parents at a PTA meeting. Parents voiced an eagerness to participate in a program designed to help them support the development of their children. Examining our teacher research journals, their responses at the meeting demonstrated an interest in being involved in their children's development, suggesting they valued teacher support and feedback to help them strengthen that role. We noted parents made specific requests for the program to apply to areas in which they were most concerned. One parent asked, "Will there be a portion that applies to younger students?" Another suggested, "The program should include an English Language Learners portion." These questions and comments spoken from a parent of a first grader, adhere to our beliefs as researchers, because they demonstrate parents' desire to be involved in the planning of family education events that support their work with their own children. This same parent also wanted us to consider, "developing a program for student-to-student partnerships." Yet another parent asked, "Will you use the same structure for a math program?" The parents at this PTA meeting wanted to participate in programs focusing on objectives they found important. Their questions and suggestions support our beliefs that parents want to play a role in their child's development, because they showed an interest in taking part in the planning of the

events. The high amount of interest and parent feedback we observed at this initial PTA meeting suggests parents place high value on family education events.

To refine our belief that parents value family education events, we wanted to look more precisely into how parents perceived the value of a specific literacy event, so we examined our observations from both sessions of our family reading program. During the first session, we observed parent involvement as they took notes as the presenters were speaking. This supports our belief and suggests parents valued the information presented. We also observed parents actively participating in the session's learning activities. While working in groups, they developed and discussed possible questions they might ask their children when reading together. Consulting our teacher research journals, we noted the groups were, "really hashing it out and debating" (journal entry November 17, 2014). This engagement shows the parents cared about the material being presented. Their effort and involvement demonstrated a value of the activities at hand.

Our observations during the second session provide additional support for our belief that the parents perceived value in this family literacy education event. Both parents and students were in attendance at this session. During the read-aloud in session 2, our anecdotal observations show that although the students were doing most of the responding to the whole group, the parents were engaging in questioning during small group discussions. Parents used the questioning techniques they had learned during the previous session, suggesting they valued the tool. For example, one parent was observed asking the inferential question, "How does he do that? Does he visualize it?" Another parent asked for text evidence from her child, "What makes you think that?" Yet another parent asked an inferential question, "Might they just be scared - human to human?"

These interactions, in which parents utilized the strategies presented, suggest parents valued the knowledge gained from participating in this literacy event.

Next, we turned to our post-survey results to learn more about our parents' perceived value of a family literacy education event. On the post-survey, parents were asked, "How will you adjust your conversations about reading as a result of attending this Family Reading Program?" Parent responses further support our belief. Their responses suggest they intend to use what they learned during the program to engage in literacy conversations at home. This intention to use the strategies presented suggests parents' perceived value in what they learned through the program.

Three parents responded by writing they will be more engaged in their child's reading. One parent wrote, "[I will] ask more questions and more in depth questions and talk to her about the books she's reading." Another parent wrote, "[I will] talk about reading more, read more with my younger child, and ask him questions about it more."

Four parents responded by suggesting they will pay more attention to the types of questions they are asking their children. One of these parents wrote, "I learned a lot. I will be incorporating text based, inference, and critical response questions while discussing our reading from now on." Another said, "I will pay attention to the types of questions I am asking and the degree to which my children support their answers from the text."

Three parents responded by saying they will focus more on critical response questioning. One stating, "[I will] question more about the author's point of view, [and] ask more critical response questions." Another saying, "[I will] definitely add more thinking about characters and how and why things are written."

Two parents' responses explained intent to use the question starters supplied by the presenters. One wrote, "[I will] ask specific questions related to the conversation starters." Another wrote, "[I will] use the conversation starters."

These survey responses support our belief by demonstrating parental intent to use the information from the program to alter their at-home literacy practices. This intent suggests parents perceive value in a family education event, including this specific family literacy event.

To summarize this data, it can be observed that parents value involvement in family literacy education events. The interest and parent feedback we observed at the PTA meeting suggests parents place high value in participating in family education events. Parent involvement at both sessions, in which they used the strategies presented, suggest parents valued the knowledge gained from participating in this literacy event. Finally, parent responses on the post-survey suggest they valued their involvement in the family literacy education event because they intend to continue to use these strategies at home.

Application of Strategies

In addition to exploring whether the parents perceived value in the family literacy event, we analyzed the data collected to explore whether the parents were able to successfully apply the strategies shared to improve literacy conversations with their children. We reviewed the anecdotal observations recorded during the event, changes in the pre- and post-survey responses, and entries from our teacher research journals.

The first event of the family reading program was attended only by parents. Here, we discussed the value of engaging children in conversations about books and presented

a tiered model of questions (text-based, inferential, and critical response) to initiate literature discussions. A handout of this model was given to parents with sample questions within each category. To practice using these questions, parents worked in small groups and selected from picture books and chapter books we had provided. Parents recorded the questions they composed on sticky-notes, while we circulated the groups to observe and provide guidance as necessary. In our teacher research journals, we observed all groups were able to independently generate questions relating to the content of their selected text. This shows parents were working to practice the strategy of using questions to engage their children in literacy discussion. After the session was over, we collected the sticky notes and categorized each according to its question-type. The table below shows the results of this categorization.

Table 1

Parent-Created Questions (11/17/14)

Type	Questions
Critical Response	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Why did the author include several pictures without text? ● Why do you think the author wrote this story? ● Why did the author begin this way?
Inference	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Why do you think this is happening? ● What does the end of the story mean? ● What lesson did you learn? ● Why do you think Max got along so well with the Wild Things? ● What kind of person do you think Katherine’s mother is? ● How did Katherine’s opinion change? ● Why did Katherine’s dad ask her “What is truth?” ● What do you think Katherine really wanted? ● Why do you think he needs a rest?
Text-based	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● What do you think is happening? ● Why did Max’s mother send him to bed without supper? ● How did Max get to where the Wild Things are? ● What was the problem in the story? ● Who is the main character?

As the table shows, critical response questions were used the least. These are the most challenging questions to answer, because it requires the reader to synthesize his or her schema with evidence from the text to draw a conclusion or make a judgment. Only three critical response questions were composed, which suggests these types of questions are not only challenging to answer, but they are also challenging to create. The table also shows inferential questions as the type of question created the most. This suggests parents may have been working to elevate text-based questions, which can be answered by referring only to the text, to inferential questions, which encourage deeper conversations and deeper thought processes, because they require the reader to synthesize prior knowledge with evidence from the text.

The second session was held for both parents and students, who were asked to bring a self-selected text. Parents were asked to bring the question template they used at the first session. As parents and students read these texts together, they were encouraged to engage their child in literature conversations using the question template as a guide. We circulated the classroom to observe their interactions and provide guidance as necessary. After the session concluded, we reviewed the conversations we observed and categorized the parents' questions according to their question type. The table below shows the results of this categorization.

Table 2

Parent-Created Questions (11/20/14)

Type	Questions
Critical Response	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Why are they giving all this information about the transporter in the beginning?
Inference	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What else do you think is the mystery? • Why do you think he is taking the string? • What do you think is going to happen next? • It doesn't say shoe. How did you know? • What might smell? • What sacrifice is she making? • How do you think she feels about that? • What were some of the bad parts of the war? • Do you think they hated the soldiers they captured? • How do you think the dad feels about Shiloh?
Text-based	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What happens if she takes the ring? • Who are the main characters in the story? • What was the purpose of the war? Did they tell you why they were fighting? • Can you catch me up?

The number of questions asked within each category is similar to those generated in the first session. This confirms our contention that critical response questions are the most challenging questions to compose. Parents would likely benefit from further instruction on how to elevate inferential questions to critical response questions. Inferential questions were, again, composed at the highest rate, which suggests parents were confident in composing these types of questions independently. Only four text-based questions were asked, which also suggests parents were looking to elevate their conversations with their children by asking questions that would initiate a deeper discussion than a text-based question might.

In addition to reviewing the questions generated by parents during the family reading program, we also reviewed the pre- and post-survey responses to identify trends

suggesting parents were applying the conversation strategies we discussed and practiced as part of the family reading program. In both surveys parents were asked, “When you talk to your child about his/her reading, what do you talk about?” In the pre-survey, ten parents responded by saying they talk about text-based story content. This includes what happened in the story, the story’s sequence, and identifying characters. None of the pre-survey responses included questions that could be categorized as inferential or critical response questions. In the post-survey, eight parents included text-based questions. In addition, four parents responded by saying they will discuss inferences made from the text. This includes how their child interprets the text, questions about character motivation, and predictions their child makes. Three parents also responded by including critical response questions, such as questioning choices made by the author or asking why the author wrote the story.

The changes observed between the pre- and post-survey responses suggest parents adjusted their understanding about literature conversations as a result of attending this family reading program. First, there was a slight decrease in the number of responses involving text-based questions. This slight decrease might be due to parents learning that text-based questions are necessary for discussing literature, but they do not stimulate thought-provoking conversations. Additionally, there was a significant increase in the number of inferential and critical response questions included in the post-survey responses. This suggests parents learned that using these types of questions are strategies they can use to engage their child in deeper, more challenging conversations about books.

The family reading program executed in this study focused on elevating literature conversations through text-based, inferential, and critical response questions. The data

collected shows parents were working toward applying these strategies to conversations with their children. Our teacher research journals noted that all parents were able to independently generate questions to engage their children in literature conversations. This shows parents used the program to practice and apply the strategy of using questions to elevate literacy discussions with their children. The large number of inferential questions created by parents during both sessions show they understood and could independently compose this type of question. The number of critical response questions composed in both sessions was low, which suggests more instruction is still needed in this area to help parents apply this strategy independently. The number of text-based questions created was also low, but this suggests parents were attempting to elevate conversations by using more inferential questions, a strategy discussed in this family reading program. The survey results also confirm this idea, because the post-survey responses included the use of inferential and critical response questions, where none of the pre-survey responses mentioned these types of questions. In summary, it can be observed that parents did learn to apply new strategies to improve the quality of literature conversations with their children as a result of attending this family reading program.

Structural Effects on Parent Involvement

Our program was structured in a manner that emphasized the parents' role as learners in this process. The program was designed to consist of two nights: the first intended for only parent participation and the second intended for both parents and students. In the first session, we invited only parents. We wanted the parents to be active participants and to know they were responsible for understanding the strategies discussed before they could transfer the information into their work with their children at home. We

also wanted to engage students in the program to give parents the opportunity to apply their newly learned knowledge in an authentic way. We designed the second session to meet this goal by having parents work directly with their children using student-selected texts they brought from home. In this way, we hoped parents would have an opportunity to participate first as learners, and then as guides to their children's literacy development.

Both sessions began with an interactive read aloud in which the presenter read a picture book aloud, stopping every few pages to pose questions to incite a whole group discussion about the book and its themes. During the parent-only session, we observed parents participating and engaging in whole group discussions by calling out responses to our questions. Reflecting in our teacher research journals, we noted that during this session only one or two parents would respond to the presenter's questions. Our anecdotal observations from this session show parents shared 17 responses during the whole group discussion.

When we looked closely at our observations from the parent-student session, we saw a significant increase in the amount of responses during the interactive read aloud. 28 responses were given during this whole group discussion. This suggests when students are included in family literacy events, overall participation increases. The interactive read aloud also varied from the first, because it included a "turn and talk" opportunity after each question. During this time, parents turned to their child to discuss their responses before they shared with the whole group. Some students shared their ideas only with their parents, while some students and parents discussed their thoughts with others sitting at their table. Once the discussion was brought back to a whole group, several hands raised in an effort to contribute to the class discussion. It can be concluded that providing

opportunities to discuss ideas in small groups and partnerships prior to contributing to a whole group discussion is beneficial in increasing overall participation.

It is also important to note that during the parent-student session discussion, four of the responses came from parents, while 24 responses came from the students. When analyzing this data, we observed that while overall participation increased, parent participation decreased dramatically. We observed parents were more reserved in order to give the students the opportunity to respond instead. Instead of being involved as learners, as they had been in the parent-only event, the parent-student structure involved them as parent-teacher partners in support of their children's literacy activities. When parents discussed the literature with their children, they listened to their ideas, but instead of sharing their own ideas, they used questions to further their children's thinking. For example, one parent probed her child to share text evidence, asking, "What makes you think that?" Another parent asked a follow-up inferential question, "Might they just be scared - human to human?" Instead of being involved as learners, the parents were now acting as partners with the teachers, asking questions to support and deepen their children's comprehension.

This helped us refine our belief that parents are more willing to participate in discussions when their children are not in attendance. While there was a significant increase in whole group participation from the first event to the second event, parent participation decreased. For this reason, it is beneficial to host parent-only events in addition to parent-student events in order to support parent involvement as learners prior to involving them as supporters of their children's literacy development. Hosting events

with both parent-only opportunities and collaborative parent-child experiences will support teachers in improving family literacy practices for all attendees.

Conclusion

In this chapter we analyzed the results of our study. While reviewing our attendance data we found more parents signed up for the family reading program than attended it. We also concluded that the highest parent participation came from the youngest grade level, while the higher grade levels had lower parent participation. We found parents highly valued the events and information included in the study. We believe that parents want to be involved in their child's development and value support from teachers to help them strengthen that role. Parents cared about the material being presented, and their effort during the events demonstrated a value of the activities at hand. Parent responses given on the post survey suggest they intend to use what was learned during the program when engaging in literacy conversations at home. Next, we analyzed parents' application of the reading strategies. While analyzing our data we found parents understood and could independently compose inferential questions. Parents' ability to construct critical response questions was low, which suggests more instruction in this area is needed. The decrease in the number of text-based questions asked during the events suggests parents were attempting to elevate conversations by using higher level questioning. Finally, while reviewing our data on the effects of a parent only versus parent-student event structure, we observed that while overall participation increased when students attended, parent participation decreased. This suggests the structure of the family education event affects parent involvement. We found benefits from both event structures that can be used to support literacy development. A

parent-only event promotes parent involvement as learners, while a parent-student event involves parents in a parent-teacher partnership in support of their children's literacy development.

In the next and final chapter, we will further detail the conclusions of our study. We will also discuss implications our study may have on future research, as well as implications for other professionals in the field of education. Additionally, we will reflect on the limitations of our study. We will investigate the areas in which our study was restricted as well as areas which may benefit from additional research.

Chapter 5

Summary, Conclusions, Limitations, and Implications for the Study

Summary

Upon the conclusion of our research, we found parents valued the information presented at our family literacy events. After engaging parents and students in these events, observing conversations, and surveying attendees, our data suggests parents want to be involved in the literacy development of their children, and they appreciate the support the teacher researchers provided. Parent surveys and conversations showed they intend to use the information they learned at the events with their children at home. Our observations suggest parents value their role as learners when engaged in a literacy event in which teachers work as coaches to support their learning experience. Their interactions with each other and participation in the events' activities showed parents put forth great efforts in their own learning, demonstrating a value in family literacy education.

After completing our family literacy events, we also found parents were able to accurately apply the strategy of posing higher level questions to deepen literacy conversations with their children. During the events in the study, parents understood the difference between text-based, inferential, and critical response questions. First, they could accurately identify the level of questions we presented. Additionally, they could create their own questions to address each of the three levels. We found, as a result of the family literacy events conducted in this study, parents were able to develop and ask more higher level questions including both inferential questions and critical response questions. Furthermore, parents were asking less text-based questions, which suggests parents were attempting to elevate their level of questioning above concrete discussion topics.

Finally, we found benefits from varying event structures. As a result of our study, we discovered hosting a parent-only event increased parent engagement in learning activities. Parents actively participated in learning the literacy strategies presented during this event structure. As a result of their engagement, parents displayed evidence of learning in their conversations and in the event activities. They were able to demonstrate an understanding of the material presented, and they applied the strategies discussed with increased independence. Likewise, we found hosting a parent-student event increased overall participation. Although parents participated less in the whole group discussions, they were participating in small group and parent-student discussions, using the strategies they had learned at the parent-only event to support their children's literacy development at this event. The amount of literacy conversations and other literacy interactions increased when students were in attendance along with their parents. This was possible because the parents attended the first event as learners, using their knowledge to facilitate student learning at the parent-student event.

Conclusions

After revisiting the literature previously outlined in chapter two of this study, we find that our research supports the conclusion that parents value the information shared through family literacy events. Parents want to be involved in their children's literacy development, and they appreciate support from teachers in refining their skills for working with their children. As previously stated, Anderson and Minke (2007) conclude that specific invitations by teachers are leading factors in parents' decisions to become involved in their child's education. In addition, Jordan et al. (2000), while reporting on the intervention program, Project EASE, found parents appreciated being invited to take

part in their children's education. Our study supports these ideas. Parents who participated expressed positive reactions to the events, and their effort and involvement in event activities demonstrated a value of the strategies presented. Also, the parents' intent to use the information to alter their at-home literacy practices confirms parents valued the strategies presented at the events.

In addition, research has shown literacy activities that help improve parents' knowledge of literacy development are more effective than strategies that do not strengthen parent knowledge (Darling & Westberg, 2004). Our study supports this conclusion, as shown through parents' abilities to learn the higher level questioning strategy and apply this strategy with their children. Parents' knowledge of literacy development was strengthened through their experience with text-based, inferential, and critical response questions during the study. Therefore, they are more equipped to apply this strategy when working at home with their children.

Through our research we found varying event structures between parent-only and parent-student events had benefits for the improvement of family literacy practices. This coincides with Doyle and Zhang (2011)'s research. In their research, they report a parent-only group viewed themselves as central to their child's learning, while the parent-child participants emphasized the importance of direct experience with their child. This can be seen in our study, as parents participated more during the parent-only session, but the participation and level of discussion increased overall during the parent-child session. At the parent-only session, parents were involved as learners, but at the parent-student session, parents involved themselves as partners with the teachers in support of their children's literacy development. Instead of sharing their own responses to literature, as

they had at the parent-only session, parents used questions to extend their children's comprehension. Doyle and Zhang (2011) also state that participants in both program models reported positive changes in the literacy activities they implemented at home. In our study, after participating in both event structures, parents intended to alter their at-home literacy practices according to the new strategies they learned through the family literacy events.

Our study aligns with the current research surrounding family literacy, parent-teacher partnerships, and family literacy events. Parents want to be involved in the literacy development of their children. They appreciate the invitations to become more engaged in their child's education, and value the support family literacy events can provide in improving parent-child literacy interactions at home. Family literacy events that improve parents' knowledge of literacy development are beneficial to student literacy development. Supporting parents' ability to apply literacy strategies will increase their potential to use these strategies with their children and will lead to positive at-home literacy interactions. Lastly, structuring events that allow for parent-only experiences as well as parent-child experiences provides opportunities for growth in parent knowledge as well as student knowledge.

Limitations

One significant limitation to this research study was the time available to conduct research. The entire research study was developed, approved, executed, and synthesized in a single semester. This timeline allowed for the implementation of only two family literacy education events. If the timeframe of the study had been lengthened, more family literacy events could have been implemented. These other events might have focused on

giving parents more practice and instruction in developing and using critical response questions with their children, which is the area parents found the most challenging. The events might have also helped parents develop other family literacy skills, such as playing word games at home. By implementing a larger number of family literacy events, more data could be collected to better understand trends in attendance and a deeper understanding of effective program structures and topics of discussion.

Furthermore, an expanded timeline might have also provided time to gather data about parents' applications of the family literacy strategies discussed. While the parents participating in the study did share information about their intentions to apply the strategies discussed, it would have been beneficial to learn whether parents were able to follow through with these intentions. Gathering data a month or a few months following the events would have provided more information about the effectiveness of the family literacy education events.

A second limitation to the study was the small size of the school where the study took place. At the time of the study, the school had one third grade class of 21 students, one fourth grade class of 11 students, and one fifth grade class of 15 students. Of these 47 students, only 13 of their parents volunteered to participate in the study. With such a small sample size, the small difference in attendance between the two events was inconclusive. If the study had taken place at a school with multiple classes per grade level, a larger sample size might have been available to study, leading to more definitive data analysis.

Implications for the Study

In analyzing the data, we have identified areas in this study that warrant further investigation. First, researchers might implement a similar study over a longer time period. This would allow for more data to be collected across several family literacy education events. Researchers could study trends in attendance over this period of time to see if participation improves or declines over the series of events. Implementing more events would also offer opportunities for researchers to experiment with different types of event structures and literacy objectives. The researchers could better understand which structures are the most effective and which literacy objectives were the most challenging for parents to apply.

Another aspect of the study that could be investigated further might be parents' abilities to apply the strategies discussed in the family literacy program at home. Researchers could follow up with participating parents through a series of surveys to see if parents utilize the strategies at home once the program is completed. This data would help researchers draw more definitive conclusions about the long-term effectiveness of family literacy education programs.

Additionally, teacher researchers interested in studying the implementation of family literacy programs might study specific populations of students. This study targeted the general population of students in grades 3-5 of an elementary school. Future studies might target other populations, such as parents of students identified as below-level readers or parents of students who speak English as a second language. These studies might identify ways educators can effectively support families of students with struggling readers.

Finally, trends in parent participation might be explored. In this study, parents were made aware of the family literacy events through flyers and an invitation at the PTA meeting. Child care was also provided during the events to increase parent participation. Might there be other ways to better attract parent participation? Teacher researchers could investigate the use of give-aways, such as free books, to increase event attendance. Providing food might be another avenue teacher researchers could explore to identify incentives that increase parent participation.

In conclusion, the findings of this study provide teachers and administrators with information to support the planning and implementation of family literacy education events. The results of this study suggest parents value the opportunity to participate in family literacy education events. In addition, it also suggests parents respond positively to the opportunity to attend literacy events by themselves and with their children. Hosting parent-only events promotes parent involvement as learners, while parent-child events provide parents a chance to apply strategies with guided support from event facilitators. Such events are also effective ways to broaden parents' understanding of literacy development and provide additional strategies to engage children in literacy conversations at home.

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Appendix A

Family Reading Program
Parent Interest Survey

Dear Parents,

As graduate students at Rowan University, we are conducting research about parent-teacher literacy partnerships. As part of our study, we will be holding a Family Reading Program at _____ for grades 3-5. The program will focus on how to engage children in higher-level conversations about books. We will host two Family Reading Nights here at _____. To ensure this program is held at your convenience, please fill out the following survey to share your availability, and return to your child's teacher as soon as possible.

Thank you,
Morgen Lehr
Lisa Remchuk

Parent(s) _____

Student(s) _____

Grade(s) _____

Night One (Parents only): Check the nights and times that work best (you may check more than one)

Monday _____ Tuesday _____ Wednesday _____ Thursday _____
5-6pm _____ 6-7pm _____ 7-8 _____

Night Two (Parents AND Students): Check the nights and times that work best (you may check more than one)

Monday _____ Tuesday _____ Wednesday _____ Thursday _____
5-6pm _____ 6-7pm _____ 7-8 _____

Would it be helpful if we provided babysitting services during the event? _____

Appendix B

Parent Reading Survey (Pre)

Please answer the following questions about your reading experiences.

1. What do you read? (circle all that apply)

Magazines Newspapers Informational Texts
 Novels Nonfiction Others: _____

I'm not much of a reader

2. How much do you agree with these statements about your own reading preferences?

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Reading is one of my favorite hobbies.				
I feel happy if I receive a book as a present.				
For me, reading is a waste of time.				
I enjoy going to a bookstore or a library.				

3. How do you talk to others about your own reading?

	Hardly ever	Once a month	Once a week	Daily
I talk with my family.				
I talk with my friends.				
I attend a book club.				
I post information about my reading online (facebook, twitter, blogs, etc.).				
Other: _____				

Please answer the following questions about your reading experiences with your child.

1. What does your child read? (circle all that apply)

Magazines

Newspapers

Informational Texts

Novels

Nonfiction

Others: _____

I'm not sure

2. How often do you or someone else in your home engage in the following activities with your child?

	Hardly ever	Once a month	Once a week	Daily
Read together				
Talk about things you have done				
Talk about things you have read				
Visit a bookstore				
Visit a library				

3. When you talk to your child about his/her reading, what do you talk about?

Appendix C

Parent Reading Survey-Post

Please answer the following questions about your reading experiences.

1. What do you read? (circle all that apply)

Magazines

Newspapers

Informational Texts

Novels

Nonfiction

Others: _____

I'm not much of a reader

2. How much do you agree with these statements about your own reading preferences?

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Reading is one of my favorite hobbies.				
I feel happy if I receive a book as a present.				
For me, reading is a waste of time.				
I enjoy going to a bookstore or a library.				

3. How do you talk to others about your own reading?

	Hardly ever	Once a month	Once a week	Daily
I talk with my family.				
I talk with my friends.				
I attend a book club.				
I post information about my reading online (facebook, twitter, blogs, etc.).				
Other: _____				

Please answer the following questions about your reading experiences with your child.

1. What does your child read? (circle all that apply)

Magazines

Newspapers

Informational Texts

Novels

Nonfiction

Others: _____

I'm not sure

2. How often do you or someone else in your home engage in the following activities with your child?

	Hardly ever	Once a month	Once a week	Daily
Read together				
Talk about things you have done				
Talk about things you have read				
Visit a bookstore				
Visit a library				

3. When you talk to your child about his/her reading, what do you talk about?

4. How will you adjust your conversations about reading as a result of attending this Family Reading Program?

Appendix D

Texts Used at Family Literacy Events

- *Naked Mole Rat Gets Dressed* by Mo Willems
- *The Man Who Walked Between the Towers* by Mordicai Gerstein
- *Where the Wild Things Are* by Maurice Sendak
- *Our Gracie Aunt* by Jacqueline Woodson
- *Pink and Say* by Patricia Polacco
- *Charlotte's Web* by E. B. White
- *The Tale of Despereaux* by Kate DiCamillo
- *Bud, Not Buddy* by Christopher Paul Curtis
- *Been to Yesterdays* by Lee Bennett Hopkins
- *A Chair for my Mother* by Vera B. Williams
- *Hey World Here I Am!* by Jean Little

Appendix E

Family Reading Program Timeline

Session 1

Date: 11/17/14

Time: 6:00-7:00

Parents only

Time	Activity	Materials
6:00	1. Parents arrive and sign in. 2. Parents complete Pre-Survey, teachers assist where necessary.	Sign in sheet Pens/pencils Pre-Survey
6:10	1. Teachers model high-level critical thinking questions using a picture book read aloud. 2. Parents engage in answering questions during the read aloud.	<i>Naked Mole Rat Gets Dressed</i> by Mo Willems
6:25	1. Teachers explain how critical thinking questions differ from other types of questions, sharing handout to demonstrate the difference. 2. Teachers review some of the questions from the read aloud. 3. Parents participate to categorize the questions using the chart	Sentence strips with questions from the read aloud Hand out
6:35	1. Teachers introduce question starters for use with questioning at home 2. Hand out copies to all parents	Question starters hand out (categorized)
6:40	1. Parents will be asked to form small groups. 2. Teachers will give each group a book. 3. Groups will work to develop questions about the book using the question starter hand out. 4. Teachers circulate to assist.	Post-Its Picture books for each group
6:55	5. Groups are invited to share some of the questions they developed	

Session 2**Date: 11/20/14****Time: 6:00-7:00****Parent and Students**

Time	Activity	Materials
6:00	Parents and students arrive and sign in.	Sign in sheet Pens/pencils
6:05	1. Teachers model critical thinking questions using a picture book read aloud. 2. Parents and students engage in answering questions during the read aloud.	<i>The Man who Walked Between the Towers</i> by Mordicai Gerstein
6:20	1. Teachers review high-level critical thinking questions. 2. Teachers review the question starters hand out.	Chart from previous session Extra copies of the question starters hand out
6:25	1. Parents break off into partnerships with their children. 2. Children read a self-selected book with their parents. 3. Parents use the question starters to ask questions while the child is reading. 4. Teachers circulate to assist.	Student self-selected books
6:45	1. Teachers hand out post-survey to parents. 2. Parents complete post-survey.	Post-survey Pens/pencils

Appendix F

Family Literacy Conversation Starters

Critical Literacy Conversation Starters

Level	Sample Questions
Critical Response	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Why do you think the author _____?• Why do you think the author wrote this story?• Why do you think the author began the story this way?• Why do you think the author ended the story this way?• Why do you think the illustrator _____?• What did the author do to make _____ interesting?• How did the author show you what kind of person _____ was?• What was the most important idea?• Do you agree with what _____ did? Why/Why not?
Inference	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• What do you think _____ really wanted?• What do you think _____ was thinking?• Why was _____ important?• What lesson did _____ learn?• What kind of person do you think _____ was?• What new information did you learn?• How would you describe the main character?• Think about what's happened so far. What do you think will happen next?
Text-based	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• What was the problem in the story?• How was the problem solved?• What happened after _____?• What is the setting?• Who is the main character?• Who are the supporting characters?

Appendix G

Data Tool: Observation Checklist (Session 1)

Behavior Observed	Parent	Coach
Within the Text Questioning		
Beyond the Text Questioning		
About the Text Questioning		
Other		

Appendix H

Data Tool: Observation Checklist (Session 2)

Behavior Observed	Parent	Student	Coach
Within the Text Questioning			
Beyond the Text Questioning			
About the Text Questioning			
Other			