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Primary Caregivers' Reports of Early Literacy Skills and Supporting Children's Literacy

Success Through Home-School Collaboration

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Abstract

Two kindergarten parents were interviewed about the home literacy environment and effective home-school collaborative practices. Both parents identified as being key contributors to their child's literacy success through frequently reading to their child, providing access to books within the home, and fostering a sense of learning and reading interest in their child. Both parents gave insights into the communication they have with their child's teacher and the resources that are provided by the school to support academic or literacy related needs of their kindergarteners. The interest of this study was to obtain the perspectives of kindergarten parents about the current home-based literacy practices and communication between home and school. Participants acknowledged the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on their child's education and the challenges that virtual learning presented.

Keywords: home literacy environment, home-school collaboration, early literacy success, COVID-19 pandemic

Introduction

The importance of developing literacy skills cannot be overstated as it is integral to the essential foundation of education and is arguably the most important thing a school can offer a student in support of their academic success. Learning to read posits many beneficial outcomes such as improvement of vocabulary, comprehension, critical thinking skills, writing skills, focus and concentration as well as social understanding (Kozak & Recchia, 2019; Mol & Bus, 2011; Sparks, Patton, & Murdoch, 2014). Based on previous data from national reading assessments, overall reading performance scores have steadily decreased among both low-performance readers and high-performance readers (NAEP, 2019). This data illustrates a need for literacy achievement gaps to be addressed both within the home and school environments. The home literacy environment has been discussed in much of the literature as a factor that contributes to later literacy success (Alston-Abel & Berninger, 2018; Anderson, et.al., 2019; Niklas & Schneider, 2015).

Research indicates that exposing children to literacy, specifically when parents read to their children and provide books within the home, positively correlates with an increase in a child's interest in reading and predicts the development of early literacy skills (Hume, Lonigan, & McQueen, 2015; Martini & Sénéchal, 2012). It is apparent in much of the research that parents are a valuable and knowledgeable resource for schools and can help school's to better understand a child's current and future academic needs (Dickinson et. al., 1998).

Problem Statement

To further explore reading performance data, The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) conducted a national assessment on reading progress among fourth and eighth-grade students. When compared to 2017, results in 2019 indicated average reading scores were lower for both fourth and eighth-grade students (NAEP, 2019). When scores were interpreted across reading performance percentiles, it was found that reading scores were lower for lower-performers and higher for higher performers. When compared to the first results of the assessment data in 1992, the scores of the lowest performers at both grades in 2019 were not significantly different, while the rest of the performers showed an improvement in overall reading progress (National Assessment of Educational Progress, 2019).

According to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) 2018 results from the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) on reading performance of fifteen-year-olds in seventy-four countries, the United States is behind at least nine other countries when comparing a mean score on reading performance (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2018).

In order to take some of the initial steps to improve reading achievement, in 1997, the U.S Congress advocated for a review of research and developed the *Report of the National Reading Panel: Teaching Children to Read* (NICHD, 2000). However, the NICHD did not address the implications of early literacy instructional practices and therefore the National Early Literacy Panel was composed in 2002 to further explore the

development of early literacy skills in children ages zero to five (National Early Literacy Panel, 2002).

Taken together, reading performance has declined over the years and lower performance readers have not significantly improved in reading ability when compared to higher performance readers. There have been many steps taken in order to improve reading outcomes and reduce the gap between lower performance readers and higher performance readers. Within this research, it is important to consider the factors that influence a child's reading achievement both in and outside of the school environment and ultimately gain a better understanding of how school and home can best collaborate in order to best support early literacy skills. It is important to note that throughout this paper the terms 'parent' and 'primary caregiver' are used interchangeably.

This research will also take into account the current worldwide Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic that is affecting the way instructional practices are being delivered. In March of 2020, many schools nationwide were forced to close schools unexpectedly due to COVID-19. In the Fall of 2020, many schools opted to give primarily virtual instruction, therefore potentially affecting the role of parents or primary caregivers in supporting their child's academic needs. This research aims to capitalize on the knowledge base of instructional and collaborative practices between the school and primary caregivers in order to better support emerging literacy skills for young children.

Predictors of Literacy Success

Researchers from the National Early Literacy Panel examined factors that promote the development of children's early literacy skills. Researchers found that

reading and writing skills developed before the age of five have a strong and predictive relationship with later conventional literacy skills (Lonigan, & Shanahan, 2009). Six variables were found to be significantly correlated with later literacy success and maintained their predictive power when variables such as IQ and socioeconomic status (SES) were accounted for. These variables include alphabet knowledge, phonological awareness, rapid automatic naming of letters or digits, rapid automatic naming of objects or colors, writing letters, and phonological memory (Lonigan, & Shanahan, 2009).

Dickinson, et. al., (1998) relied primarily on parental reports of emerging literacy skills before preschool years as a later predictor of literacy success. Researchers asked maternal parents a variety of questions regarding home support for emergent literacy (e.g., Do you read to your child?) as well as questions related to emergent literacy skills (e.g., Can your child recognize and name letters?). Participants of this study were evaluated using the *Wide Range Achievement Test (WRAT)* at both the kindergarten and first-grade level to assess literacy success. Results indicate that parental report data predicted positive literacy-related variables in grade one. Routine use of parental reports by schools establishes positive efforts in helping understand children's needs and abilities and in addition, establishes a relationship with parents as a knowledgeable resource about their children (Dickinson, et. al., 1998).

Reading Interest

Literacy interest presents as a complex construct that is not easily captured by a single measure. Hume, Lonigan, and McQueen (2015) found children's reading interests positively correlated with how often parents exposed children to reading and or print but

not with parent teaching (e.g., corrective feedback while reading). Furthermore, exposure to literacy was found to be important to the growth of literacy interest with little evidence supporting parent-teaching practices contributing to literacy interest. Parent practices such as exposure to literacy (i.e., reading more to children, providing more books and reading in front of children) are important in promoting children's literacy interests.

Martini and Sénéchal (2012) examined the relationship between parent teaching, expectations, and child interest in learning literacy skills at home. Researchers found that a child's interest in reading, after controlling for parent expectations and teaching, was a predictor in the development of early literacy skills. Parents who reported teaching literacy tended to have higher expectations for their child's literacy knowledge. Taken together, the knowledge gained from a child's home literacy environment, specifically parental reports of literacy, could facilitate partnerships between home and school and further support the early literacy needs of children.

Home Literacy Environment

It is no question that a child's learning and achievement in school depends on several factors both within and outside of school. When looking at what influences a child's reading success outside of school, the child's home environment plays an important role. In particular, a child's home literacy environment influences early competencies in reading (Niklas & Schneider, 2015). Examples of elements within the home literacy environment include the reading behavior of parents, the frequency a child is read to, the total number of books, as well as the number of children's books in the home (Niklas, & Schneider, 2015).

Shared reading practices set the context for later literacy learning and can provide rewarding book experiences that promote story comprehension, vocabulary, and language development (Blewitt et. al., 2009). In addition to early literacy development, shared book reading can also impact emotional development by strengthening attachment to parents or caregivers through the interactions around books (Justice & Pullen, 2003). Shared book reading is defined as an adult reading to or being read to by a child. A study by Anderson, Atkinson, Swaggerty and O'Brien (2019) examined the relationship between home-based shared book reading practices and a child's literacy skills when beginning kindergarten. Researchers sent home a parent survey and found that those with higher household income and higher parental education were more likely to report reading with their child three or more times a week. Socioeconomic status as well as parent education level, are found to be contributory factors when considering the frequency and likelihood a child will be read to. Intuitively, children who are read to more frequently are more likely to ask to be read to, enjoy looking at books on their own, and have favorite books than children who are read to less frequently.

In addition to the home literacy environment, factors such as family context, SES, and family resources are important to examine. In a study by Aikens and Barbarin, (2008), researchers investigated the reading trajectories of children in different socioeconomic backgrounds, from kindergarten to third grade. Researchers found children who came from higher SES backgrounds, had higher initial reading achievement and more rapid reading growth when beginning kindergarten. The results suggest the relation between SES and a child's initial reading competencies is mediated by the home literacy environment. Due to SES being a fixed or uncontrollable factor within a child's

environment, approaches to remediate SES gaps should be considered. Home-based interventions can reduce the adverse effects of family mediators.

Home-Based Interventions

In the school setting, resources are available to teach children to decode text and read with fluency, and more complex skills are needed in order to comprehend text. If the school instruction is not successful in developing reading skills in children, then home-based interventions are another area of support in a child's reading success. A study by Hindin et. al., (2007) examined the effectiveness of an in-home repeated-reading intervention on reading achievement in eight low performing second-grade children. Researchers looked at whether the intervention improved children's reading accuracy, fluency, and literacy skills when reading independently. The primary strategy parents used when helping their children during the reading intervention was to pronounce an unknown word. Results of the study were measured via pre- and post- design and indicated that participants made fewer reading errors and increased reading fluency after the intervention.

Within any community, there are families that require more support to access a higher quality shared reading environment. With this, parents have their own conflicts that are likely to impede their ability to successfully spend time reading with their child. Families who are educationally or socio-economically disadvantaged may not prioritize reading due to a variety of different reasons. Families who have children with behavioral, attention, language, or literacy difficulties may not prioritize reading. Fortunately, there are many non-intensive and inexpensive home-based literacy resources available to

families through online resources and resources within the community. Navigating these resources, however, may be overwhelming for parents without initial guidance. Parents, schools, and community resources play a crucial role in the development of a child's reading skills, interests, and the navigation or potential resources that support literacy success.

School and Home Collaboration

There are differing theoretical perspectives on the influence of external environments on family functioning and human development. One of the most well-known perspectives in psychological research is Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems framework theory. Bronfenbrenner's (1986) theory states that as a child develops, the interaction within a child's environment influences their physical and cognitive growth. Each system within the child's environment differs in proximity to the child yet nonetheless, each system affects the child's developmental trajectory. A child does not develop within a vacuum, rather with the support of family and the surrounding community. With this theory in mind, it is important to understand the impact of a child's environment including school, home, and community in their development both intellectually and physically. Interactions between a child's home and school environment can play a crucial role in the maintenance of a child's educational success.

In a study by Cox (2005), home-school collaboration interventions were found to be effective in helping achieve positive changes in academic performance and school-related behavior. Researchers determined that home-school collaboration differs from the term 'parent involvement'. Home-school collaboration involves the flow of information

as a two-way form of communication from school to home as opposed to a one-way communication of information. Joint involvement from both parent and school personnel is critical in establishing a reliable form of communication, achieving similar student-oriented goals, and sharing power. Historically, research has focused on home and school as independent systems rather than overlapping systems. The literature began to change in the 1990s to view the education of students as a shared responsibility between schools and families instead of the primary responsibility of a singular entity.

Regarding home-school collaboration practices, McCarthey (2000), constructed strategies aimed at improving a child's literacy skills at both home and school. Strategies include having parents keep a portfolio documenting their child's literacy growth and sharing this information with teachers, home visits to gather information about a families' home literacy practices, and sending home books and other literacy materials.

Researchers Alston-Abel and Berninger (2018), conducted a longitudinal study exploring the relationship between home literacy practices and home-school collaboration through a consultation lens. A parent home literacy questionnaire was sent home to students in kindergarten through third grade. Reading and writing achievement was measured through the administration of the Wechsler Individual Achievement Test-Second Edition (WIAT-II). Results yielded consultation tips for educational practitioners such as, asking parents about home literacy practices, listening to what they share, paying attention to writing as well as reading, and encouraging parent involvement in their child's literacy learning. These findings indicate the strong importance of the type of information that can be gleaned from parental literacy reports and using home and school as a collaborative tool in aiding the literacy success of young students.

Rationale for the Current Study

Many benefits can be gained from parental reports of the literacy practices within the home as well as collaborative practices between home and school. Home-school collaboration is effective in helping achieve desired school outcomes and parental reports show valuable insight regarding early literacy development (Cox, 2005; Dickinson & De Temple,1998). There is potential for school systems to emphasize the importance of using parental or primary caregiver's reports of early literacy and engage in an effective form of collaboration. However, there is a need for a better understanding of the current collaborative practices between home and school and the primary caregiver's reports of the home literacy environment. Additionally, it is also important to understand how to best use this information to benefit parent or primary caregiver, school, and student. The goal of this study is to identify current collaboration practices between kindergarten teachers and primary caregivers regarding promoting the early literacy needs of kindergarteners. Specifically, this study aims to answer the following research questions:

Research Questions:

1. What is the primary caregiver's view of his or her role in the development of literacy skills in their child?
2. What sorts of behavior do primary caregivers see within the home environment that might be influenced by literacy activities?
3. How can schools and primary caregivers best communicate to support early literacy skills?

4. How has the primary caregiver's role in supporting their child's academic needs changed due to the COVID-19 pandemic?

5. Do primary caregivers perceive kindergarten teachers taking intentional steps to increase literacy with their child?

Methodology

Information was gathered by conducting a semi-structured interview with kindergarten parents or primary caregivers, asking their perspective on their current home literacy practices as well as their collaborative practices with their child's school and insights on collaborative practices both before COVID-19 pandemic and during COVID-19 pandemic. The interview included questions regarding the parent's demographics, whether they read to their child, what kind of communication they have with their child's school, and whether their child's school recommends literacy resources to support the development of literacy skills. The information that was obtained from these interviews was used to identify the potential need for kindergarten teachers and parents to collaborate to support a child's literacy needs and continue maintenance and growth in the development of early literacy skills.

Participants

Participants were recruited through local public school's kindergarten programs. Participants were parents or the primary caregiver of kindergarten students. This study had a total of two participants. Participation in the study was voluntary and consent was obtained from participants. The study obtained information from willing participants from one school within Albemarle County Public Schools in the state of Virginia for the

2020-2021 academic year. Participants were recruited through an email sent out by the student's teacher or word of mouth. An email to recruit participants can be found in Appendix C. Both participants reported speaking both English and Spanish at home with Spanish being the first language for the parent.

Procedure

The data collection method consisted of a semi-structured phone interview. The interview took approximately 30 minutes to complete. The interview consisted of 23 free response questions and are listed in Appendix D. The questions were derived from the literature review as well as questionnaires used in previous research investigations (e.g., Boudreau, 2005; Dickinson & De Temple, 1998; Marvin & Ogden, 2000):

First, five questions were asked about the family background and context, followed by six questions on the primary caregiver's view of his or her role in the development of early literacy skills in their child. Three questions about the types of behavior seen by primary caregivers within the home that might be influenced by literacy activities were asked. Five questions about how school and home can best communicate to support early literacy skills were asked. These were followed by two questions about how the primary caregiver's role in supporting their child's academic needs may or may not have changed due to COVID-19 and two questions about the primary caregiver's perception of whether their child's teacher takes intentional steps with them to increase literacy with their child.

The researcher read aloud all questions to the participants and typed their responses in a secure online document. At the conclusion of the interviews, the

participants were thanked for their time and willingness to participate in the research study. It should be noted that the interviews were conducted at least one month after Albemarle County Public Schools allowed more options for in-person instruction and both participant's kindergartners were attending in-person instruction at the time of the interview. Albemarle County Public Schools shut-down in March of 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic and in the Fall of 2020 offered limited in-person instruction while remaining primarily virtual to the general student population. In the Spring of 2021, in-person options were offered with more opportunities for younger, kindergarten through third grade students, to receive in-person instruction.

Data Analysis

Data was analyzed using classical content analysis (Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2008) and responses were recorded in the form of field notes. This method involved recording the participant's questionnaire responses and determining the frequency of themes used within each response. Themes are used to gain a better understanding of the home literacy environment and the current home-school collaboration practices across participant responses. Qualitative data was obtained from participants free responses of the interview questions (Appendix D). Due to the study only having two participants, limited themes and patterns were obtained. The results are discussed in a more case by case basis and themes are noted when applicable.

Results

Table 1

Demographic Information from Participants

Participant	Occupation	Adults living in the home	Siblings in Elementary School	Internet Access at home	Personal Reading Behaviors
1	Staff member at a Public School	2	1 older sibling	Yes	Reads daily. Reads books and enjoys writing. Has published a book.
2	Researcher at University	2	1 older sibling	Yes	Reads daily. Reads books, blog posts and news magazines, primarily non-fiction material.

What is the parent's or primary caregiver's view of his or her role in the development of literacy skills in their child?

Both participants reported being active members in the role of the development of their child's literacy skills. Both participants reported reading to their child every day or every night, that they began reading at an early age, and that their child enjoys being read to. For example, Participant 1 stated:

I started reading to them when they were 1-year-old. We read books that were simpler with a lot of pictures, her older sibling likes comic books. My child looks forward to reading but wants to sometimes watch more T.V, I cut off the T.V for reading time to help my child relax and fall asleep. In kindergarten, I have seen

improvements in reading and that [improvements] has happened naturally. I often request that my child reads instructions to a remote for example or how to put a toy together.

When asked if the participants thought it was important to read to their child and have books in the home, both participants gave equal agreement to both questions. Both participants made comments about the fact that reading helps their child learn more vocabulary and helps their child see how letters connect on a page. Both participants reported having an ample number of children's books in their home and that they felt grateful for the number of books and other literacy resources available to their child. Participant 2 commented: "Reading is the best way to talk to them [their child] and expand their vocabulary. Reading also helps them to become more curious about new subjects and develop critical thinking skills all while becoming more aware of their surroundings." Participant 1 made a comment, "Because of the pandemic I feel guilty for all of the technology usage or keeping my children entertained with technology; however, I try as often as possible to encourage my children to read based on their interests."

Participants were asked how has reading to their child changed now that they are in kindergarten. Both participants alluded to the fact that both them and their children are glad to be back in in-person instruction. Participant 2 stated:

I am trying to get my child to read more. If I compare my kindergartener to the older sibling, based off the pandemic and education from home, my kindergartner might be a little bit behind [regarding obtaining literacy skills] But with in-person [instruction] things have gotten better. I encourage my kindergartener to read to

me because I want her to be able to read on her own. I read a page and then pass it off to my child and I can see her interest is slowly increasing with lots of encouragement.

When asked if others in the home read to their child, Participant 1 responded "the older sibling will sometimes read to my kindergartner" and Participant 2 responded "her Dad will read to her about once a month but does so in a monotone voice, so I am the preferred reader." Additionally, participants were asked if their child enjoys other forms of media such as TV or video games and whether they enjoy this with their child or if media activities are consumed independently. Participant 2 responded, "No video games but my kindergartner will mainly with watch YouTube videos with their sibling. The YouTube videos sometimes involve others reading to them which is a great exposure especially if we do not have access or have not yet bought the particular children's book that is being read in the video." Participant 1 responded, "My child enjoys playing video games, we often watch TV together and it can sometimes be hard to pull my child away from TV for nightly reading time."

Both participants view their role as an important aspect of their parental responsibility. Both participants reported that supporting their child as they develop in early literacy skills is way to enhance and build upon future literacy skills.

What sorts of behavior do parents or primary caregivers see within the home environment that might be influenced by literacy activities?

Both participants reported that their child likes to read on their own, either after some encouragement or depending on the subject of the book. Participant 1 stated:

If it is a comic book, my child will read this over and over. A book isn't too

appealing to him without pictures or with too many words. Since he is in

kindergarten and is just starting out [reading] it can be a little stressful if he

messes a word up. He will sometimes grab the book from my hand and will try to

read the book so I can see that he is wanting to learn.

When asked if the participant's child enjoys spending time looking at books or

enjoys school Participant 2 reported, "my kindergartner needs to be motivated to read but

does enjoy reading when I am close by. She loves school but hated it when it was online

and was always asking "are we done yet?" while in Zoom class." Participant 1 reported,

"my child sometimes likes to look at books on his own, I often have to hide the tablet

otherwise he will want to be on the tablet. I think the *Epic* app is a great app to have

because there are so many books to choose from. My child is usually shy at first in school

but is enjoying learning and sharing what he learns with family."

Both participants reported behaviors within the home environment that might

influence the early literacy skills by using technology to help expose their child to

additional literacy resources. Both participants reported that their child desires to be read

to and will request it during bedtime. One participant reported that it is difficulty to pull

their child away from the T.V or tablet and instead engage in literacy related activities.

How can schools and parents or primary caregivers best communicate to support

early literacy skills?

Multiple questions were asked of the participants about how the school and home

can best communicate to best support kindergarteners' early literacy skills. Both

participants indicated that because the school year was so atypical, that communication was lagging between home and school but there was an overall understanding that everyone was doing the best they could. When asked how often the participant is in communication with their child's teacher and what form of communication is most helpful, Participant 1 reported "I am usually in communication with my child's teacher monthly and if we do communicate it is usually over email or text messages. If I feel things are going well in class, I don't feel the need to be in communication" Participant 2 stated:

> Usually, I will communicate if there are issues that come up but if my child is doing good, I don't feel that I need to check in. I would say I check-in once every three months or once a month. I wish things were done differently but I feel the teacher is busy and hasn't have the time.

Participants were further asked if the communication with their child's teacher about reading and what type of communication has been most helpful. Both participants reported that they do not communicate with their kindergartener's teacher about reading specifically because of the nature of the pandemic year and will primarily reach out to their kindergartner's teacher if they feel that there were concerns or if things were not going well. Participant 2 reported "I don't communicate about reading, if it was a regular year, I would, but I am feeing some dips in my kindergartner's reading and her teacher retired this year, the current teacher is doing the best she can, and I am seeing some progress in my kindergartener's reading. I am giving the benefit of the doubt [to the teacher] and I don't have the same expectations [because of the pandemic]. I feel that my role has changed as a parent and my kindergartner isn't getting the optimal education, I

remember with my older daughter I didn't help [with reading] at all. With my kindergarten I am helping a lot more by encouraging reading and for her to learn her letter sounds." Additionally, Participant 2 reported "Because there is no school on Friday, they [the school] have a library hour where my kindergartner can log reading her favorite books, we don't have the option to go to the library [in-person] and pick up books, which was very helpful, this year you have to pick out the books on-line and then pick it up. I appreciate the school doing themes for books for big ideas such as social justice and racism for young kids to gain exposure to. The school is doing an amazing job."

Both participants reported that they communicate with their child's teacher only if they feel the need to or if there is a problem in the classroom. Both participants reported that they will communicate with their child's teacher about once a month through either email or text messages. Both participants discussed the fact the due to the COVID-19 pandemic and nature of a primarily virtual school year, their communication with their child's school has lessened or changed in frequency.

How has parents' role or primary caregivers' role in supporting their child's academic needs changed due to the COVID-19 pandemic?

Participants gave many responses related to the nature of their role as a parent during virtual instruction and changes in their role due to the pandemic. Additional information about the parents' or primary caregivers' role due to changes to instruction due to the COVID-19 pandemic and how communication between home and school has changed was asked of participants. Participant 2 responded:

The 'traction' [of communication] is less and the ability to volunteer in the classroom is less. Stress is high for teachers and parents, and it is not the same interaction at all because issues are not able to be talked about as easily, we are all doing our best. Teachers are very responsive to requests but expectations for me have lowered. When beginning virtual, I would ask teachers to not greet or ask my kindergartener anything over Zoom because she would shut down. I hoped they didn't expect her to talk over Zoom because she needed time to warm up. Teachers were very sensitive to challenges over Zoom, let her calm down on her own and were very naturally prepared because they love kids. There was a greater focus on emotional needs than academic needs [of kindergartners]. Being a year behind isn't a big deal because I want my kindergartner to be happy.

Participant 1 replied "The pandemic was a situation that was so overwhelming, and I did not want to reach out to the teacher at all. I emailed to check in about lack of engagement and anxiety from my kindergartener logging on. It is all a blur." Overall, the pandemic has impacted not only student's education but has also affected the role of the parent. It is evident through the participant responses that the virtual environment is not ideal for a kindergartner to begin their educational career. Additionally, it was made apparent through the participants' responses that during the virtual learning environment, academics were not a priority instead the focus was on their child's social-emotional well-being.

Both participants reported challenges of either their child's social-emotional wellbeing or engagement during the period of online instruction. One participant reported

that the school closure and beginning of the school year following the closure was all a blur and that everyone was doing the best they could.

Do primary caregivers perceive kindergarten teacher taking intentional steps to increase literacy with their child?

To obtain a more solidified look into the intentional step's kindergarten teachers can take with parents or primary caregivers to increase literacy in kindergarten students, two final questions were asked of participants. These questions investigated whether the kindergartner teacher has recommended resources or activities to support kindergartners and if they followed up with parents to give additional assistance. Participant 1 responded, "They [kindergarten teacher] printed a lot of books and pamphlets in both English and Spanish, they also provided access to the *Epic* app and audiobooks. They didn't reach out to me that much maybe because they were assessing them [kindergartener] and he was reading sight words, doing good, and meeting expectations." Participant 2 responded:

> The school makes use of and provides access to iPads for my kindergartener where we use the *Epic* app. They recommend he reads for 30 minutes a day on the app. I have a friend whose child's school gets a certificate at the school for reading 10 books and I see the pride in the child's face [after receiving certificate] by rewarding them with positive reinforcement. The school usually does challenges for reading such as if you read 30 books you get a lunch or pizza with the principal or a gift from the toy box. They aren't doing that this year. I know sometimes my child gets attendance stickers and is proud of these and doesn't

want to miss school. Can you imagine something similar for reading? Kids love challenges.

Both participants were able to identify the *Epic* app as a specific resource to support

reading at home. One participant identified classroom or school wide challenges for reading books as a tool to evoke pride or motivation to complete academic related tasks. The intentional steps taken by kindergarten teachers to support the early literacy needs of kindergartners were not as easily identifiable, most likely due to the impact of virtual learning and limited communication opportunities.

Discussion

In this study on the impact of the home literacy environment and home-school collaboration on early literacy skills within kindergarten students, both parents that participated reported playing a primary role in the development of their child's early literacy skills. They both reported that reading to their child is an important contributing factor in the development of literacy skills. They both reported communicating with their child's teacher at least once a month and only reaching out to their child's teacher if they noticed problems or challenges that their child was facing. Both identified that their role as parents in supporting their child academically has changed due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Both participants identified resources that were sent home with their kindergartner such as using the school iPad to access literacy related resources such as the *Epic* app or audiobooks. The segment that follows gives a more in depth look at

participant responses and the specific role a school psychologist can play regarding this study's topic.

The Role of the School Psychologist in Supporting Early Literacy Success through Home School Collaboration

School psychologists are uniquely trained professionals that can help support early literacy skills through home school collaboration: they are educational experts with knowledge of academic interventions and are equipped with consultation skills that are necessary for smooth and successful communication between home and school. Among other things, they can be helpful in the following areas.

School psychologists may equip parents with the knowledge and importance of supporting their child's early literacy success and constructing an effective home literacy environment. As evident throughout the interviews, both participants were active contributors in their role of supporting their child's literacy success. Both participants identified clear connections in early literacy exposure and later predictive literacy success related variables. These variables included letter sound recognition, expanding their child's vocabulary, and increasing or maintaining their child's curiosity. It is noted that the home literacy environment has a unique impact on variations in a child's literacy skills and perception of the importance in early literacy development is the first step in providing a nurturing home-literacy environment (Griffin, et al.,1997; Fitzgerald, et al., 1991). It is important to note that it is helpful for parents to be aware of information regarding the developmental variability in obtaining literacy skills in young children.

School psychologists may use consultative skills to help identify the current challenges a teacher may be facing within the classroom. Once these challenges are identified, the school psychologist can work with the teacher to overcome these challenges and better facilitate communication between the home and school. For example, a teacher may be overwhelmed with external challenges present within the school year and may not be as readily or available to parents. However, because this study was primarily focused on parent's or primary caregiver's perceptions of the current challenges related to the COVID-19 pandemic, there is not additional information to support the teacher's perspective of supporting kindergartener's early literacy needs.

School psychologists may help parents build a positive relationship with the teacher in supporting their child's educational needs and goals. As evident throughout the interviews with parent participants, both participants reported that they were usually the first one to reach out and communicate with their child's teacher. Typically, participants only reached out to communicate with their child's teacher once a month or if they noticed a problem or challenge their child was facing. As supported in previous research and evident through insight in the interviews with participants of this study, it is not just what parents do with their children at home but also their relationships with professionals at school that can have impact on their child's academic achievement outcomes (Hill, 2001; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005).

School psychologists may highlight the importance of a parent's or primary giver's role in the development of their child's academic success. As evidenced throughout the interviews, parents' role in supporting their child academically shifted drastically during the COVID-19 pandemic subsequent virtual learning in the home environment. Both

participants noted that when compared to the older sibling of the kindergartener during non-pandemic learning, their role in supporting the academic needs of their child increased greatly. When discussing the shift of their role, both participants concluded that they did not feel they had to support the literacy needs of their older child as much as they do with their kindergartener. The results of this study and an additional study by Fontenelle-Tereshchuk, D. (2021), support the importance of recognizing and utilizing parental support in children's education and a need for improvement in collaborative practices between parents and schools.

School psychologists may support the gaps in a child's educational progress and social-emotional functioning based off the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, temporary school closure, and periods of virtual learning. During the interviews, both participants identified that their child's academic progress was delayed or was a secondary concern to their child's social-emotional well-being during the stressful and uncertain times of the pandemic and virtual learning. In a study by, Capurso, et. al., (2020)., researchers found that changes in a child's expression of emotions during the pandemic included difficulty concentrating, boredom, irritability, restlessness, loneliness, and discomfort. Additionally, it may be beneficial to help parents understand a process called *emotional contagion,* a process that children use to conceptualize reality by relying on the emotions transmitted by the adults that take care of them (Bowlby, 1969). Through participant responses and the previously cited research, it is reasonable to conclude that a child's social-emotional functioning, especially during the time of the pandemic and virtual learning, was a necessary and primary focus for parents in supporting their child.

School psychologists may advocate for additional resources and school wide supports to be put in place to best support generalized academic growth across settings and effective home-school collaboration. Both participants identified the helpful qualities of technology resources in supporting literacy and the school sending iPads home with access to literacy related apps such as the *Epic* app. One participant made a comment about the usefulness of YouTube videos of others reading children's stories, not only in the amount of enjoyment their child had in watching the videos, but by also providing easy access to various children's books. In fact, a previous study by Sullivan et. al., (2014), supports many experts in early childhood and literacy are favorable toward the iPad as an appropriate technology for emerging literacy learners. In addition to technology as a helpful resource, one participant highlighted the impact that classroom based 'challenges' for attendance and reading had on her child's motivation and engagement in wanting to come to school and read the most books when compared to other classmates.

School psychologists may seek additional information about the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on a child's learning. Additionally, school psychologists can provide professional development opportunities to school members around this topic. A multitude of literature and evidence-based resources surrounding the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic are rapidly emerging. By continuing to broaden the understanding of this phenomenon, school psychologists and other school-based professionals can continue to support and nurture the learning and educational environment of current and future students.

Limitations of the Study and Further Directions

The major limitation of this study was that there were challenges in soliciting participants. Likely due to the nature of the school year, an email sent out to kindergarten teachers to then send to the parents of their kindergarteners, was not the most effective form of recruiting participation. As mentioned throughout the study, the parent's role in supporting their child academically changed and increased drastically when students began learning from home. Therefore, parents' willingness to participate in this research study was limited. Additionally, the researcher could have allowed for participants whose primary language is Spanish to be included in the study by factoring in the use of an interpreter within this study to include a more accurate representation of the population. The two participants that did choose to be involved in this study represent a skewed population and is not representative of the wide range of socioeconomic and culturally diverse populations of the schools within the research location. Both participants were professionals within the education systems and possessed higher education degrees. The limited communication between participants and the school is likely representative of the pandemic; however, evidence still suggests that creating polices within lower-level grades can help teachers increase communication with parents or primary caregivers of their students.

The study could be improved by including a wider range in demographics amongst participants and participants that represent parents or primary caregivers at more than one elementary school. Additionally, this study could be more robust if it allowed for teachers' perspectives on supporting kindergartener's early literacy skills and the home-school communication aspect. As mentioned throughout the study, parent's or primary caregivers were faced with many challenges of their own, and it is reasonable to

imagine that teachers were faced with their own unique challenges as well. As an additional piece of data, collecting self-report information from kindergarten students about the virtual learning environment, personal reading interests, or classroom observations of kindergarten students would have served as a useful informative factor related to this topic.

Conclusion

Establishing early literacy skills through effective home literacy environment and home school collaboration is a key contributor to a child's overall success in school. These contributions are made possible through necessary support at home and school by both parents or primary caregivers and teachers. Most notably, parents within this study played key roles in their kindergartener's development, interest, and over well-being regarding literacy skills and overall success. Teachers are identified as well as being contributors in a child's literacy development and are influential in establishing meaning communication and connection between home and school. The resources that the teachers and school provide for kindergarteners and parents undoubtedly go a long way in supporting a child's literacy success and maintaining effective lines of communication to best portray the current academic needs of the child.

School psychologists and other school-based staff are equipped with the skills to not only overcome the challenges the current academic year has posed but to also provide excellent models of resiliency. School psychologists are in a unique situation to use their backgrounds and knowledge of child development, coping skills, academic interventions, and consultation. With these skills and background, school psychologists can effectively

step in and work with others to support students' academic success, social-emotional well-being and effective home-school collaboration.

Given the nature of this year and the primarily virtual instruction caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, limitations in this study are present but also within the frequency of communication between and home and school. Arguable, due to the various challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, schools have faced one of the most dramatic changes in the way educational instruction is delivered. It is likely to take additional time, research, and practical implementation to support adjustments in the academic trajectory of students. Parents' or primary caregivers' insights on literacy skills and the effectiveness of home-school collaboration is essential when aiming to improve teacher instructional growth support and school-parent relationships. Moving forward there is exponential room for growth and various new ideas with technological advances and emerging literature to effectively support a child's overall literacy success.

Appendix A: Consent Form

Consent to Participate in Research

Identification of Investigators & Purpose of the Study

You are being asked to participate in a research study conducted by Emily Smith from James Madison University. The purpose of this study is to collect more information about the home literacy environment as well as identify current collaboration practices between home and school. This study will contribute to the researcher's completion of her educational specialist research project.

Research Procedures

Should you decide to participate in this research study, you will be asked to sign this consent form or give verbal/oral consent to the researcher once all your questions have been answered to your satisfaction. This study consists of an interview that will be administered to individual participants via a computer/phone interview. You will be asked to provide answers to a series of questions related to the home literacy environment as well as current collaboration practices between home and school.

Time Required

Participation in this study will require 20-30 minutes of your time.

Risk

The investigator does not perceive more than minimal risks from your involvement in this study (that is, no risks beyond the risks associated with everyday life). There are no identified risks for participants outside the risks of everyday life. In order to protect your confidentiality, the interview will optimally take place in a private setting. Headphones are recommended and participants will be able to take breaks during the interview at any point they wish.

Benefits

While there are no direct benefits to you participating in this study, potential benefits from participation in this study include providing useful information to the existing research in literacy and allowing more of an understanding of the home literacy environment and what contributes to a child's later literacy success. Additionally, this research could benefit educational practitioners who work with student's and the student's parents in order to understand current literacy practices within the home and what might be needed in order to further support the child's literacy needs.

Confidentiality

The results of this research will be presented at the psychology graduate school symposium at James Madison University. The results of this project will be coded in such a way that the respondent's identity will not be attached to the final form of this study. The researcher retains the right to use and publish non-identifiable data. While individual responses are confidential, aggregate data will be presented representing averages or generalizations about the responses as a whole. All data will be stored in a secure

location accessible only to the researcher. Upon completion of the study, all information that matches up individual respondents with their answers will be destroyed.

Participation & Withdrawal
Your participation is entirely voluntary. You are free to choose not to participate. Should you choose to participate, you can withdraw at any time without consequences of any kind.

Questions about the Study
If you have questions or concerns during the time of your participation in this study, or after its completion or you would like to receive a copy of the final aggregate results of this study, please contact:

Emily Smith   Ashton Trice
Graduate Psychology Department   Graduate Psychology Department
James Madison University   James Madison University
smith7ea@jmu.edu   Telephone: (540) 568-8189
                                                              tricead@jmu.edu

Questions about Your Rights as a Research Subject
Dr. Taimi Castle
Chair, Institutional Review Board
James Madison University
(540) 568-5929
castletl@jmu.edu

Giving of Consent
I have read this consent form and I understand what is being requested of me as a participant in this study. I freely consent to participate. I have been given satisfactory answers to my questions. The investigator provided me with a copy of this form. I certify that I am at least 18 years of age.

_____
Name of Participant (Printed)

_____   _____
Name of Participant (Signed)   Date

_____   _____
Name of Researcher (Signed)   Date

Appendix B: Verbal Consent Form for Telephone or Web-based Interviews

VERBAL CONSENT DOCUMENTATION FOR PARTICIPATION.

SUBJECT: Primary Caregivers' Reports of Early Literacy Skills and Supporting Children's Literacy Success Through Home-School Collaboration

Oral consent serves as an assurance that the required elements of informed consent have been presented orally to the participant or the participant's legally authorized representative.

Verbal consent to participate in this telephone interview has been obtained by the participant's willingness to continue with the telephone interview by providing answers to a series of questions related to what the participant has heard about. The following is a script that will be read aloud to participants.

> You are being asked to participate in a research study conducted by Emily Smith from James Madison University. The purpose of this study is to collect more information about the home literacy environment as well as identify current collaboration practices between home and school. This study will contribute to the researcher's completion of her educational specialist research project.
>
> This study consists of an interview that will be administered to individual participants over the telephone or through a web-based platform. You will be asked to provide answers to a series of questions related to the home literacy environment and current collaboration practices between home and school.
>
> Participation in this study will require no more than 30 minutes of your time.
>
> There are no identified risks for participants outside the risks of everyday life. In order to protect your confidentiality, the interview will optimally take place in a private setting. Headphones are recommended and participants will be able to take breaks during the interview at any point they wish.
>
> Potential benefits from participation in this study include providing useful information to the existing research in literacy and allowing more of an understanding of the home literacy environment and what contributes to a child's later literacy success. Additionally, this research could benefit educational practitioners who work with student's and the student's parents in order to understand current literacy practices within the home and what might be needed in order to further support the child's literacy needs.

The results of this research will be presented at a research symposium at James Madison University. The results of this project will be coded in such a way that the respondent's identity will not be attached to the final form of this study. We retain the right to use and publish non-identifiable data. While individual responses are confidential, data will be presented in aggregate form. All data will be stored in a secure location accessible only to me, the researcher. Upon completion of the study, all information that matches up your with your answers will be destroyed.

Your participation is entirely voluntary. You are free to choose not to participate. Should you choose to participate, you can withdraw at any time without consequences of any kind.

Do you have any questions about the study, your participation, or your rights as a participant?

I attest that the aforementioned written consent has been orally presented to the human subject and the human subject provided me with an oral assurance of their willingness to participate in the research.

_____   _____

_____

Surveyor's Name (Printed)   Surveyor

Appendix C: Recruitment Email Sent to Participants

To: Parents

Subject: Volunteers Needed

Dear Parent or Primary Caregiver,

This year our school is fortunate enough to have a graduate student from JMU who is interning as a school psychologist. Her name is Emily Smith and she is working on a project involving the role of primary caregivers in developing early literacy in the home. This email is to determine what parents or primary caregivers would be interested in participating in this project. If you decide to participate, you will be contacted by Emily and asked various questions about the reading practices you incorporate at home as well as forms of communication with the school you have found to be effective. The interview should not last longer than 30 minutes and would be scheduled at a time that is convenient for you. If you are interested in participating or would like additional information please contact Emily directly at the following email address: esmith5@k12ablemarle.org. Thank you for your time and consideration, your involvement is very much appreciated.

Appendix D: Parental Interview Questions

Questions adapted from various sources including Boudreau, 2005; Dickinson & De Temple, 1998; Marvin & Ogden, 2002.

Hi, I'm Emily, I am currently a graduate student in the School Psychology Program at James Madison University. Thank you in advance for your time and agreeing to be a participant in my research study. I am interviewing a few other parents or primary caregivers and I am hoping to collect information about the home literacy environment and current collaboration practices between parent or primary caregiver and school. First, are you in a place where we can share confidential information? I have some questions that I would like to ask you today and I will be writing down your response. It is my hope that the information I gather will be helpful for teachers in the future. I want to start by asking you a few questions about yourself.

Demographic Questions:

1. What do you do for a living?

2. How many adults are living in the home?

3. Are there any siblings who are in Elementary School?

4. Do you have access to the internet at home?

5. Do you like to read? Do you read every day? What kinds of things do you enjoy reading?

Research Questions:

A. What is the parent's or primary caregiver's view of his or her role in the development of literacy skills in   their child?

6. How often do you read to your child now? Did you read more when your child was younger? When did you start reading to your child? Does your child enjoy being read to?

7. Do you think it's important to read to your child? Why?

8. Do you think it's important to have books in the home?

9. How has reading to your child changed now that he or she is in Kindergarten?

10. (If there are other adults in the home) Do others read to your child?

11. What kinds of media does your child enjoy, like TV or video games? Do you enjoy these with your child or are this mostly things for him or her to do by their self?

B. What sorts of behavior do parents or primary caregivers see within the home environment that might be influenced by literacy activities?

12. Does your child like to read?

13. Does your child choose to spend time looking at books?

14. Does your child like school? Does your child like on-line educational activities?

C. How can schools and parents or primary caregivers best communicate to support early literacy skills?

15. How often are you in communication with your child's teacher?

16. How do you communicate with your child's teacher?

17. What do you communicate about? Do you communicate about reading?

18. What type of communication from your child's school has been most helpful?

19. Can you give me an example of a specific communication that has been helpful?

D. How has parents' role or primary caregivers' role in supporting their child's academic needs changed due to the COVID-19 pandemic?

20. How did communication with your child's teacher change when learning became virtual?

21. How could this communication be improved?

E. Do primary caregivers perceive kindergarten teacher taking intentional steps to increase literacy with their child?

22. Has your child's teacher recommended resources or activities to you to support your child's reading? (If yes) Can you give me an example?

23. (If yes) Did the teacher follow up to give you additional assistance?

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