Family involvement in the primary years: Teachers’ perceptions of the effects on literacy achievement

By

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A research paper submitted in conformity with the requirements

For the degree of Master of Teaching

Department of Curriculum, Teaching and Learning

Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the University of Toronto

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Teachers’ perceptions of the effects of family involvement on literacy achievement

Abstract

This research study focuses on the perceptions teachers have about the effects that family involvement has on the literacy achievement of elementary school students. The study is guided by this question of what teachers’ perceptions look like and is supported by several sub-questions that help distinguish how much and what types of involvement are impactful and what roles schools have in supporting involvement. A comprehensive literature review examines existing research on this topic from North America and around the world. With a case study approach, three in-depth interviews were conducted with elementary school teachers in the Peel District School board. The data collected during these interviews results in six overarching themes: 1) Teachers believe literacy affects all other subjects and areas of life, 2) Teachers believe that involvement requires both academic support and emotional support to be effective, 3) Teachers believe that family involvement has a direct correlation to literacy achievement, 4) Teachers believe that there are barriers that families face that may deter their involvement, 5) Teachers believe that in general when families are not involved, negative consequences are likely to follow including lack of literacy achievement, poor self-esteem, trouble in all aspects of curriculum, 6) Teachers believe that communicating with parents is important. This research study concludes with a discussion on the implications of this research in regards to other literature, it’s implications in the field, and recommended steps for future research.

Keywords:
Literacy, families, family involvement, teachers, reading, writing, achievement
Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge with love, my parents, James and Elizabeth for their continual support throughout my academic journey. They have been patient, understanding and encouraging the entire way, and I could never thank them enough. I would further like to thank my closest friends for always seeming interested in the research I was doing, the stories I was sharing, and the passion for the field of education.

I will mention one person whose support and unyielding encouragement has helped me see myself as someone who is doing something important, worthwhile and significant. Jonathan Reilly Thomas has been the breadcrumbs on the ground, steering me back to the path whenever I strayed. I hope only to do the same for you, Jon.

A final thank you to the team of passionate, talented and motivated teachers who I have been honoured to call my colleagues and friends for the past two years. We have learned so much from each other and I cannot wait to see what brilliant things you will bring to the field of education.
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Chapter 1: Introduction

1.0 Introduction and Research Content and Problem

Literacy has been, remains, and probably will always be a topic on which great importance and attention is paid in the field of education. In the growing age of technology, the way in which children are expected to develop their literacy skills is complicated. Some researchers attest that the roles of teachers remain the same as they have always been when it comes to literacy instruction. Brunner (2009) explains that in order to learn to read, students need to be properly facilitated using many traditionally human interactions. For example, students must be engaged by the teacher and find reading meaningful, and teachers must remain positive and encouraging. Fountas and Pinnell (2000) have established programs used in Ontario boards and boards across Canada that allow educators to teach students how to pick the right books and to give purpose to their reading. Familial involvement is another important topic relating to education, particularly when discussing the primary/junior grades. Many educators might ask: how are we supposed to facilitate this type of involvement? It is important to consider how much involvement is necessary to really support and even improve the literacy development in young children and why parent/family involvement does affect literacy achievement. These questions are bound to be on the minds of all educators and probably parents. Cooper, Patall, & Robinson (2008) suggest that 95% of students reported that they did better in school at least some of the time when they received help with homework from their parents. These findings suggest that on some level children will benefit from familial involvement in their schooling. In this research study, I aim to establish what type and how much involvement yields positive results in literacy achievement. There are some gaps in the literature, which are an underrepresentation of
immigrant families and their involvement in schooling as well as the effect of parental involvement on literacy achievement from the perspective of the teacher. As a preservice teacher in the Peel District school board, this gap is important to my research as the schools that I work with are made up of students and families from all around the world. Select interview questions will be tailored to investigating immigrant families and their involvement in their children’s learning and school.

1.1 Purpose

The purpose of conducting this study is to investigate what the effect of parent/family participation has on the literacy achievement of students in the primary grades and how this participation is being and can be supported by the schools. Family involvement, for the purpose of this paper, will refer to immediate family (parents/guardians) of the child participating in their school life in a variety of ways (homework, volunteering, and weekend excursions). Much of the existing research in this area draws results from the opinions of parents, and occasionally students. In this study, I will interview and use the experiences and opinions of three teachers in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA) to explore the outcomes of parental involvement on students’ literacy achievement within their classrooms. The knowledge and information acquired through these interviews can benefit new and experienced teachers in fostering and developing strategies that help support literacy achievement through the involvement of parents and families.

Through this research, I hope to gain an understanding of how I, as an educator, can support my students’ development through the involvement of parents and families and to understand what type of strategies are already being used in schools around the GTA. Finally, I
would like to know what challenges teachers are facing in regards to family involvement to shed light on how the system can be improved.

1.2 Research questions

The main research question of this study is: What is the effect of family involvement on student literacy in the primary years’ classroom as perceived by teachers? This study is also guided by the following key/sub-questions: How much and in what ways do families need to be involved in order to see improvement in literacy achievement?; How does the teacher/school facilitate family involvement in their children’s schooling?; Are students whose families are not involved at a disadvantage in regards to their literacy achievement in comparison to other classmates?; What challenges do teachers face in regards to parent/family participation?

1.3 Background of the researcher

I can remember vividly being a young child, brushing my teeth and hopping into bed, waiting for story time with my father. Whether he was reading from a book, or recalling adventures from his own childhood, the last big event of the day was always listening to my dad tell a story as I drifted away to sleep. It was important, both to Dad and myself. That is how I remember my childhood. I know that I was fortunate enough to have parents who were involved both academically and leisurely in my learning. Aside from one on one reading, my father was active in a lot of my homework activities. I recall 4th grade, when we had been learning about provinces and capitals, and I had not grasped the concepts. There was a unit test on the horizon and for a week straight my father worked with me reviewing the maps and worksheets from
school until I was where my classmates were. I got 100% on that test and it is a memory that is still so alive today. I was able to feel pride in my academics because I worked hard and it paid off.

I want to know that my students will have support that extends beyond the classroom. The reality is that not all families can offer the same amount of involvement in their child’s schooling because of factors individual to them. There are things educators may be able to do, however, that can involve parents more often and in a variety of ways. Throughout my studies at OISE, I have had the opportunity to consider this topic both in university classes and in elementary schools. Literacy and family involvement as separate entities or as one combined topic are of extreme importance to educators and families. In a document released in 2014 by the Ontario Ministry of Education, it states that the province’s goals include “high levels of achievement in literacy” (Ministry of Education, p. 2). Literacy is discussed several other times throughout the document as an important part of their vision. This investigation strives to provide further insight into the topic and to improve what can be done within schools.

I would like to use the findings of this research to impact my future classroom by understanding the relationship between familial involvement in school and literacy achievement. If I know how they relate, it becomes possible to support and improve this involvement.

1.4 Rationale for the study

There has been a lot of research done on the topic of family involvement and its effect on literacy achievement. The majority of the research report results from the perspective of the parents and the students involved (Adams, Keating, Rogers, Ryan, & Theule, 2009; Adamski, Fraser, & Peiro, 2013). Huntsinger and Jose (2009) found that “the influence of parental
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participation on children’s achievement is not due to skill-building, but rather to its impact on attitudes and motivation” (Huntsinger et al., 2009, 408). This suggests that positive outcomes result from family involvement, not only on achievement scores but on self-esteem. Kaniuka (2012) report on their study that involved a remedial reading program for historically low-scoring students. Their research resulted in greater reading accomplishment which in turn led to higher scores “with regard to attitude towards reading and reading self-esteem and a better overall general attitude towards reading” (186). Kim (2009) examined the barriers that some minority families face in participating in their child’s schooling and concluded that although a great deal of importance lies in the involvement of families in their child’s academics, academic shortcomings or failures should not be attributed to lack of parental involvement (p. 91). Cooper et al. presented a chart that listed potential positives and negatives associated with parental involvement in homework (Cooper, H., Patall, Erika A., & Robinson, J.C., 2008, p. 1041). Some positives included an accelerated learning and enhanced communication between both parent and child as well as parent and teacher, where potential negatives results included interference with learning and emotional costs and tension (p. 1041). Cooper et al. found that “the overall effect of parent involvement in homework was small and often not significant” (p. 1087). On the other hand, research by Adams et al. suggests that “school-based parental involvement […] is associated with children’s school achievement [however …,] it is indirect” (Adams et al., 2009, p. 45). These conflicting results are important to consider when the research has been heavily opinion based on the part of the families and students. The current research study will offer a new perspective on the part of the educators involved with these families and students.
1.5 Overview

Chapter 1 includes an introduction to the topic and research paper, followed by the purpose of this research investigation. The first chapter also includes my main research question and guiding sub-questions, as well as personal background details which led to my interest in this topic. Chapter 2 contains a review of the literature on this subject. Chapter 3 provides the methodology and procedure used in this study including information about the participants, data collection instruments, and limitations of the study. Chapter 4 identifies the research participants and describes the data as it addresses the research questions. Chapter 5 includes what was learned, insights, recommendations for practice, further study, and potential limitations of the study. References and a list of appendices will appear at the end.
Chapter 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

2.0 Introduction

There is a substantial existing body of research on the correlation between parental involvement and academic achievement of students at the elementary level. This literature review was conducted as a result of and with a focus on my research question: what is the effect of parent/family participation on the literacy achievement of students in the primary grades? The existing research that I reviewed in this paper focuses a great deal on the parents’ perceptions, but neglects to investigate the perceptions of the classroom teacher when discussing the effects that parental involvement has on their students’ academic achievement. Thus, this research study will focus specifically on the teachers’ perceptions. Previous research also tended to focus either on math or an overall academic achievement rather than on a specific area of achievement. These two gaps have provided me with a purpose for further investigation.

2.1 Students’ and parents’ perceptions of parental involvement and its effects on academic achievement

A Canadian study by Adams et al. (2009) investigated 4 schools in a small city through the use of questionnaires. Children were asked to identify their interactions with their mothers and/or fathers. Following the initial questionnaire, two follow up questionnaires were given to the students that investigated their self-confidence and their attitudes. The results significantly show that maternal involvement in all areas had direct impact on the students’ personal characteristics, which are: academic competence, self-concept in reading, self-concept in math, and global self-concept. Adams et al.’s study also shows that maternal involvement in homework yields higher academic competence, as perceived by students, but also yields self-reported
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negative results. Students reported feeling academic pressure from maternal involvement in homework. An important finding from this research is that girls reported a higher academic competence and higher self-concept in reading when their fathers were involved, and boys a higher global self-concept and more academic pressure. This research, although limiting in its sampling, provides an important insight for the investigation of parental involvement and academic achievement. There is a higher level of academic competence, but it is matched with higher academic pressure. This suggests that certain types of parental involvement are not positively affecting students on a personal level, even if it is yielding an increase in academic achievement.

Berry, Pezdek and Renno (2002) investigated parents’ predictions of their children’s mathematics performance and find that in almost all cases parents significantly overestimated their children’s performance. The study also finds that parents claimed to help their children for a little less than half of the amount of overall time their child spent working on homework, but results indicated that this involvement had no significant impact on the child’s academic performance. They conclude that hours spent working on the homework was not connected to improved performance. These findings contradict Adams et al.’s findings, however, they do suggest that parents believe they are doing more for their children than they actually are. This supports the notion that the effects on achievement are dependent on the type of involvement that parents are participating in.

Much of the existing research, it should be noted, come from parent self-reporting and less on student and teachers’ reporting.
2.2 Actual or perceived barriers for parental involvement

In previous studies, researchers have presented a wide range of barriers, both actual and perceived, that parents may run into when considering involvement in their child’s schooling.

In a study conducted by Adamski, Fraser, and Peiro (2013), the researchers discuss how different cultures have varying expectations and standards about what is appropriate when it comes to participating in their children’s schooling. In some cultures, it is believed to be disrespectful to involve themselves in their children’s academics. The article also cites other barriers such as language barriers for new immigrants, clashing of cultures, and an inability to fully understand school rules and expectations. This study found that both classroom and home conditions jointly impact student outcomes. In regards to cultural barriers in family participation in schools, there is not much research existing to compare, but this topic will be explored in the current research study.

In Kim’s 2009 research, barriers are addressed through two perspectives. One perspective discusses how minority parents feel negative and uncomfortable feelings when participating in the school because in North American schools, teachers have traditionally relied on middle class families to take action within the schools to accomplish tasks, like raising funds. Immigrant families report feeling unneeded or unwanted when giving their input and that “majority” families become hostile when minority families initiate involvement in the school.

Lahaie (2008) cites “lack of childcare, inflexible work schedules, limited income, and lack of transportation to participate in school programs and events” (p. 685). Lahaie does, however, discuss that we must look beyond in-school participation as the only type of
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involvement parents have in their child’s academics. A great deal of this involvement comes from within the home and the research in that study found that it is an important element of immigrant children’s learning and performance at school.

Another factor that has been explored in the research is that barrier parents report facing when they have children with an exceptionality, such as ADHD as discussed by Marton, Rogers, Tannock, and Wiener (2009). In this study, parents reported being less likely to be involved academically as they felt that they were less capable of effectively helping their child with their academic work, which is consistent with other research on parental involvement in children with ADHD. The paper also discusses how parents of typically developing children are involved with the mindset that their child can attain certain levels of achievement which some parents with ADHD may not believe in their own children. An important finding in Marton et al.’s (2009) research is that in mothers of children both with and without ADHD, they reported similar levels of involvement in their child’s academic life. In fathers of children with ADHD, however, results reported them being “more disengaged from their children’s learning and using a more coercive style regarding their child’s achievement compared to fathers of children without ADHD” (p. 179). Marton et al. (2009) discuss that this may have to do with some fathers’ belief that their child inherited their ADHD from them.

In the research discussed that focuses on barriers to parental involvement, the barrier almost always involves language or cultural beliefs. This is an important detail to keep in mind when exploring this topic. We must move beyond thinking that parents do not want to be involved, but there is something they feel is standing in the way. It may be that they cannot
understand the work because English is new to them, or it may be that their cultural beliefs clash
with those of the schools’. In some cases time is a factor because they are working hours that do
not allow them to be involved as they would like to be. These factors and more impact how
much and in which ways a parent is participating in their child’s schooling.

2.3 The effects on academic achievement as concluded by the researchers

There is a great deal of conflicting opinions when it comes to the effect that parental
involvement has on academic achievement. This is probably due in large part to the varying
definitions of parental involvement. Various studies look at many types of involvement, whereas
others look at only one type but throw the broad title of parental involvement on top of it.

Much of the research, including that of Fan & Chen (2001) stipulates that parental
expectations for how children will perform academically had a very strong positive affect on
their academic achievement. In other words, it is not about the act of supervision or just being
there during homework, it is more about the expectations and aspirations that parents share with
their children that has a positive correlation. Chen et al. ’s (2009) research indicates a negative
relationship between parental involvement via homework and their child’s academic
performance. They suggest this may be because in most cases homework supervision is
occurring because the child is already struggling in school. In essence, this involvement should
be happening prior to the struggle (or during the time of early childhood) and at other times
during the struggle. By participating as a supportive and encouraging parent, their child may then
begin to improve academically as a result of improved self-concept.
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In Berry et al.’s (2002) research, they found that in elementary school children, the amount of hours per week that parents spent helping their children with their math homework did not have statistical significance on their child’s math achievement scores. In a cross-national study conducted by Guzman et al. (2013), the researchers concluded that there was a strong relationship between parental involvement and child well-being, educational outcomes, and literacy achievement. The researchers did, however, conclude that not all types of parental involvement are associated with higher levels of student literacy. An increase in homework supervision and support may be linked to a child’s poor performance academically and thus have a negative impact on their child’s academic achievement. Open communication and time spent together as well as moral support yields positive results for literacy achievement.

Huntsinger and Jose (2009) presented research that contradicted much of the other existing research when they concluded that the rote and drill type homework involvement that Chinese American parents participated in with their children yielded more positive attitudes towards school and liked reading better than children of European American parents who spent more time involved in the form of involvement in activities at school.

2.4 Position on the topic

Based on the existing literature, there is a direct connection between parental involvement and academic (and more specifically, literacy) performance. The impact of this correlation is dependent on factors such as quality of time spent, rather than amount of time spent, as discussed in Guzman et al. (2013). The type of involvement also plays a factor on the impact it will have on student performance. It is likely, as discussed in Adamski et al. (2013) that a primary focus on homework in parental involvement may yield high stress and have no impact on improved
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performance, but interacting in a variety of ways will likely improve positive self-concept which will yield positive results in academic performance. It is necessary to identify the type of involvement being explored when conducting research on this topic.

Much of the research, as in Chen and Fan (2001) and Guzman et al. (2013), supports the correlation between parental expectations and encouragement and student performance. What occurs during these interactions appears to have a more positive effect on the child’s mindset overall which allows their self-concept in academics, like literacy, to improve as well.

The research that currently exists and that was reviewed for this paper is at times divided drastically. The relationship between learning in the home and learning in the classroom is a topic that has long and extensively been explored. Some research suggests a strong correlation between parental involvement and academic achievement, where others suggest that the correlation is weak. There are also those who point to the schools for being a barrier between parents trying to be involved and the actual involvement taking place. There are many factors that are to be taken into account when investigating how parents involve themselves in their child’s lives academically. I will be grouping the research accordingly: students’ and parents’ perception of the outcomes of parental involvement; the school’s role in the act of parental participation, as discussed by the researchers; the actual or perceived barriers for parental involvement; and the overall findings on parental involvement and its negative, positive, or neutral effects on academic achievement.

Based on the existing research and the gaps in the literature, I will explore the perceptions elementary school teachers have on the effects of parental involvement on literacy achievement.
In this way, I can investigate the types of involvement the teachers perceive to be occurring, and how this involvement is yielding results in their classroom.

CHAPTER 3 – RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.0 Introduction (Chapter Overview)

In this chapter, I discuss the research methodology. This will provide information on the research approach and procedures, followed by the instruments used to collect data and the sampling criteria. Next, I will provide an in-depth look at participants and the sampling procedures, as well as the biographies of participants. Following that, the data analysis and ethical review procedures that were important to the success of my research will be explained. Both limitations and strengths in the research process will be thoroughly discussed, as they are significant in understanding the overall research process. I will conclude with an overview of the pivotal steps taken and the reasons for them, as well as what is to follow in proceeding chapters.

3.1 Research Approach & Procedures

This study took a qualitative approach, which offers an opportunity to understand human behaviour and institutions (Frankfort-Nachmias & Nachmias, 2008, p. 257) in a more personal and in-depth way. Specifically, I used a case study (Creswell, 2013) approach, which focused on the perspectives of three teachers over a set period of time. With this approach, my goal was to get to know participants as research partners so that I might gain a better insight into their beliefs and experiences within the classroom in regards to literacy and family involvement.

When investigating complex and multifaceted areas like the one in the current research study, it is beneficial to use qualitative research that allows those investigating the tools to collect
data effectively; data that cannot be narrowed down to a yes/no or numerical answer, as with quantitative research. Paired with a thorough literature search, qualitative research can provide meaningful and detailed data.

3.2 Instruments of Data Collection

The method of data collection that was utilized in this case study research used semi-structured interview protocols which allowed for the structure of specific questions that needed to be targeted for the research, but also allowed opportunity for the participants to elaborate. This method can “reduce the tendency of premature closure of data collection” (Gugiu & Rodriguez-Campos, 2007) by confirming the meaning of a participant’s answers and giving them space to explain and, in some instances, expand on the topic. If I had used a completely structured interview, I would have risked losing out on important supporting data.

3.3 Participants

I interviewed three full time elementary teachers from the Peel District School Board in Mississauga, Ontario. Each of the teachers had been teaching for more than 10 years and had experience.

3.3.1 Sampling Criteria

There was a set of criteria that the teachers being selected for this interview had to meet in order to benefit the study’s success. The teachers needed a minimum of three years teaching experience in order to ensure that the teacher has seen the effect that parental involvement has had on student literacy over time. It also provided insurance that they have experienced a wide range of family involvements in their students’ academics and that they were not basing it on one
or two experiences. The teachers in this study will all needed to be elementary school teachers (grades kindergarten to six), as that is the grade range being studied. Teachers participating in this study also needed to have literacy as a part of their evaluative year round curriculum, as that is a significant part of the study. Classroom grade teachers were thus targeted, as opposed to special education or resource teachers who may have valuable insights but are not required to evaluate literacy on a regular basis.

3.3.2 Sampling procedures

In recruiting my participants, I engaged in convenience sampling which “constituted [of a] non-random (non-probability) sampling” (Sedgwick, 2013, 1). I contacted teachers that I have worked with and/or had been suggested to me by other professionals. As I worked closely with teaching professionals, convenience sampling allowed me to use sources that I am already familiar with. I contacted the participants via email, explaining what the study is about and why I was interested in their involvement. Once they agreed, I scheduled interviews and provided them with a copy of the research questions I had prepared in advance. This allowed participants to think about the questions and their views and feelings on the topic before the interview took place.

During initial contact with participants, I discussed the ethical considerations being taken within this study, indicating that no children or families were to be identified specifically. Participants were also given pseudonyms in order to protect their views and opinions from affecting their professional or personal standing.
3.3.3 Participant Bios

My first participant, Diane, is a grade 1 teacher who has 25 years of teaching experience in the Peel District School Board. She has taught kindergarten to grade 3, and has had literacy experiences and assessment every year that she has been teaching.

My second participant, Sandy, has been a teacher for 26 years. She taught in the Jane and Finch area with the Toronto District school board, and fifteen years ago came to peel and has been at this particular school since. She is currently teaching grade 5, but has taught kindergarten, 3rd and 4th grade as well.

Carol, my final participant, has been teaching for 13 years, and has been at this particular school for 10 years. She has taught 4th grade the longest, but has had experiences with kindergarten and grade 6-8 as well.

3.4 Data Analysis

The interviews were tape recorded and transcribed. Following the transcription process, I coded the data using my key research questions as a guide and divided them into categories and then themes. Coding “in qualitative research seeks to describe faithfully important details of the phenomenon and to organize the data to identify underlying patterns” (Brent & Slusarz, 2003, p.281). Once these themes were identified I was able to identify their significance to the research and compare it to existing literature.
3.5 Ethical Review Procedures

Certain ethical considerations have been made in the study to avoid risks to participants. The names of all participants have been omitted and replaced with pseudonyms. This was done in order to protect the identities of those who have dedicated their time to this research. All details that may indicate particular schools or students and their families have been removed from the paper in order to remain confidential. There are no known risks in this study that would put any participants in a vulnerable position, however, the consent letter stated that participants have the right to refuse answering any questions and end the interview at any time if they feel the need. Following the interviews, all participants were provided a transcript of the interview, allowing them to review and clarify their statements or retract any statements if they wish, prior to analyzing the data.

Prior to conducting the interview, participants were asked to sign a consent letter (Appendix A) which states that they give their consent to be interviewed and audio-recorded. Additionally, this letter provided an overview of the research study, discusses ethical considerations and details the expectations of the participant (One 1-hour interview). The recorded interviews are stored on my password protected computer for up to 5 years, and will then be destroyed.

3.6 Methodological Limitations and Strengths

Because of ethical considerations, this study did not include interviews of children or their parents/families, as children are considered vulnerable persons and we never want to put our participants at risk of harm. Our research focuses on the teacher instead of child and family. In doing this, our study is limited to the perspective of one part of a puzzle. We do not hear
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whether the parents and children believe there is an effect on the child’s literacy achievement when parents are involved in their education. We also do not hear how often parents and children report the rate of involvement, or their perceived effects of that involvement, as other research reports (Crosby, Padak, Rasinski, Yildirim, 2015; Huwang, 2013; Senechal & LeFevre, 2002). This study is also limited to a small group of teachers which, because of the small sample size, cannot generalize an entire population of GTA teachers.

There is also a strength in focusing on teacher’s perspectives, as most existing literature focuses on parents and students’ perspectives and talks very little about the educators’ beliefs. Therefore, this current study is filling in a gap in the existing research. The fact that in-depth interviews are the main source of data collection gives me the advantage of obtaining a wider and deeper range of information than questionnaires would allow. It also gives our research partners, the teachers, the opportunity to have their voice heard and their opinions validated. We hear about their values and beliefs and provide a space for self-reflection.

3.7 Conclusion

In conclusion, I will took a qualitative research approach to the data collection process. Specifically, I used a case study semi-structured interview protocol which allowed for the most in-depth and specific answers. Because my research focuses on the effects of family involvement on literacy in the opinion of the teachers, it is important to allow for a platform for teachers to expand on their answers in order to really get their points across in an accurate way. Following the recorded interview process, which took place after consent had been given by each participant, the data was be coded, separated into themes, and compared to the existing research in literature. Next, in chapter 4, I will report the research findings.
CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

4.0 Introduction

This chapter fortifies the information collected from the three face to face interviews of the PDSB elementary school teachers, using the pseudonyms: Diane, Sandy and Carol. Throughout the analysis of the data, I found six overarching themes emerge: 1) Teachers believe literacy affects all other subjects and areas of life, 2) Teachers believe that involvement requires both academic support and emotional support to be effective, 3) Teachers believe that family involvement has a direct correlation to literacy achievement, 4) Teachers believe that there are barriers that families face that may deter their involvement, 5) Teachers believe that in general when families are not involved, negative consequences are likely to follow including lack of literacy achievement, poor self-esteem, trouble in all aspects of curriculum, 6) Teachers believe that communicating with parents is important. I will discuss each of these themes in-depth throughout this chapter.

4.1 Teachers believe literacy affects all other subjects and areas of life

In all three interviews, all teachers expressed their belief that literacy achievement affects all other academic subjects and also affects the child’s life in general. When asked about the importance of literacy, Diane said that literacy is “the most important because literacy filters into all of the other subject areas” and went on to say that the confidence that evolves out of literacy achievement affects all other areas of their lives. Sandy describes her current students as “avid readers” and discussed how that affects their overall attitude in academics and thus builds up their confidence. These responses correlate with the literature, as Kaniuka (2010) states that “in order to increase students’ self-concept, the focus for educators should be on improving
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academic achievement” (p. 186) in reference to reading. De Naeghel et al. (2012) describe that often the motivation for reading that students have is extrinsic motivation, such as approval of teacher, which drives their purpose for reading. Carol’s beliefs correlate with the literature. She expressed that “… [she] really feel that many students are very much externally motivated” when asked about students attitudes towards literacy. De Naeghel et al. go on to discuss that in order to create an intrinsic motivation, we must create positive climates in which students can read often and with choice. Carol stated firmly that reading will be the most important things for students to accomplish. She says,

I find that from my perspective when I’m trying to prepare kids for the next grade and what skills they need to move along, they need to be a reader. Because it impacts everything. It’s impacting math, science, social studies. But it so much impacts every aspect of their life.

Carol went on to relate that statement to her own children, with whom she still feels that reading will be the most significant factor for all other academics achievements and beyond. This attitude was reflected in all three teachers’ responses.

4.2 Teachers believe that involvement requires both academic support and emotional support to be effective

Diane, Sandy and Carol all emphasized the significance of parental involvement in having impact on literacy achievement, and beyond. They all specified that it must be more than just checking homework, and should involve emotional support. Diane spoke specifically of one student whose mother was very concerned about getting more academic work for their child but losing the ability to see that the child has a need beyond remedial work. She expressed that the
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child needs to feel that they are being valued within and outside of their academic work. She also cites an experience with a student whose family was very emotionally supportive. She says:

You can tell just by his attitude towards homework, even towards failure, and things like that – the things his parents have instilled in him and just being positive when he makes mistakes and just learning form it – he’s got such as healthy attitude towards that.

Sandy and Carol’s opinions reflect Diane’s. Sandy discussed how students whose families were not emotionally supportive often felt less confident in their academics and self-esteem. For example, if families are asking questions about their day, doing things together on weekends and other extra-curricular family experiences, Sandy feels that the student tends to perform better overall. Guzman, Hampden-Thompson, & Lippman (2013) support this belief with their research, stating that “speaking and generally spending time with them will have a positive impact on their achievement irrespective of the[ir] culture[e] or country” (261).

4.3 Teachers believe that family involvement has a direct correlation to literacy achievement

In all three interviews, the teacher expressed their strong belief that family involvement directly affects the literacy achievement of students. Carol spoke strongly about this when she described those students whose parents she knew were participating in their children’s at-home experiences, reading and otherwise. She said:

You can see it in their writing. You can see it in their ability to focus. You can see it in their patience. You can see it in their ability to sustain reading in the class. You can see they are making right choices in books. You can see that they are not wandering around
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the classroom flipping book, book, book. They have found a book. They may have found an author or a genre that they like and they get right to it. And even though you’ve gone over the 20 days of reading, which I do at the beginning of September to get the kids going and learning about what kinds of book they enjoy, but the kids who are already reading at home they don’t even need that, they already know.

Carol speaks very passionately about this. She said several times throughout the interview that reading is the root of all of the child’s future academic success and that parental involvement strengthens the skill. Similarly, Guzman et al. (2013) reveal that “across the 21 countries included in [their] study, in general, increased social and cultural communication with parents is associated with higher levels of student literacy” (258). All three teachers discussed their belief that involvement is not necessarily going to be homework help. Both Carol and Sandy, junior elementary teachers, shared that they rarely give homework because parents either do it for the child, or it does not get done. Diane, a grade 1 teacher, also stated that homework is not a priority in grade 1. All three did, however, have an at-home reading program that they encouraged both students and parents to take seriously. All three teachers stated that they believed children develop their reading and literacy skills when practicing with their grown-ups at home. Huang (2013) parallels these beliefs as the researcher shares that “children see reading as enjoyable and important when parents believe reading is a valuable activity within the family” (as cited in Baker, 2000).

Diane said in grade 1 parents are usually still helping with homework, but by grade two that participation begins to fizzle out. Diana says that she “prefer[s] they spent time doing fun things with their kids. They can do a little bit of homework, sure, but spend the time going out
with them and having fun instead.” She stated her belief that if parents are too focused on homework rather than involving themselves in other ways, the child can become burnt out and lose their motivation. Baeriswyl, Dumont, Moroni, Niggli, and Trautwein (2015) state that parents helping with homework remains the most controversial type of parental involvement. The researchers also “observed a high correlation between intrusive involvement and the quantity of parental help, indicating that greater amounts of parental help may be perceived as more intrusive by children” (427). They explained that the negative consequences may result from parents not knowing content thoroughly, being too overbearing, or using developmentally inappropriate technique.

When Sandy was asked if she believed if there was a difference in the reading/writing levels of students whose parents were involved in comparison to students whose parents were not, she answered, “Oh definitely, it’s higher, definitely higher. Because parents take an avid interest and show their kids that they are interested and ask questions”.

4.4 Teachers believe that there are barriers that families can face that may deter their involvement

Almost uniformly, all three teachers were able to empathize and identify with parents’ barriers when it comes to being involved with their child, both academically and otherwise. Diane shared that some clear barriers she finds that her students’ parents are facing are jobs that didn’t allow for much time at home, mental health, physical health, and language barriers. Sandy and Carol’s beliefs aligned with Diane’s. Sandy stated,

With our immigrant families, they themselves feel that they are not adequate to teach their child to read because they do not have the language, and I have always said to every
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parent, read in your language. It doesn't matter what language. They are hearing the language, they are hearing you reading, they are hearing you in your voice your love of reading.

Similarly, Carol stated that although language is a barrier, she always encourages families to read in their home language and to help them understand how important that is because Reading is reading. If parents don’t have the reading skills in the English language, they could be monitoring and reading in their home language… The dedicated time to sit down and do that is very difficult because of parents’ schedules, trying to earn a living to put food on the table. I think a lot of kids are being cared for by grandma who may not have the English literacy skills. So English literacy is a barrier.

Huang (2013) found that “parental involvement [is] a major factor in fostering children’s English language development and skills” (262), which supports what Carol and Sandy stated they believe about involvement, regardless of a parent/guardian’s ability to speak English. In essence, the emotional involvement that all three teachers felt was so fundamental may not be met due to barriers faced by individual families. Kim (2009) supports this gap being referred to, due to both language and cultural differences. The research finds that communication may be difficult between teacher and parent and that “minority parents do not like the formality of parent–teacher conferences, nor do they like the time restrictions of these conferences that prevent them from sharing what they know about their children with the teachers” (88). All three teachers have expressed that in interviews, there can be some disconnect because of language and that in some cases siblings are translating information between parent and teacher.
Diane warmly shared that “newcomer families have been really so eager to help their kids. It’s hard for them to communicate, but they want the best for their child and they want to do everything they can to help them” but adds, “I don’t know if they feel comfortable [reaching out] – I don’t know if they really know all of the avenues of communication”.

4.5 Teachers believe that in general when families are not involved, negative consequences are likely to follow including lack of literacy achievement, poor self-esteem, and trouble in all aspects of curriculum

Sandy, Carol, and Sue all shared anecdotes of particular students whose lives were so greatly impacted by their parents lack of involvement that their stories have stuck with them, in some cases, over many years. Sandy described a boy she had in her fourth grade class almost a decade ago. She said he was Canadian born, parents were both employed in 9-5 work, and at the end of the day they wanted to relax. They did not want to worry about school work “and it transpired in class. There was no help studying for tests. There was no motivation in class to do their best. So, I guess the self-esteem of that student was very low.” Sandy explained that his lunches were often lacking proper nutrition (doughnuts, potato chips), and that he was clearly hurting when he saw how involved other parents were in his classmates’ lives. “It really impeded his ability to learn and to do well.” She said. “The unfortunate thing is that after grade 9 he quit school. Because his parents were not interested.”

Diane discusses how she knows immediately when parent and child are not doing their reading at home, because it is obvious in their ability to read in class, to progress further and to work on other areas of the curriculum. All three teachers describe how low literacy affects low-self-esteem, and thus affects behaviours and impedes the ability for that child to learn.
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All three teachers expressed a belief that in some cases, students are able to persevere in spite of the lack of involvement by their families. Diane said that sometimes a student will just rise above, as she says is the case with one of her grade 2 students whose family situation is challenging. The mother of the child has been upfront in saying that she does not have any spare moments in a day to spend time reading at home with her son. Diane says that often he comes with half eaten lunches from days before and that his behaviour is very challenging in class. She does say, to her relief, that the student is doing well academically and indeed is one of the top two readers in the classroom. His brother who is in fifth grade is not doing well academically.

4.6 Teachers believe that communicating with parents is important

In all three interviews, the teachers explained that there was no particular initiative from the school to get parents more involved in areas of school. Each school has parent volunteers for pizza lunch day and school trips, but very little in the way of an invitation to be a part of the school’s initiatives itself. Carol discusses her school’s yearly family literacy night which the teachers organize to get families involved in the reading and writing program. She says a lot of it falls in the individual teachers themselves. Each of the three teachers have different systems for keeping parents involved. Diane has a weekly newsletter that she sends home, detailing what is happening in the classroom each week. She says “[she] think[s] it is so important in grade 1 and 2 to let parents know every week what they’re doing – because the kids can’t tell them and often parents are very interested in that and often like jump in and do an enriching task with the”

Diane and Carol both described the students’ agenda as the gateway to conversation, as both parent and teacher are checking them ideally every day. Diane, Carol, and Sandy say that random phone calls home to notify parents of positive things their children are accomplishing in
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class is very important, so that the basis of conversation does not always stem from the negative. Sandy uses a website called *Class Dojo* that she updates daily for parents to keep tabs on what is happening in the classroom. It is a way to discuss the overall classroom activity as well as some one on one communication about each individual child do the family.

When asked what type of advice they have for new teachers who would like to involve families, all three teachers had a great deal to say. Overwhelmingly, all three felt that the child’s school experience is more successful when there is positive open communication between teacher and parent. Diane says,

I think the biggest thing is to really have that communication at the beginning of the year.

I will phone each parent at the beginning of the year after maybe second or third week of school and say *do you have any questions for me?* Start off with open communication with the parents – start off by sending positives home with them.

Carol shares similar thoughts. She says it is important to “try and provide that outreach. Make those attempts to do the reading program, even if it is only going to be 30%. That’s 30% of your class doing it.” It was clear that the teachers could see the benefits of parental involvement and in fact wanted to support it in their own ways. Each teacher had a slightly different approach but overall, the importance of family communication was important for the success of each individual student. Sandy closed with this advice to future teachers:

Be honest. Be honest with the families. Don’t sugar-coat anything. Tell it as it is. If you are honest with the parents then they will work with you in dealing with their son or their daughter. Be friendly, just be yourself. Be who you are. Show that their child matters. That's all any parent wants.
4.7 Overview

Carol, Sandy, and Diane all expressed a belief that family involvement in children’s academics and life overall have a direct and strong effect on the child’s literacy achievement. All three teachers described experiences they have had which provided them with their justifications for these beliefs. Students who were avid readers and enthusiastic learners in reading and writing almost always had families who were involved in their academics and beyond. All of the teachers also attributed strong self-esteem in school with family involvement. They expressed that without the emotional support and involvement, the child would likely struggle academically and socially. All three teachers stated a belief that reading is the most important skill to master in elementary school and that parents need to be reading with their child at home. The three teachers also expressed their perceived barriers that families may face that may deter them from becoming involved, such as job obligations, mental health, and, most commonly, language barriers. Carol, Sandy, and Diane stated passionately that there is a strong need for parent-teacher communication which facilitates parent involvement. Their desire to support families was palpable in their interviews, as they all voiced their belief that with the academic support of families, their active interest in their children, and an emotional responsiveness, children stand a very good chance to successfully grow in their literacy achievement.
CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

5.0 Introduction to the chapter

In this final chapter, I present an overview of my findings in relation to the existing literature and discuss the implications of these findings on teachers and their students. I then provide recommendations for schools and teachers. Finally, I provide suggestions for further research and hopes for change in the role teachers play in fostering family involvement.

5.1 Overview of key findings and their significance

The insights that the three teachers in this study provided suggest that there are a myriad of influences on literacy achievement in the elementary years but that family involvement does have a tangible effect on it. The teachers came from different backgrounds and were teaching different grades, but there were many similarities in their beliefs. Diane, Sandy and Carol all expressed emphatically that literacy achievement affects all areas of a students’ academics and their lives in general. This put into perspective how heavily each of them weighed literacy in their own classrooms. Fan and Chen (2011) discuss how parents’ expectations for how their children will do has a positive effect on how they will achieve in the classroom. This also correlates with what the teachers shared about their belief that involvement may not mean attending every school activity but being emotionally involved.

All three of the teachers described their belief that school work had to be done in class because homework has traditionally been an unsuccessful method for student practice, for many reasons, some being lack of completion or over involvement from families. In their research Chen et al. (2009) describes that students continue to do poorly with homework supervision because the help is generally coming too late. The students are experiencing low self-esteem and
it is not improving with parental monitoring of homework. The teachers also expressed that many of these students do not always have an adult family member at home to involve themselves in their child’s homework and socio-emotional experiences. Many family members have work hours that clash with the child’s time spent at home and barriers such as language and cultural misunderstanding may be a reason that families are not as involved as they may want to be.

In all instances, the teachers expressed that they were not following a school mandated family inclusion model, but were taking it upon themselves to engage in parent-teacher communication when they did. All teachers described a lack of opportunities within the school for parents and families to be involved, barring a few family evenings throughout the school year. Diane, Sandy and Carol all stated that family involvement was extremely important for a child’s literacy development and that they encourage students and families to read and interact in their home language as much as they can. The teachers all shared personal stories of students whose literacy achievement was low, and consequently, their other curriculum subjects and self-esteem were low. They attributed some of this struggle to a lack of parent/family involvement.

5.2 Implications

The teachers interviewed all discussed the fact that there was no programming put in place to incorporate families into the school. Although we discussed involvement as both academic and social/emotional, most of the barriers that teachers perceived families to experience appeared to be in regards to school involvement. The barriers discussed most frequently in the interviews were irregular work hours, language barriers and a lack of
understanding in the school itself and the specific curriculum components. The perceptions of these teachers are in line with much of the existing research in the field. As previously discussed, Adamski et al. (2009) acknowledge that language barriers for new immigrants, clashing of cultures, and an inability to fully understand school rules and expectations are some reasons that families do not become involved in the school and/or their child’s academics at home.

The gap between the child and their family members is only widened if the system continues to prevent these families from feeling comfortable accessing the schools. Lahai (2008) also discussed factors such as lack of available child care as a reason that parents may not be able to access the school. Diane, Sandy and Carol discussed this in their interviews. Based on the interviews of these three teachers and the reviews of the literature, a board wide initiative is needed that bridges the gaps between school and family. Families need to feel comfortable participating, and to do this they must have an understanding of the programming and opportunities for them in order to be a part of the school community. Programming must be put in place that provides families with both in-person support and flexible support in the form of phone and email services. These services ideally are to translate and culturally relate information to families that diminish the misunderstandings that are currently preventing this involvement. If we are to recognize that families have significant impacts on their children’s literacy achievement, as concluded through a comprehensive literature review and three in-depth interviews, then the school system as a whole needs to start establishing an attitude that supports the family role in the school, in their child’s academics, and emphasizes their positive impact on all aspects of their child’s life.
5.3 Recommendations

Based on the information gathered in this research study, specific recommendations are being made to involved families more successfully.

**Recommendations:**

- *To increase the opportunities within each school for all families to become involved.* As discussed in the interviews, often the only opportunities families have to be “involved” in the school are through parent teacher interviews and occasionally through agenda messages and phone calls. Culturally relevant classrooms can invite family members into the classroom to share aspects of their lives, allowing students to learn about them and in turn allow the family members to learn about the classroom and learning goals.

- *Decrease the misunderstandings between school and families.* Families may be reluctant to involve themselves in their child’s academics if they feel that their language, for example, is a deterrent to their child’s learning. As all three teachers expressed, parents should know that reading and speaking in their home language is very beneficial to literacy achievement overall and this should be encouraged.

- *Provide resources in and out of the school to support families.* Newcomers to Canada are not always aware of the supports that may already be in place for them and schools should invite families to explore what the school has to offer and what the greater community can do. This may be providing literature from the school library or setting families up with orientations for the public library.

- *An increase in professional development for family studies and inclusive practices.* Often teachers are urged to and do engage in professional development for inclusion of students
Teachers’ perceptions of the effects of family involvement on literacy achievement in the classroom, but there is an apparent need for teachers to have a deeper understanding of how to create inclusive classrooms and school climates that involve parents and families.

5.4 Limitations and areas for further research

There are several limitations to this study that I would like to discuss. The sample size of this study was small, with three elementary school teachers within one school board. Because this sample size was small, the data collected cannot be used to generalize for an entire population of elementary teachers in the Peel District School board. The interviews were all between 45 and 60 minutes long and thus provided a general overview rather than an in-depth exploration of teacher practice and experience. The purpose of the study was to offer teacher’s perspectives on the effects of family involvement on literacy achievement, which successfully took place in all three interviews.

This study provided insights that there is still a great deal more research needed in this area to enforce plans for action. For instance, two of the three teachers were able to identify students who struggled without family involvement but also students who were able to persevere academically without family involvement. This suggests that other factors may have equal or greater influence on literacy achievement. There was also the issue that many of the students within these schools were from predominantly low-income, English as a second language households. Other school boards in different areas of the Greater Toronto Area and the province as a whole may yield different results. Some of the literature investigated family involvement or lack thereof in children with special needs, which is something that did not come up in the current research study. I have listed some recommended considerations for further research:
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- **Study boards beyond the Peel District School board**
- **Compare low socio economic and higher socio economic neighbourhoods**
- **Investigate both ELL families and fluent English speaking families**
- **Investigate schools who have family involvement initiatives and compare to schools without these initiatives**
- **Investigate the involvement and/or barriers to involvement in parents/family members of children with special needs**

### 5.5 Concluding comments

Literacy achievement is affected by family involvement in the student’s life; these interviews and the existing research has made this a fact. This involvement may appear as homework help, test preparation, asking questions, going on weekend trips, and celebrating both big and small victories. Teachers believe that the effect is significant and is necessary in most cases in order for students to persevere in literacy and other subject areas. The concern now is how will we as teachers ensure that we are doing everything we can to involve parents. There will always be circumstances beyond our control in which some students’ families are not going be involved, for certain reasons. This may not be something that we can change, but we can definitely create a system that allows families the ample opportunities to become involved and to know that their role is welcomed and valued. Particularly in the Peel District school board, the population is made up of families coming in from all around the world and schools must be able to foster relationships and create awareness about just how necessary these relations are. By fostering the relationships between school and family, and family and child, students have a greater chance to achieve full potential. The literature reveals that families want this, and this
research study reveals that teachers want this. And since we know that students need this, there’s really no excuse.
APPENDICES

Appendix A: Letter of Consent for Interview (TEMPLATE ONLY)

Date: ___________________

Dear ________________,

I am a graduate student at OISE, University of Toronto, and am currently enrolled as a Master of Teaching candidate. I am studying the effects of family involvement on students’ literacy for the purposes of investigating an educational topic as a major assignment for our program. I think that your knowledge and experience will provide insights into this topic.

I am writing a report on this study as a requirement of the Master of Teaching Program. My course instructor who is providing support for the process this year is Dr.___________________. My research supervisor is _____________________. The purpose of this requirement is to allow us to become familiar with a variety of ways to do research. My data collection consists of a 50-60 minute interview that will be tape-recorded. I would be grateful if you would allow me to
interview you at a place and time convenient to you. I can conduct the interview at your office or workplace, in a public place, or anywhere else that you might prefer.

The contents of this interview will be used for my assignment, which will include a final paper, as well as informal presentations to my classmates and/or potentially at a conference or publication. I will not use your name or anything else that might identify you in my written work, oral presentations, or publications. This information remains confidential. The only people who will have access to my assignment work will be my research supervisor and my course instructor. You are free to change your mind at any time, and to withdraw even after you have consented to participate. You may decline to answer any specific questions. I will destroy the tape recording after the paper has been presented and/or published which may take up to five years after the data has been collected. There are no known risks or benefits to you for assisting in the project, and I will share with you a copy of my notes to ensure accuracy.

Please sign the attached form, if you agree to be interviewed. The second copy is for your records. Thank you very much for your help.

Yours sincerely,

Researcher name: _________________________________

Phone number, email: _______________________________
Instructor’s Name: ____________________________________________

Phone number: ________________ Email: _______________________

Research Supervisor’s Name: ___________________________________

Phone #: ______________________ Email: _______________________

Consent Form

I acknowledge that the topic of this interview has been explained to me and that any questions that I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction. I understand that I can withdraw at any time without penalty.

I have read the letter provided to me by ______________________(name of researcher) and agree to participate in an interview for the purposes described.

Signature: __________________________________________

Name (printed): ________________________________

Date: ____________________
Appendix B: Interview questions

Background

- Can you tell me how long you have been teaching and how long you have been at this particular school?
- What grades have you taught and for how long did you teach each grade?
- Have you had any professional development in the area of literacy specifically?
- How important do you feel literacy is in the elementary years?
- What factors do you think influence literacy achievement the most?
- Does the school have an initiative to involve families in the school?
- How important do you feel the involvement of the family is in regards to literacy achievement?

Personal strategies and experiences

- Do you have any specific strategies for involving families in their child’s education?
  - Do you feel that these strategies have been successful?
- In your words, what do you consider family involvement to look like?

- On average, do you feel that the majority of families are involved in their child’s learning?
  - How involved do you believe they are?
- Can you tell me about a specific student you have taught or are currently teaching whose family you believe to be very involved in their learning?
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- Can you tell me a little bit about his or her background?
- In what ways are their family members involved in their learning?
- Have you seen a level of improvement in their literacy achievement (reading, writing) with the involvement of their families?

- Can you tell me about a student you have taught or are currently teaching whose family you do not believe to be very involved in their learning/academics?
  - Can you tell me a little bit about his or her background?
  - Have you drawn any comparisons between this student and students’ whose families you do believe to be involved?

- If you compare these two students, do you see a difference in their academic achievement?
  - Do you attribute that difference to the level of parental involvement in their learning?

- How do you measure literacy achievement in your classroom?

- In your experience, do you find that families who are very involved in their child’s academics puts pressure on them?

- Do you feel that parents who are very involved can impact their children’s literacy achievement negatively?

- Would you consider one on one reading between child and parent/guardian, outside of homework, to be a form of involvement in their learning?

Beliefs

- What do you believe is an appropriate level of involvement?
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- Hours per day or several times per week
- To be adequately involved to make a positive impact, what do parents need to do?

- Do you believe that parents want to be involved with their child’s education?
- Do you believe that the school provides enough opportunity to allow for involvement from the families?
- Do you believe there is a difference between parental involvement in homework completion and parental involvement in other ways, such as day trips, discussions on interests, reading for pleasure?
- Do you think one type of involvement is more important than the other?
- Do you see any parental involvement in learning as harmful or detrimental to the child’s learning?
- Do you believe that you have implemented opportunities in your own classroom for parental involvement (ie. Communication between yourself and families via emails, letters, or phone calls and/or updates on what is happening weekly/monthly in the classroom)
- Do you believe there is a difference in literacy achievement between your students whose families are involved in their learning and those students whose families do not appear to be involved in their learning?
- What barriers do you believe some of your students families might be facing when it comes to becoming involved in their child’s learning/academics?
- Do you believe there is a positive association between parental involvement and literacy achievement?
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- Do you think families feel comfortable involving themselves in their child’s academics?
- Do you find most parents feel comfortable reaching out to teachers or school staff to become involved or to understand their child’s learning? (i.e., Families who may not understand the topic their child has homework on – would they feel comfortable calling or emailing to clarify?)
- Do you feel that on average families believe that it is their responsibility to become involved in their child’s learning?
- Do you believe that some parents feel that it is not their responsibility to become involved with their child’s academics and is solely the responsibility of you, the teacher?

Closing

- Do you have any advice for teachers who are working with or attempting to work with families of their students?
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References


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