

# Where Are *Their* Voices? Examining Power and Privilege in a Family Literacy Text

*Tracey Kumar*

## **Abstract**

The purpose of this study was to examine how a family literacy text linked to a large-scale, U.S.-based family literacy program either privileged or dis-privileged dominant, Eurocentric literacy practices. More specifically, this study investigated the ways in which the family literacy text: (1) conceptualized literacy; and (2) constructed the role of mothers in supporting the literacy development of their children. Critical content analysis was used to identify themes, categories, and codes within the text. The findings from this study suggest that while the family literacy text conceptualizes home and school literacy similarly, it situates home literacy within a supporting role. The findings also suggest that the family literacy text positions parents as conduits between home and school and as instructional assistants supporting the work of their child's teacher. Thus, the family literacy text encourages parents to initiate communication with teachers, learn about classroom-based literacy practices, and incorporate similar texts and activities within the home. Based on these findings, the family literacy text seems to promote the transmission of school literacy, thus privileging dominant, Eurocentric literacy practices.

Key Words: family literacy materials, programs, parents, critical theory

## **Introduction**

Research has shown that engagement in home literacy activities, for example, shared book reading (Britto, Brooks-Gunn, & Griffin, 2006; Storch

& Whitehurst, 2001) and the direct teaching of letters and sounds (Hood, Conlon, & Andrews, 2008; Stephenson, Parrila, & Georgiou, 2008), may lead to higher levels of emergent and school literacy. Findings such as these have prompted the creation of family literacy programs aimed at teaching parents how to engage in home literacy activities with their children (Auerbach, 1990; Gadsden, 2008) and encouraging parents to incorporate such activities into their daily routines (Auerbach, 1990; Elish-Piper, 2000; Note: the term parents is used throughout this article to refer to any family member or guardian who acts as a primary caregiver for the child). By doing so, these programs aim to facilitate the development of emergent and school literacy (Auerbach, 1995; Elish-Piper, 2000; Gadsden, 2008), particularly among children from diverse racial, ethnic, linguistic, and socioeconomic backgrounds (Alamprese, 2004; Gadsden, 2004; Nistler & Maiers, 1999; Taylor, 1993).

Despite their potential benefits, critics have raised numerous concerns about family literacy programs. Critics claim that many programs devote too much attention to school-based literacy practices (Auerbach, 1990; Elish-Piper, 2000; Morrow & Paratore, 1993) while disregarding the literacy practices of their participants (Auerbach, 1995; Reyes & Torres, 2007). Additionally, since school-based literacy practices typically reflect mainstream, European American culture (Auerbach, 1990; Reyes & Torres, 2007), many critics assert that family literacy programs proffer deficit notions of families from diverse backgrounds (Gadsden, 2004; Taylor, 1993). Other critics accuse family literacy programs of attempting to colonize participants (Reyes & Torres, 2007).

In response to these and other concerns, several studies have examined text and images in family literacy materials (Anderson, Lenters, & McTavish, 2008; Anderson, Streelasky, & Anderson, 2007; Kendrick, Anderson, Smythe, & McKay, 2003; Smythe, 2006; Smythe & Isserlis, 2002). Among these studies, two examined books, manuals, listserv discussions, and other materials (Smythe, 2006; Smythe & Isserlis, 2002), and three investigated the websites of family literacy programs (Anderson et al., 2007; Anderson et al., 2008; Kendrick et al., 2003). While these studies have made important contributions to the body of research, additional studies are needed to address the full range of family literacy materials. Toward such a contribution, this study examined the ways in which a family literacy text linked to a large-scale, U.S.-based program privileged and/or disprivileged mainstream, Eurocentric literacy practices.

## **Theoretical Framework**

This study employed Critical Race Theory (CRT) as a guiding framework. CRT emerged from the work of critical legal scholars shortly after the Civil

Rights Movement. Since that time, CRT has been utilized by scholars in a number of fields including education. In education, CRT operates as “a framework or set of basic insights, perspectives, methods, and pedagogy that seeks to identify, analyze, and transform those aspects of education that maintain subordinate and dominant positions in and out of the classroom” (Solòrzano & Yosso, 2002, p. 25). To achieve that aim, CRT: (1) interrogates conventional assertions about objectivity, colorblindness, and equality; (2) honors the lived experiences of those who have been affected by racism; (3) draws on the insights of scholars from relevant fields; (4) considers racism and other forms of oppression; and (5) promotes empowerment and social justice (Solòrzano & Yosso, 2002).

Through the use of CRT, education researchers have noted that labels such as “at-risk” promote a deficit view of students from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds (Ladson-Billings, 1998; Shapiro, 2014; Solòrzano & Yosso, 2002) and that the continued use of Eurocentric curricula serves to maintain race-based inequities in U.S. schools (Ladson-Billings, 1998). In a similar vein, this study used CRT as a framework for investigating the ways in which a family literacy text privileged and/or disprivileged mainstream, Eurocentric literacy practices. By doing so, this study sought to examine the text for “hidden” racism and to advocate for literacy practices that are relevant and empowering for participants from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds.

## Literature Review

For the purposes of this study, *family literacy program* refers to “interventions that enhance family members’ literacy skills through an intergenerational focus” (Wasik & Herrmann, 2004, p. 3). While all programs aim to increase participants’ literacy achievement, they differ in the types of services that they provide. Thus, family literacy programs can be divided into three categories: those that exclusively target children, those delivered exclusively to parents, and those that serve both parents and children (Cassidy et al., 2004; Wasik & Herrmann, 2004). However, the most comprehensive programs not only serve both parents and children, but also consist of a variety of components, including early childhood education, adult education, parenting classes, and shared literacy activities (Chance, 2010; Swick, 2009; Wasik & Herrmann, 2004).

In the context of family literacy, shared literacy activities involve shared reading and a variety of literacy-related exercises (Senechal & Young, 2008; Van Steensel, McElvany, Kurvers, & Herppich, 2011). According to Van Steensel et al. (2011), *shared reading* refers to “joint, parent–child activities around a storybook or picture book, with the focus on the interactive transaction of

meaning” (p. 90). Such activities may engage parents in reading aloud to children or in listening to children as they read aloud (Senechal & Young, 2008). By contrast, *literacy exercises* can be defined as “phonics and storybook-based activities that do not focus on the transaction of meaning, but on practicing correct reading” (Van Steensel et al., 2011, p. 90). Thus, literacy exercises emphasize knowledge and skills related to the alphabet, the sounds of language, and letter–sound relationships (Senechal & Young, 2008).

Through engagement in shared literacy activities, family literacy programs strive to raise the achievement of children deemed “at-risk” for literacy-related difficulties (Senechal & Young, 2008; Van Steensel et al., 2011). This at-risk status has long been determined on the basis of parents’ employment, income, and level of education (Senechal & Young, 2004). Therefore, “adults in these families (and hence in these programs) not only have low levels of reading and writing, but also typically represent low-income and minority parents” (Gadsden, 2004, p. 403). Family literacy programs have also begun to target parents and children from linguistically diverse backgrounds (Alamprese, 2004). For that reason, English language learners now constitute a substantial percentage of participants in many family literacy programs (e.g., Mann, 2014; O’Donnell & Kirkner, 2014; Soto Huerta & Riojas-Cortez, 2011). In addition to language, race, and class, it is important to note that family literacy programs are also gendered, as the majority of adult participants are women.

Due to their constituency and aims, critics have raised numerous concerns about family literacy programs. Many critics claim that family literacy programs are rooted in the assumption that “non-mainstream” parents lack the skills needed to help their children succeed (Elish-Piper, 2000; Morrow & Paratore, 1993). Thus, in an effort to remediate families’ perceived weaknesses, programs “[give] parents guidelines, materials, and training to carry out school-like activities in the home” (Auerbach, 1990, p. 16). By doing so, family literacy programs not only disregard participants’ preexisting literacy practices (Auerbach, 1995; Reyes & Torres, 2007), but also perpetuate the belief that parents need to replicate school-based practices in order to support the literacy development of their children (Gadsden, 2008).

By contrast, studies have shown that families from diverse backgrounds engage in a variety of home literacy activities (Auerbach, 1989; Delgado-Gaitan, 1987; Heath, 1982, 1983; Johnson, 2010; Lynch, 2009; Mui & Anderson, 2008; Taylor & Dorsey-Gaines, 1988). For example, Lynch (2009) investigated the print literacy activities of 38 low-income families from rural, urban, and migrant contexts. The families reported frequent engagement with calendars, menus, lists, notes, periodicals, and other print texts. These findings suggest that diverse families are “involved with various print literacy activities despite

commonly held beliefs to the contrary” (Lynch, 2009, p. 516). Nonetheless, studies have also demonstrated that the home literacy practices of diverse families differ from those which are commonly utilized in schools (Heath, 1982, 1983; Mui & Anderson, 2008). For example, Mui and Anderson (2008) studied the home literacy practices of an extended Indo-Canadian family; findings indicated that the children were “learning to read and write through an array of literacy activities other than storybook reading” (p. 240).

Additionally, several studies have examined the ways in which text and images on family literacy websites serve to conceptualize families and literacy (Anderson et al., 2007; Anderson et al., 2008; Kendrick et al., 2003). To illustrate, Kendrick et al. (2003) compared images from family literacy websites with those created by elementary school children. The researchers gave children one hour to draw a picture that illustrated their home literacy practices. Findings indicated that while the children’s drawings reflected a variety of literacy practices and involved parents, siblings, and extended family members, the images found on family literacy websites typically involved shared reading between a mother and child. The salience of shared reading between a mother and child was also noted in subsequent studies of family literacy websites (Anderson et al., 2007; Anderson et al., 2008).

In addition, two other studies investigated the ways in which family literacy materials construct the role of mothers in caring for their children (Smythe, 2006; Smythe & Isserlis, 2002). For that purpose, Smythe and Isserlis (2002) examined a variety of materials, including manuals, brochures, and listserv discussions. Through their research, Smythe and Isserlis found that the materials not only emphasize the importance of parent involvement in the school setting, but also “position parents and most often mothers as their child’s first and most important educator” (p. 33). Smythe and Isserlis also found that the materials privilege two-parent families, in which “women occupy the domestic sphere of child raising and men occupy the public sphere of work outside the home” (p. 30). Similar findings emerged from Smythe’s (2006) analysis of more than 200 19th and 20th century texts. Thus, findings from these studies suggest that family literacy materials promote traditional views regarding the role of mothers and the structure of families.

To build upon the existing body of research, this study examined a family literacy text which was linked to a large-scale, U.S.-based family literacy program. The purpose of this study was to investigate the ways in which the family literacy text privileged and/or disprivileged mainstream, Eurocentric literacy practices. To that end, this study sought answers to the following research questions:

- How do classroom and home-based literacy practices outlined in the text serve to conceptualize literacy?
- How do suggestions and recommendations in the text construct the role of parents in providing literacy instruction for their children?

## Method

### Program

The program to which the family literacy text was connected lasted for more than a decade. During that time, the program provided: (1) early childhood instruction; (2) adult literacy instruction; (3) training in home-based literacy practices; and (4) shared literacy activities between parents and their children. Through these components, the program sought to raise the literacy achievement of children and parents and, as a result, improve access to employment and educational opportunities. In an effort to serve families with the greatest level of need, the program targeted areas with high rates of poverty, violence, illiteracy, and unemployment. The program also targeted “special populations” such as English language learners and members of Native American tribes. Thus, parents and children enrolled in the program typically represented one or more historically marginalized groups.

### Data Source

A family literacy text connected to the aforementioned program served as the data source for this study. Although the text had been created by a third party, it was offered on the program’s website as a resource for the training of parents. In an effort to teach parents how to support the literacy development of their children, the text provided: (1) an overview of the knowledge and skills associated with reading; (2) a description of instructional practices which are believed to promote reading development; and (3) suggestions regarding home-based literacy activities. Because the text was offered as a pdf file, it could be viewed online, downloaded and saved to any computer, or printed for potential distribution to parents. Additionally, it is important to note that when I accessed the text in 2010, it was available only in English. Furthermore, while other resources appeared on the program’s website, those resources were designed for teachers, administrators, and program coordinators. By contrast, the text that served as the data source for this study was designed exclusively for parents. For that reason, the other resources were excluded from the data set.

### Data Analysis

To examine the family literacy text, I employed critical content analysis. In general terms, content analysis is a method for analyzing texts that have

been acquired through the data collection process (White & Marsh, 2006). To analyze such texts, researchers must: (1) establish a theoretical framework; (2) generate guiding questions; (3) determine data sources and sampling methods; (4) decide on a unit of analysis; (5) create a coding scheme; and (6) revise codes as needed (White & Marsh, 2006). Nonetheless, as Hoffman, Wilson, Martinez, and Sailors (2011) point out, “content analysis is critical when it is used to ferret out issues of overt or covert power in texts” (p. 40). Thus, to engage in critical content analysis, researchers must use a critical theory as a guiding framework. Given the framework and purpose of this study, critical content analysis seemed to be the most appropriate analytical method.

To prepare the data for analysis, I transcribed the text into a Microsoft Word document. Then, I divided the data into individual clauses by placing each clause on a separate line. For that purpose, I isolated “any string of words that [had] a subject and a predicate, but [did] not stand as a sentence by itself” (Gee, 2011, p. 50). For example, the sentence “help your child separate the sounds in words, listen for beginning and ending sounds, and put separate sounds together” was divided into three separate clauses, as illustrated below:

help your child separate the sounds in words,  
listen for beginning and ending sounds, and  
put separate sounds together.

After dividing the data into 119 clauses, I began the coding process. Throughout the process, I employed constant comparisons (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) to compare incidents with a particular code to other incidents that had been assigned the same code and to group similar incidents together to form categories. In addition, I also utilized a codebook (Neuendorff, 2011) to record codes and their definitions and to organize those codes into themes and categories.

Additionally, to lend credibility to the study, I engaged in peer debriefing (Creswell, 2009) throughout the process. As Creswell (2009) explains, peer debriefing “involves locating a person (a peer debriefer) who reviews and asks questions about the qualitative study so that the account will resonate with people other than the researcher” (p. 192). For that purpose, I consulted with several education faculty, all of whom had expertise in critical theory, issues of power, and qualitative research. As a result, I not only made numerous revisions to the codes, categories, and themes, but also reconsidered other aspects of the study, including its limitations and conclusions.

## Findings

Analysis of the family literacy text yielded three themes, 9 categories, and 42 codes. Among the three themes were *the nature of reading*, *classroom-based literacy instruction*, and *home-based literacy support*. In the paragraphs that follow, I provide an in-depth account of each of these three themes. To that end, I describe the categories and codes associated with each theme and illustrate the categories and codes with excerpts from the data. Additionally, I address the categories and codes in order of salience, beginning with those that appear most frequently in the data.

### The Nature of Reading

The first theme, the *nature of reading*, highlights general understandings about reading and reading development and outlines the knowledge and skills necessary for acquiring fluency and comprehension. As such, this theme consists of two categories including *knowledge about reading* and *knowledge for reading*. The first category, *knowledge about reading* ( $n = 23$ ), addresses general understandings about reading and the reading development of young children. The second category, *knowledge for reading* ( $n = 17$ ), addresses the skills and competencies that children must acquire to become fluent, successful readers. These categories and their respective codes are outlined in Table 1 and described in detail in the paragraphs below.

Table 1. Theme 1, Nature of Reading, Categories and Codes

|  |  |
|--|--|
| <p>Knowledge About Reading (<math>n = 23</math>)</p> | <p>Conceptualized by experts (<math>n = 4</math>)<br/>                     Prerequisite for success (<math>n = 4</math>)<br/>                     Accumulation of skills (<math>n = 4</math>)<br/>                     Exposure to texts &amp; practices (<math>n = 4</math>)<br/>                     Repetition/multiple exposures (<math>n = 4</math>)<br/>                     Time &amp; labor intensive (<math>n = 3</math>)</p> |
| <p>Knowledge for Reading (<math>n = 17</math>)</p>   | <p>Comprehension (<math>n = 5</math>)<br/>                     Vocabulary (<math>n = 3</math>)<br/>                     Oral language (<math>n = 2</math>)<br/>                     Fluency (<math>n = 2</math>)<br/>                     Phonics (<math>n = 2</math>)<br/>                     Alphabetic knowledge (<math>n = 2</math>)<br/>                     Phonemic awareness (<math>n = 1</math>)</p>                         |



### *Knowledge About Reading*

According to the text, understandings of reading and reading development emanate from the work of literacy “experts” (“Fortunately, research is now available that suggests how to give each child a good start in reading”). Drawing on these expert understandings, the text claims that early reading development serves as a prerequisite for success (“Success in school starts with reading”). Thus, as the text indicates, early reading development impacts success not only in school, but later in life as well (“When children become good readers in the early grades, they are more likely to become better learners throughout their school years and beyond”). In addition, the text also conceptualizes reading development as the acquisition of particular skills (“Becoming a reader involves the development of important skills”). As such, the development of reading-related skills occurs through exposure to a variety of texts and practices (“Children learn words more easily when they hear them spoken often”) and requires repetition (“Learning to read takes practice, more practice than children get during the school day”), time, and effort (“On average, children need two years of instruction in letter–sound relationships”).

### *Knowledge for Reading*

While the first category highlights general understandings about reading and reading development, this category addresses the skills and competencies that children must master in order to become fluent, successful readers. According to the text, children must acquire skills and competencies related to comprehension, including making sense of what they read (“understand what is read”) and what they hear (“listen to stories read aloud”). The text also suggests that to become fluent, successful readers, children must increase their knowledge of vocabulary (“learn and use new words”). Therefore, children must not only learn the meanings of words, but also be able to use them in oral and written communication. Apart from vocabulary and comprehension, the text also indicates that children need to develop automaticity with respect to word recognition (“recognizing words becomes easy and automatic”). However, the text suggests that children must first gain a clear understanding of letter–sound relationships (“connect sounds to letters to figure out the code of reading”). For that purpose, children must gain alphabetic knowledge (“recognize and name the letters of the alphabet”) and phonemic awareness (“listen to the sounds of spoken language”).

### **Classroom-Based Reading Instruction**

The second theme, *classroom-based literacy instruction*, describes the instructional practices that teachers use to promote literacy development in the

classroom. This theme consists of three categories, including *meaning making*, *letters & sounds*, and *values & beliefs*. The first category, *meaning making* ( $n = 14$ ), highlights instructional practices that support children’s ability to make sense of oral and written texts. The second category, *letters & sounds* ( $n = 13$ ), outlines instructional practices that promote the development of knowledge and skills used to identify words and phrases in print texts. Finally, the third category, *values & beliefs* ( $n = 2$ ), addresses teacher behaviors that promote an appreciation for reading. These categories are outlined in Table 2 and described in the following paragraphs.

Table 2. Theme 2, Classroom-Based Literacy Instruction, Categories and Codes

|   |   |
|---|---|
| <p>Meaning Making<br/>(<math>n = 14</math>)</p>       | <p>Providing direct instruction (<math>n = 5</math>)<br/>Modeling use of knowledge &amp; skills (<math>n = 5</math>)<br/>Supporting application of knowledge &amp; skills (<math>n = 2</math>)<br/>Supporting acquisition of new knowledge &amp; skills (<math>n = 1</math>)<br/>Monitoring children’s progress (<math>n = 1</math>)</p>  |
| <p>Letters &amp; Sounds<br/>(<math>n = 13</math>)</p> | <p>Providing direct instruction (<math>n = 3</math>)<br/>Supporting acquisition of new knowledge &amp; skills (<math>n = 3</math>)<br/>Facilitating opportunities for practice (<math>n = 3</math>)<br/>Facilitating engagement with text (<math>n = 2</math>)<br/>Modeling use of knowledge &amp; skills (<math>n = 1</math>)<br/>Differentiating instruction (<math>n = 1</math>)</p> |
| <p>Values &amp; Beliefs (<math>n = 2</math>)</p>      | <p>Making reading a priority (<math>n = 1</math>)<br/>Emphasizing knowledge &amp; skills for reading (<math>n = 1</math>)</p>   |

*Meaning Making*

According to the text, teachers should provide direct instruction related to word meanings (“teaching the meanings of words”) and vocabulary acquisition strategies (“teaching ways to learn the meaning of new words”). In addition, teachers should also model the application of new knowledge and skills (“teachers show them ways to figure out the meaning of what they are reading”). Thus, as the text indicates, teachers should not only explain comprehension strategies, but also show children how to apply those strategies to real reading tasks. Since children may not be able to use strategies independently, teachers should provide them with the support that they need to do so (“teachers help children to check their understanding”). For that purpose, teachers should monitor students and determine whether or not support is needed (“when children are having difficulty”). Finally, since teachers recognize the limits of direct instruction (“teachers cannot possibly teach children the meaning of every new word they see or read”), they should not only engage in direct teaching of word meanings, but also help children learn to figure out word meanings on their own.

### *Letters and Sounds*

The second theme addresses instructional practices that support the development of knowledge and skills pertaining to letters and sounds. According to the text, teachers should provide direct instruction related to the alphabet (“teaching the letters of the alphabet”), phonemic awareness (“teaching the sounds of language”), and phonics (“systematically teaching phonics—the way letters and sounds are related”). By doing so, teachers can support the acquisition of knowledge and skills in these areas (“teachers help children learn to recognize letter names and shapes”). Teachers should also provide children with opportunities to use what they have learned. For that purpose, teachers may devise practice opportunities related to phonemic awareness (“the teacher provides opportunities for children to practice with the sounds that make up words”) and phonics (“children have the chance to practice the letter–sound relationships they are learning”). As the text illustrates, teachers can create such opportunities by utilizing texts that exemplify the knowledge and skills that children are learning. For that purpose, teachers may have children engage with existing texts (“by reading easy books that use words with the letter–sound relationships they are learning”), or create new texts (“write the letter–sound relationships they know...by using them in words, sentences, messages, and their own stories”). Thus, as the text suggests, teachers should facilitate opportunities for children to apply the knowledge and skills that they are learning (“helping children write the letter–sound relationships they know”). Finally, in an effort to ensure that all children master letters and sounds, teachers should also provide differentiated instruction (“continuing to teach letters and sounds for children who need more practice”).

### *Values and Beliefs*

The third and final category outlines teacher behaviors that communicate the importance of reading. According to the text, teachers should make reading a priority in the classroom. For that purpose, teachers should incorporate read-alouds into the daily classroom schedule (“reading to children every day”) and emphasize the knowledge and skills which are required for reading (“teach the meaning of words, especially words that are important to understanding a book”). Thus, teachers should not only allocate ample time for reading, but also take steps to ensure that reading proves meaningful and productive for students. By doing so, teachers can communicate the value of reading within the classroom setting.

### **Home-Based Literacy Support**

The third theme, *home-based literacy support*, explains what parents can do at home to support the literacy development of their children. This theme

comprises four categories, including *letters & sounds*, *home-school connections*, *meaning making*, and *values & beliefs*. The first category, *letters & sounds* ( $n = 24$ ), outlines home-based practices that support the development of knowledge and skills which are used to decode written text. The second category, *home-school connections* ( $n = 15$ ), highlights caregiver behaviors that promote communication and cooperation between the school environment and the home. The third category, *meaning making* ( $n = 10$ ), addresses home-based instructional practices that support children’s ability to derive meaning from oral and written texts. Finally, the fourth category, *values & beliefs* ( $n = 8$ ) addresses caregiver behaviors that communicate the importance of reading and reading development. These categories are described in the paragraphs below and outlined in Table 3.

Table 3. Theme 3, Home-Based Literacy Support, Categories and Codes

|                                      |   |
|--------------------------------------|---|
| Letters & Sounds ( $n = 24$ )        | Facilitating opportunities to practice ( $n = 8$ )<br>Facilitating engagement with text ( $n = 7$ )<br>Facilitating application of knowledge & skills ( $n = 5$ )<br>Supporting specific objectives ( $n = 3$ )<br>Providing direct instruction ( $n = 1$ ) |
| Home-School Connections ( $n = 15$ ) | Supporting school literacy at home ( $n = 6$ )<br>Learning about instruction ( $n = 6$ )<br>Monitoring child’s progress ( $n = 2$ )<br>Advocating for the child ( $n = 1$ )   |
| Meaning Making ( $n = 10$ )          | Facilitating opportunities to practice ( $n = 7$ )<br>Checking for understanding ( $n = 1$ )<br>Providing direct instruction ( $n = 1$ )<br>Supporting specific objectives ( $n = 1$ )  |
| Values & Beliefs ( $n = 8$ )         | Making reading a priority ( $n = 4$ )<br>Reinforcing behaviors & accomplishments ( $n = 2$ )<br>Modeling engagement in literacy ( $n = 2$ )   |

### *Letter-Sound Relationships*

To support the development of knowledge and skills required for decoding written texts, the family literacy text urges parents to facilitate practice opportunities related to alphabetic knowledge (“practicing the alphabet”), phonemic awareness (“practicing the sounds of language”), and phonics (“listen as your child practices”). To facilitate such opportunities, the text recommends that parents use a variety of texts, including environmental print (“by pointing out letters wherever you see them”), books (“by reading alphabet books”), and oral language (“how many words can you make up that sound like the word bat?”).

Through engagement with these and other activities, parents can help children apply the knowledge and skills that they are learning at school. As such, the text offers numerous suggestions related to phonemic awareness (e.g., “helping your child take spoken words apart”). In addition, the text also encourages parents to help children achieve important objectives, such as increasing accuracy with respect to decoding (“help him read words correctly”). Finally, the text recommends that parents support their children’s learning through direct instruction (“teach your child rhymes, short poems, and songs”).

### *Home–School Connections*

This category addresses the behaviors that foster communication and cooperation between parents and their child’s teacher. As such, the text urges parents to support the work of teachers through home-based reading instruction (“at home, you can help”). To that end, the text encourages parents to learn about classroom instruction by observing (“at school, you should see teachers”) and by talking to the teacher (“ask the teacher about ways you can help”). In addition, the text also encourages parents to keep track of their child’s reading development (“keep informed about your child’s progress in reading”). Finally, the text indicates that by monitoring reading development, learning about instructional practices, and engaging in home-based literacy activities, parents can serve as powerful allies for their children (“be your child’s best advocate”).

### *Meaning Making*

The third category addresses home literacy practices that support the development of knowledge and skills needed to make sense of oral and written language. According to the text, parents should create opportunities for children to use knowledge and skills related to meaning making. To that end, the text recommends that parents engage children in conversations pertaining to general topics (“share conversations with your child over meal times and other times you are together”) and those that pertain specifically to books (“talk with your child about what she is reading”). Through conversations about books, parents may verify children’s understanding of written texts. For example, parents may ask questions about new vocabulary that their child encountered while reading a book (“ask about new words”). In addition, the text also urges parents to provide direct instruction related to meaning making (“introduce new and interesting words at every opportunity”). By providing direct instruction, checking for understanding, and facilitating opportunities for children to apply knowledge and skills, parents can help children master objectives related to meaning making (“building reading comprehension”).

### *Values and Beliefs*

The final category, *values & beliefs*, highlights caregiver behaviors that communicate the importance of reading. As such, the text encourages parents to make reading a priority at home. To that end, the text recommends that parents facilitate reading-related activities on a regular basis. Such activities may include library visits (“visit the library often”) and shared reading (“read together every day”). In addition, the text also encourages parents to reinforce reading-related activities (“encourage her to read on her own”) and accomplishments (“let your child know you are proud of his reading”). Lastly, the text urges parents to demonstrate their own engagement in literacy-related practices (“be a reader and a writer”). Through these practices, parents can communicate the value of reading and writing to their children.

## **Discussion**

In summary, analysis of the data suggests that the family literacy text conceptualizes reading as a phenomenon that can be best understood through research. Drawing on such research, the family literacy text conceptualizes reading development as the gradual accumulation of knowledge and skills, particularly those related to comprehension and decoding. The text indicates that to help children acquire reading-related knowledge and skills, teachers use a variety of instructional techniques, including scaffolding and direct instruction. However, as the text suggests, teachers cannot provide children with all the support that they need to master reading-related knowledge and skills. For that reason, the text urges parents to support their children’s literacy development by engaging in home literacy activities. More specifically, the text encourages parents to facilitate activities related to comprehension and decoding, make literacy a priority by modeling engagement in reading and writing, and talk with their child’s teacher to learn about classroom-based literacy instruction.

### **Conceptualizations of Literacy**

These findings suggest that the family literacy text conceptualizes home literacy and school literacy in the same manner. As such, the text indicates that both classroom instruction and home literacy activities should foster the development of decoding and comprehension. To illustrate, the text recommends that both teachers and parents engage children in activities that promote alphabetic knowledge, phonemic awareness, phonics, and vocabulary. By doing so, the family literacy text suggests that classroom instruction and home literacy activities should fulfill the same objectives. Additionally, the text also indicates

that teachers and parents should engage children in the same types of literacy activities. For example, the text recommends that both teachers and parents engage children in activities that involve writing, speaking, and, most prominently, reading. To achieve that aim, the text advocates for the use of various texts including environmental print, student-made texts, and, most notably, books. Thus, by suggesting that home and school literacy espouse the same objectives, engage children in the same types of literacy-related activities, and utilize the same types of texts, the family literacy text conceptualizes home and school literacy in the same manner.

Findings regarding the conceptualizations of literacy align with existing research in at least two ways. First, the findings of this study corroborate findings from studies of family literacy programs (Senechal & Young, 2008; Van Steensel et al., 2011). Findings from these studies revealed that family literacy programs incorporate activities which support the development of decoding and comprehension. Thus, by emphasizing the development of decoding and comprehension, the family literacy text exemplifies findings from research pertaining to family literacy programs. Second, the findings from this study also corroborate findings from previous studies of family literacy materials (Anderson et al., 2007; Anderson et al., 2008; Kendrick et al., 2003). In these studies, researchers found that the text and images on family literacy websites privileged reading over other forms of literacy. Anderson et al. (2008) explain that “despite protestations that ‘family literacy is not just about reading and writing,’ found on a number of sites, reading was the most frequent form or strand of literacy identified” (p. 69). However, in contrast with the present study, writing also appeared frequently in two of the three studies of family literacy websites. Thus, findings regarding the conceptualizations of literacy not only affirm but also contradict those of previous research.

Additionally, the findings from this study also build upon the existing body of research in other ways. The findings suggest that the family literacy text positions home literacy in a supportive role with respect to school literacy. To illustrate, the text urges parents to support school literacy by engaging in home literacy activities with their children. This notion of support is made evident not only by repeated iterations of the phrase “at home you can help,” but also by the ways in which home and school literacy are discussed throughout the text. For example, the text alternates descriptions of classroom-based literacy instruction with descriptions of home-based literacy activities. In each pair of descriptions, classroom-based literacy instruction appears first and provides the context for the development of home-based literacy activities. By doing so, the family literacy text suggests that home-based literacy activities should support or augment classroom-based literacy instruction.

Thus, the findings of this study suggest that while the family literacy text conceptualizes home and school literacy in the same manner, it seems to cast home literacy in a supporting role. By conceptualizing home and school literacy in that way, the family literacy text reflects the “transmission of school literacy model” (Auerbach, 1990, p. 17). Auerbach (1990) explains that, in this model,

The goal often seems to be to transform home contexts into sites for mainstream literacy interactions and to inculcate parents with the skills and behaviors necessary to interact on the schools’ terms. Parents are taught about mainstream ways of relating to print and specific school-like literacy tasks that they can do with their children. The direction of this model is from the schools—to the parents—to the children (p. 17).

By promoting this model, the text reflects at least two concerns which have been cited by critics of family literacy programs. First, by encouraging parents to replicate classroom-based literacy practices in the home, the text marginalizes literacy practices which are different from those found in the school setting. Second, by placing heavy emphasis on books and reading, the text privileges literacy practices which align with European American culture.

### **Role of Parents**

The findings from this study also address the ways in which the family literacy text constructs the role of parents in supporting the literacy development of their children. As such, findings suggest that parents should serve as a conduit between the home and the classroom. To illustrate, the text recommends that parents not only establish a relationship with their child’s teacher, but also maintain clear communication regarding their child’s literacy development. By doing so, the text seems to assign parents the responsibility of building home-school connections. In addition, the family literacy text also recommends that parents work to build similarities between the home and the classroom. For example, the text recommends that parents learn about classroom-based literacy activities so they may replicate those activities in the home.

Additionally, the findings from this study suggest that the family literacy text constructs the role of parents as that of an instructional assistant. The text urges parents to engage their children in home literacy activities on a regular basis. However, the text explains that in doing so, parents should support not only their child’s literacy development, but also the work of their child’s teacher. Thus, the family literacy text urges parents to engage their child in home-based literacy activities which align with those found in the classroom setting. In order to do so, the family literacy text recommends that parents observe their child’s teacher and inquire about appropriate home-based literacy



activities. By doing so, the family literacy text constructs parents as instructional assistants.

Likewise, previous studies have demonstrated that family literacy materials position parents within an instructional role (Anderson et al., 2008; Smythe & Isserlis, 2002). The findings from this study corroborate these previous findings. Nonetheless, the findings from this study also challenge the nature of parents' role as it pertains to literacy instruction. To illustrate, Smythe and Isserlis (2002) noted that family literacy materials often position parents "as their child's first and most important teacher" (p. 33). However, by constructing parents as instructional assistants, the family literacy text seems to challenge the notion of parents as "first" or "most important." Thus, the findings of this study not only corroborate but also challenge findings from previous studies of family literacy materials.

### **Limitations of the Study**

While the findings of this study echo important concerns about the nature and content of family literacy materials, at least two limitations must be considered. First, although the family literacy text was linked to a nationwide, U.S.-based family literacy program, the number of participants who utilized the text remains unknown. For that reason, speculation regarding the "impact" of the text is, at present, unwarranted. Second, the data set for this study consisted of only one data source—the family literacy text. Therefore, additional data sources would provide deeper insights regarding the family literacy text and its possible impact. As such, inquiries regarding the distribution of the family literacy text and interviews with parents who received and/or used the text should be considered as avenues for future research studies.

### **Implications for Family Educators**

In summary, the findings from this study suggest that while the family literacy text conceptualizes home and school literacy in the same manner, it positions home literacy in a supporting role with respect to school literacy. In addition, the findings also suggest that the family literacy text positions parents as home-school conduits and instructional assistants. To fulfill these purposes, the family literacy text urges parents to initiate communication with their child's teacher, learn about classroom-based literacy practices, and engage in their child in similar activities at home. Thus, by conceptualizing literacy and the role of parents in that way, the text not only privileges school literacy practices which mirror the practices of mainstream, European American families, but also leaves little room for parents' preexisting literacy practices.

As a result, the findings from this study highlight important considerations regarding the design of family literacy materials, suggesting that additional attention should be given to participants' preexisting literacy practices. For that purpose, program developers may reach out to families from diverse backgrounds and inquire about their home-based literacy activities. As a result, program developers may be able to design materials which better represent the lived experiences of diverse program participants. In a similar vein, the findings also point to a need for increased awareness regarding participants' day to day experiences. By learning more about those experiences, program developers may be better able to assess the feasibility of various home-based literacy practices. For example, program developers may find that employment and other responsibilities leave parents with little time to implement home literacy activities, but that families are already engaging in other literacy practices, such as storytelling. Lastly, the findings of this study signal a need for greater input from parents and other members of the community. Program developers could solicit evaluative feedback from parents and use that feedback to revise existing family literacy materials. By seeking input from parents and other community members, learning about the day to day experiences of program participants, and inquiring into the home literacy practices of families from diverse backgrounds, program developers can ensure that parents' voices are well-represented within family literacy texts.

## References

- Alamprese, J. A. (2004). Understanding adult education in context. In B. H. Wasik (Ed.), *Handbook of family literacy* (pp. 253–270). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Anderson, J., Lenters, K., & McTavish, M. (2008). Constructing families, constructing literacy: A critical analysis of family literacy websites. *School Community Journal*, 18(1), 61–78. Retrieved from <http://www.schoolcommunitynetwork.org/SCJ.aspx>
- Anderson, J., Strelasky, J., & Anderson, T. (2007). Representing and promoting family literacy on the World Wide Web: A critical analysis. *Alberta Journal of Educational Research*, 53(2), 143–156.
- Auerbach, E. (1989). Toward a social-contextual approach to family literacy. *Harvard Educational Review*, 59(2), 165–181.
- Auerbach, E. (1990). *Making meaning, making change: A guide to participatory curriculum development for adult ESL and family literacy*. Boston, MA: University of Massachusetts.
- Auerbach, E. (1995). Deconstructing the discourse of strengths in family literacy. *Journal of Reading Behavior*, 27(4), 643–661. doi:10.1080/10862969509547903
- Britto, P. R., Brooks-Gunn, J., & Griffin, T. M. (2006). Maternal reading and teaching patterns: Associations with school readiness in low-income African American families. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 41(1), 68–89. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4151801>
- Cassidy, J., García, R., Tejeda-Delgado, C., Garrett, S. D., Martínez-García, C., & Hinojosa, R. V. (2004). A learner-centered family literacy project for Latino parents and caregivers. *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy*, 47, 478–488.

- Chance, R. (2010). Family literacy programs: Opportunities and possibilities. *Teacher Librarian*, 37(5), 8–12.
- Creswell, J. W. (2009). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.). Los Angeles, CA: Sage.
- Delgado-Gaitan, C. (1987). Mexican adult literacy: New directions for immigrants. In S. R. Goldman & H. T. Trueba (Eds.), *Becoming literate in English as a second language: Cognition and literacy* (pp. 9–32). Westport, CT: Ablex Publishing.
- Elish-Piper, L. (2000). An analysis of the social-contextual responsiveness of adult education in urban family literacy programs: Trends, obstacles, and solutions. *Reading Research and Instruction*, 39(3), 184–200. doi:10.1080/19388070009558321
- Gadsden, V. L. (2004). Family literacy and culture. In B. H. Wasik (Ed.), *Handbook of family literacy* (pp. 401–424). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Gadsden, V. L. (2008). Family literacy. In B. V. Street & N. H. Hornberger (Eds.), *Encyclopedia of language and education* (pp. 163–177). New York, NY: Springer.
- Gee, J. P. (2011). *How to do discourse analysis: A toolkit*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Glaser, B., & Strauss, A. (1967). *The discovery of grounded theory: Strategies for qualitative research*. Chicago, IL: Aldine.
- Heath, S. B. (1982). What no bedtime story means: Narrative skills at home and school. *Language in Society*, 11(1), 49–76. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4167291>
- Heath, S. B. (1983). *Ways with words*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.
- Hoffman, J. V., Wilson, M., Martinez, R., & Sailors, M. (2011). Content analysis in literacy research: The past, present, and future. In N. K. Duke & M. H. Mallette (Eds.), *Literacy research methodologies* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.; pp. 28–49). New York, NY: Guilford.
- Hood, M., Conlon, E., & Andrews, G. (2008). Preschool home literacy practices and children's literacy development: A longitudinal analysis. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 100, 252–271.
- Johnson, A. S. (2010). The Jones family's culture of literacy. *The Reading Teacher*, 64(1), 33–44.
- Kendrick, M., Anderson, J., Smythe, S., & McKay, R. (2003). What images of family literacy reveal about family literacy practices and family literacy programs. In C. Fairbanks, J. Worthy, J. Hoffman, & D. Schallert (Eds.), *52<sup>nd</sup> yearbook of the National Reading Conference* (pp. 245–258). Oak Creek, WI: National Reading Conference.
- Ladson-Billings, G. (1998). Just what is Critical Race Theory and what's it doing in a nice field like education? *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 11(1), 7–24.
- Lynch, J. (2009). Print literacy engagement of parents from low-income backgrounds: Implications for adult and family literacy programs. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, 52(6), 509–521.
- Mann, V. (2014). Spanish-language home visitation to disadvantaged Latino preschoolers: A means of promoting language development and English school readiness. *Creative Education*, 5, 411–426.
- Morrow, L. M., & Paratore, J. (with Graber, D., Harrison, C., & Tracey, D.). (1993). Family literacy: Perspectives and practices. *The Reading Teacher*, 47(3), 194–200. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20201233>
- Mui, S., & Anderson, J. (2008). At home with the Johars: Another look at family literacy. *The Reading Teacher*, 62(3), 234–243.
- Neuendorff, K. A. (2011). Content analysis: A methodological primer for gender research. *Sex Roles*, 64, 276–289.
- Nistler, R. J., & Maiers, A. (1999). Stopping the silence: Hearing parents' voices in an urban first-grade family literacy program. *The Reading Teacher*, 53(8), 670–680. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20204864>

- O'Donnell, J., & Kirkner, S. L. (2014). The impact of a collaborative family involvement program on Latino families and children's educational performance. *School Community Journal*, 24(1), 211–234. Retrieved from <http://www.schoolcommunitynetwork.org/SCJ.aspx>
- Reyes, L. V., & Torres, M. N. (2007). Decolonizing family literacy in a culture circle: Reinventing the family literacy educator's role. *Journal of Early Childhood Literacy*, 7(1), 73–94. doi:10/1177/1468798407074837
- Senechal, M., & Young, L. (2008). The effect of family literacy interventions on children's acquisition of reading from Kindergarten to Grade 3: A meta-analytic review. *Review of Educational Research*, 78(4), 880–907. doi:10.3102/0034654308320319
- Shapiro, S. (2014). "Words that you said got bigger": English language learners' lived experiences of deficit discourse. *Research in the Teaching of English*, 48(4), 386–406.
- Smythe, S. (2006). *The good mother: A critical discourse analysis of literacy advice to mothers in the Twentieth Century*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of British Columbia, Vancouver.
- Smythe, S., & Isserlis, J. (2002). Regulating women and families: Mothering discourses in family literacy texts. *English Quarterly*, 34(3/4), 30–38.
- Solórzano, D. G., & Yosso, T. (2002). Critical race methodology: Counter-storytelling as an analytical framework for educational research. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 8(1), 23–44.
- Soto Huerta, M. E., & Riojas-Cortez, M. (2011). Santo remedio: Latino parents and students foster literacy through a culturally relevant folk medicine event. *Multicultural Education*, 18(2), 39–43.
- Stephenson, K. A., Parrila, R. K., & Georgiou, G. K. (2008). Effects of home literacy, parents' beliefs, and children's task-focused behavior on emergent literacy and word reading skills. *Scientific Studies of Reading*, 12(1), 24–50. doi:10/1080/10888430701746864
- Storch, S. A., & Whitehurst, G. J. (2001). The role of family and home in the literacy development of children from low-income backgrounds. *New Directions for Child and Adolescent Development*, 92, 53–71.
- Swick, K. J. (2009). Promoting school and life success through early childhood family literacy. *Early Childhood Education*, 36, 403–406. doi:10.1007/s1064300903054
- Taylor, D. (1993). Family literacy: Resisting deficit models. *TESOL Quarterly*, 27(3), 550–553.
- Taylor, D., & Dorsey-Gaines, C. (1988). *Growing up literate*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Van Steensel, R., McElvany, N., Kurvers, J., & Herppich, S. (2011). How effective are family literacy programs? Results of a meta-analysis. *Review of Educational Research*, 81(1), 69–96. doi:10/3102/0034654310388819
- Wasik, B. H., & Herrmann, S. (2004). Family literacy: History, concepts, and services. In B. H. Wasik (Ed.), *Handbook of family literacy* (pp. 3–22). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- White, M. D., & Marsh, E. E. (2006). Content analysis: A flexible methodology. *Library Trends*, 55(1), 22–45.

Tracey Kumar is an assistant professor in the Department of Teaching and Learning at Southeastern Louisiana University. Her research emphasizes the proliferation of texts/practices that are relevant and empowering for diverse students, families, and communities. Correspondence concerning this article may be sent to Southeastern Louisiana Univ., Dept. of Teaching & Learning, SLU 10749, Hammond, LA 70402.