

“We Conquered This Together”: Tier 2 Collaboration With Families

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Abstract

Family involvement in a child’s education is vital to student success. This article presents qualitative findings from a more extensive study that examined family participation within a Response to Intervention (RtI) framework for K–1 grade students receiving Tier 2 reading interventions. RtI is a problem-solving tiered framework designed to provide high quality instruction to students who struggle with academic challenges, and Tier 2 interventions are for students who require more targeted instruction. This study focused on a group of families of K–1 students receiving targeted (Tier 2) reading interventions. Data were collected from extensive interviews, memos, field notes, and other artifacts. Analysis of the family interviews revealed several themes including *frustration*, *engagement*, and *collaboration*, which is relevant for all educators as they collaborate with families to close learning gaps among students. Key findings after the study intervention included families reporting feeling more comfortable in the role of teacher at home, families reporting increases in problem-solving, and families feeling more engaged in academically supporting their children. Actual and perceived barriers of time, human connection, and fear of upsetting teachers often impeded family engagement. A lack of understanding and communication between the school and the families influenced family engagement and connectedness to student learning.

Key Words: family involvement, family engagement, family–school collaboration, problem-solving, Response to Intervention, RtI, Tier 2, communication

Introduction

There are several educational quandaries in public schools, and among the most challenging is the need to develop consensus on the type and intensity of family engagement in student learning. Federal mandates such as the Every Student Succeeds Act (2015) and Individuals with Disabilities Act (2004) require that schools and families collaborate, yet schools and families often disagree about the type of participation and intensity of participation that would be best in any given circumstance (Griffith, 1998; Hill & Taylor, 2004). Families and schools often question how family engagement can positively influence student learning (Jeynes, 2012; O'Donnell & Kirkner, 2014). Frequently, schools view family participation in the educational process through a single lens leading to narrow-minded assumptions about families (Ferrara, 2009). This limiting "school-centric" (Lawson, 2003) view often perceives the family in minor roles such as participating in family-school nights and parent-teacher conferences. Consequently, family participation is limited to peripheral involvement in their child's education, (Ferrara, 2009), feeling alienated by school structure (Drummond & Stipek, 2004; Griffith, 1998; Harris & Goodall, 2008; Mapp & Kuttner, 2013), or questioning their role in the school environment (Green, Walker, Hoover-Dempsey, & Sandler, 2007; Hoover-Dempsey, & Sandler, 1995, 1997). As a result, many families fade from the role of the teacher in the home (Epstein, 2001). However, family involvement can improve student academic outcomes (Comer & Haynes, 1991; Dowd-Eagle, 2007; Fan & Chen, 2001; Green et al., 2007; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Sheldon & Epstein, 2005). When families and schools collaborate to support student learning, academic outcomes are positive and improved (Dowd-Eagle, 2007; Henderson & Mapp, 2002).

Collaborating in a problem-solving process produces a productive and meaningful approach to working with families. The problem-solving process encourages shared responsibility for student learning (Christenson & Sheridan, 2001; Reschly, 2008; Reschly & Christenson, 2012; Reschly, Coolong, Christenson, & Gutkin, 2007; Sheridan & Kratochwill, 2010), a keystone of family engagement. When families begin to identify personal desires and concerns for their children as well as the available resources and supports, they can serve as an agent of student improvement (Faires, Nichols, & Rickelman, 2000; Reschly & Christenson, 2012; Sheridan & Kratochwill, 2010). Through a problem-solving process, families can share expert information about their children and can learn valuable skills to more fully support learning at home (Reschly & Christenson, 2012). Further, problem-solving with families on academic matters forces schools to understand what families need to become

collaborative team members, which is an essential aspect of federal legislation (ESSA, 2015; IDEA, 2004). This type of collaboration is a productive and meaningful way that families can become more actively involved in their child's education (Christenson & Sheridan, 2001; Sheridan & Kratochwill, 2010).

Family-school collaboration is an essential part of the Response to Intervention (RtI) process. RtI is designed to be an evidence-based service delivery model conceptualized through a multitiered approach which is intended to assist struggling students either in the general education setting or through supplemental instruction (Hollenbeck, 2007; Vaughn, Wanzek, Woodruff, & Linan-Thompson, 2007). The traditional RtI model, designed as a three-tiered system, provides gradual supports for students beginning with universal interventions (Tier 1), then targeted interventions (Tier 2), and, finally, intensive or individual intervention (Tier 3).

Although problem-solving has been utilized as a school-based strategy to assist students who require intensive interventions and supports, there is a gap in the research, specifically involving kindergarten and first grade (K-1) students receiving Tier 2 instructional reading supports. Furthermore, there has been little research conducted on family involvement within the RtI problem-solving process (Sheridan & Kratochwill, 2010). "Parents have been involved [minimally in RtI] through a perfunctory and superficial manner through obligatory methods such as parent notification" (Burns & Gibbons, 2008, p. 10), even though there are federal requirements for authentic family engagement. In light of this concept, this study involved families who had K-1 children requiring Tier 2 reading supports.

Conceptual Frameworks

This study built upon the assertion that family engagement in student learning is paramount to improving student learning and achievement. Within the RtI construct, Family-School Partnerships (Christenson & Sheridan, 2001) and the structured interview process found in Conjoint Behavioral Consultation (Sheridan & Kratochwill, 2010) framed the study. These concepts complement one another by keeping families at the forefront of problem-solving and providing structured opportunities for fluid collaboration regarding the student's learning process within an RtI framework.

The goal of RtI is to identify distinctive instructional interventions that support student academic success (Burns & Gibbons, 2008). The RtI framework includes collaborative problem-solving, frequent monitoring of student progress, and differentiation of instruction with increasing levels of intensity within three tiers of instructional support (Burns & Gibbons, 2008; Gerzel-

Short & Wilkins, 2009). For example, all students in a given school receive Tier 1, which is the foundational “core” instruction for all students (e.g., the general education grade-level reading program). Some students will require Tier 2 targeted interventions designed to focus instruction on a specific skill or sets of skills, (e.g., focused instruction based on student need such as extra phonics instruction or extra practice learning letter names and letter sounds). A few individual students will require Tier 3 intensive interventions which are delivered in small controlled groups (e.g., specialized instruction such as *Direct Instruction Reading Mastery*).

The goal of collaborative problem-solving is to evaluate the educational needs of students to decide which effective research-based interventions can best meet the needs of a given student (Fuchs, Fuchs, & Compton, 2004; Shinn, 2005). Schools create problem-solving teams that evaluate student data, continuously checking to determine whether interventions and strategies are effective in supporting students’ needs (Gerzel-Short, & Wilkins, 2009). These teams consist of school personnel and typically do not include families. However, collaborating with families through problem-solving is a dynamic and valuable way that families can become more actively involved in their child’s education (Christenson & Sheridan, 2001; Sheridan & Kratochwill, 2010). Early involvement in a child’s education is imperative in the RtI process because families can identify concerns and desires for their children who are struggling with early literacy skills. Considering families as members of the problem-solving team enhances shared responsibilities for student learning and improves family–school partnerships.

Family–School Partnerships

Christenson and Sheridan (2001) identified four principles of favorable home–school collaborative relationships: approach, attitude, atmosphere, and action. *Approach* is foundational and sets the tone of communication with the understanding that family engagement in school is crucial. *Attitude* takes into consideration the “values and perceptions held about family–school relationships” (p. 26) and reflects a willingness to understand and address barriers to family engagement. *Atmosphere* is the climate of the school and includes a range of communication strategies to share information with all families. *Action* refers to strategies schools use to build strong collaborative partnerships with families (e.g., the monitoring of student progress is a shared responsibility between the home and school). These four components of family–school relationships help to create a cohesive, supportive tone for problem-solving with families by facilitating communication through mutual consultation and respect.

Conjoint Behavioral Consultation

Conjoint Behavioral Consultation (CBC) is a structured, strength-based, problem-solving model that uses consultation between home and school (Sheridan & Kratochwill, 2010). This problem-solving model is a powerful tool used to actively partner with families to improve student learning outcomes because it is a shared home–school experience. The CBC model takes into account that children function and learn in multiple environments (Bronfenbrenner, 1986) and that mutual collaboration between the adults who are responsible for arranging the two environments is essential for children’s success. CBC utilizes a consultant (e.g., school personnel) who facilitates the problem-solving process between home and school (Sheridan, Clarke, & Burt, 2008). CBC has three key goals: (a) promoting academic, social, and behavioral outcomes for children; (b) planning across multiple domains; and (c) encouraging parent engagement and strengthening relationships between environmental systems (Sheridan & Kratochwill, 2010). In CBC, the family and the school work collaboratively to problem solve and support the student (e.g., collaboratively identify and set goals, support a Tier 2 reading intervention in the home and the school) in cross-system planning (Sheridan & Kratochwill, 2010). Throughout this structured process, families become empowered to help their children, which results in increased opportunities to problem solve in the future.

While federal legislation guides schools to engage families in “meaningful” practices, families often remain excluded from strategies that can improve student academic outcomes. Although numerous studies have evaluated family involvement (e.g., Faires, Nichols, & Rickelman, 2000; Jeynes, 2012; O’Donnell & Kirkner, 2014) and studies have covered the RtI framework (Compton, Fuchs, Fuchs, & Bryant, 2006; Kamps et al., 2008), there is a considerable gap in the literature merging family engagement and participation within the RtI and problem-solving framework. Therefore, this qualitative study focused on family–school partnerships and family presence in supporting reading interventions at home, and not only adds to the body of research but, more importantly, adds a proactive voice to the importance of family–school collaborative relationships in an RtI context.

Methodology

The information presented in this article is a portion of the research from a larger mixed-methods study. The article discusses the results of an intervention implemented through family sessions that aimed to engage families in their child’s learning.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this case study was to investigate the effects of family involvement in Tier 2 reading interventions for K–1 students. The following questions guided this study:

1. How do family–child interactions change as a result of the family sessions?
2. What do families report regarding family involvement in school as a result of family intervention sessions?

Setting and Researcher Role

Tree Grove Elementary (pseudonym, as are all names used in this article), located in a Midwestern rural/suburban community, is a part of a community unit school district consisting of one high school, several middle schools, and eight elementary schools. Tree Grove was considered “at risk” for school failure because of students’ high mobility and low socioeconomic status. According to the Child Welfare Information Gateway (2009), by considering the risk factors, the family and school team can mitigate reduced academic performance for students in early grades by providing students and families with support for early learning as well as connecting the family and school through partnerships. I was the researcher in this study, and although I was a special education teacher at the school, I had no direct instructional interaction with the participants in this study.

Context

The school district utilized a tiered instructional approach, modeled on RtI problem-solving, to meet the diverse needs of students enrolled in the school district. As an “early adopter” of RtI practices, this school district provided extensive professional development on RtI, the problem-solving model, and tiered instructional supports for school faculty and staff. The school district employed local norms based on early literacy and reading curriculum-based measurements (CBM) benchmarking to establish the menu of services within the tiers. CBM are valid general outcome measurements which are characterized as easy to administer, time sensitive (short duration ranging from 1–4 minutes), inexpensive, reliable, and reactive to subtle academic changes (Deno, 2003). These measurements are used as both a general outcome measurement and a progress-monitoring tool (Deno, 2003). CBM are based on content taught in the general education classroom. Early literacy reading probes that assess letter naming and letter sound identification are examples of CBM.

The school-based data team determined all tiered supplemental instructional decisions, and I was not involved in the data team process. The data team

consisted of building leadership, grade level general education teachers, and educational specialists (i.e., special education teachers, a school psychologist, and a reading specialist). At the time student data were collected, there were no direct interventions or supports for families with children receiving Tier 2 interventions other than notification of the service via a letter sent home with the child.

The school data team designated Aimsweb® (i.e., web-based RtI data assessment and management system) cut scores between the 10th and 25th percentile (local norms) of early literacy and reading CBM requiring Tier 2 interventions. The cut score range helped the team determine the most appropriate Tier 2 interventions for students. Data-based decision making followed an accepted practice based on benchmarking three times a year, and results of these data team meetings determined the level of interventions needed by students. The data team also held follow-up team meetings every 6–8 weeks based on the tiered supports students required. During these meetings, the data team considered all pertinent data such as CBM benchmarking data, progress monitoring, and anecdotal information collected from teachers as well as whether to maintain current interventions, change interventions, or suspend interventions. According to Tree Grove CBM benchmarking data, 31 students in K–1 were eligible for Tier 2 reading supports. Family participants for this study were identified from this group of students' families.

Recruitment

Before recruitment, IRB approval was obtained, and special care was taken to ensure the safety and protection of all participants. Participant assents and consents were collected, and all data including transcripts, digital recordings, and student CBM data were stored in a password-protected file. Family participants were recruited through an established “take home” folder system designated by the school and classroom teachers. The “take home” folder procedure system was shared with families during parent–teacher conferences. All forms and phone calls were available in English and Spanish. Since many families did not attend parent–teacher conferences, the informational letter and consent/assent forms in both English and Spanish were mailed with a self-addressed, stamped envelope to all potential participant families. The informational letter included: (a) general information regarding the study, (b) the time commitment, (c) a description of data collection tools, and (d) how the data would be protected and secured. Follow-up recruiting phone calls were made to secure participants for the study.

The selection of potential family participants was at first based on a convenience sample drawn from the families of the 31 K–1 students identified

as needing additional Tier 2 instructional supports in the area of early literacy skills. The sample excluded four participants, one family moved, one family requested no sharing of personal information, one family address was not locatable, and one family was having significant family issues and was not available to participate in the study. Therefore, the revised total of available participants numbered 27 K–1 students receiving Tier 2 reading intervention before data collection. The participants in the study were families of those children in Grades K–1 receiving Tier 2 reading interventions. Although students were not direct participants in this study, their CBM benchmarking and progress monitoring data was used during problem-solving family sessions, so in addition to the family consent forms, student assent forms were also gathered. Of the 27 families of children identified as needing Tier 2 instructional supports, 12 families signed participant consent forms, and their identified children signed assent forms. These 12 families were randomly assigned to the control group or the intervention group. Participants in the control group did not participate in family interviews and will not be discussed in this article, which reports the findings from the six families in the intervention group.

Participants

Participant data were collected through semi-structured interviews which served as problem-solving meetings. Springboard conversations with families centered on the early literacy and reading CBM benchmark and progress monitoring data which the school provided with family permission. For this article, the term family session refers to an interview.

Table 1. Participant Characteristics (respondents completing forms)

Family	Gender	Age	Race/Ethnicity	Level of Education
1	F	25–29	White	HSG
2	F	30–34	Hispanic	SHS
3	F	30–34	Asian American	HSG
4	F	30–34	African American	SC
5	F	35–39	African American	SC
6	F	40–44	White	CG

Note. SHS = Some High School; HSG = High School Graduate; SC = Some College; CG = College Graduate

Of the six families that participated in the family sessions, three had kindergarten students, and three had first grade students. Although both male and

female family members participated in the study, only one member of each family completed a demographic information form. The six respondents were female and represented each of the age ranges provided—one respondent in the 25–29 age range, three respondents in the 30–34 age range, one respondent in the 35–39 age range, and one respondent in the 40–44 age range. The participants, as shown in Table 1, varied in age, race/ethnicity, and level of education.

Procedures

Initially, based on family preference, each respective family session was conducted face-to-face at the school in the evening. As families became more comfortable with me, I was invited into each of the family homes. All interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed, and participants were assured their comments would remain confidential and protected. The family sessions served several purposes, but in particular they were designed to provide open communication between the families and myself and to add a family voice to student learning. The family sessions were dynamic, and the flow represented the needs of the family, meaning that after the initial meeting where individual benchmarking student data were evaluated and discussed, subsequent interviews followed the problem-solving model loosely based on CBC (Sheridan & Kratchowill, 2010). The interview protocols were validated through peer review. Interview protocols are procedural guides (scripts) designed to structure the interview and include the types and depths of questions used to do so (Patton, 2015). The interview protocols (see Table 2) reflected an open-ended and flexible approach, with each session starting with a typical pattern of the family sharing the successes and barriers of the week, then looking at their child's data and the problem-solving issues identified by the family.

I met with most families in at least five separate sessions, although one family was available for only four family sessions. Each session lasted, on average, one and a half to two hours and typically included two to three family members. The typical cycle of a family session began with celebrations and challenges of working with a child at home. Next, we would review the most current progress-monitoring chart that I received from the school, then we would problem solve by looking at the data. Finally, families would determine instructional decisions that they wanted to make at home about their child's data. These problem-solving sessions were an essential aspect of the intervention. Typically, families would identify a skill they wanted to work on with their child, and then I created an activity or game that would help the family support their child. Often these activities included specific steps that families could follow such as a teaching cycle or a specific reading strategy that they might use if the child was struggling with a particular task or assignment. Each

family received a binder, and weekly we would add the progress monitoring data, a notes page, and any strategies or activities that the families used with their child.

Table 2. Family Session Cycles

Interview Cycle	Purpose	Activity/Materials
Individual Family Session 1	Establish a collegial relationship Look at individual student winter benchmarking data Problem solve around the data	Binder of activities based on family/ student needs in reading
Individual Family Session 2	Update from home Look at student progress monitoring data Problem solve Determine what is working and what are the next steps	Binder of activities based on family/ student needs in reading
Individual Family Session 3	Update from home Look at student progress monitoring data Problem solve Determine what is working and what are the next steps	Binder of activities based on family/ student needs in reading
Individual Family Session 4	Update from home Look at student progress monitoring data Problem solve Determine what is working and what are the next steps	Binder of activities based on family/ student needs in reading
Individual Family Session 5	Update from home Look at individual student spring benchmarking data & progress monitoring data Next steps Exit interview	RtI post survey

Data Analysis

Qualitative data analysis involves looking at data and creating categories that help to organize volumes of data using codes and themes to find patterns (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). The processes of writing thoughtful memos as a reflection tool during data collection can provide moments of clarity during the process of sifting through volumes of data (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). The qualitative data were analyzed once the memo writing and transcribing were completed. Data analyses included open coding, thick description, and coding of themes (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Shank, 2006). The trustworthiness of

the data was supported through achieving intercoder reliability with an unconnected researcher, member checking, and peer review, since garnering the voice of participant families concerning student learning and achievement is vital to student growth (Christenson & Sheridan, 2001). The creation of a codebook helped establish intercoder agreement (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011; Saldaña, 2009). All qualitative data were coded and evaluated for themes using NVivo® qualitative analysis software.

Initially, data analysis was conducted using a process of open coding to make the information more manageable (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Shank, 2006). This first cycle of open coding action yielded 38 initial codes. Next, coordinating, similar codes were grouped into smaller, more manageable parent codes with child codes, which resulted in 25 parent codes, and more refining by axial coding the transcribed data resulted in 15 parent codes. The comprehensive axial coding condensed the data further to develop themes (Mertens, 2010). As suggested, a codebook was developed that included each code and its definition (Mertens, 2010). The process of the intercoder agreement was used based on the codebook developed to find reliability and agreement in the coding process (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011; Saldaña, 2009). During this process, another researcher unconnected to the study but familiar with qualitative analysis and NVivo® used the established codebook (see Table 3, next page) and evaluated several transcripts separate from the researcher to determine intercoder agreement. The intercoder agreement formula was the number of agreements divided by the total number of agreements added to the total number of disagreements multiplied by 100. In the case of this study, the level of agreement was 93% agreement.

Findings

The findings presented here are the reflections and thoughts of the families that participated in the family sessions. Analysis of the data revealed six themes. The first research question revolving around a change in family–child interactions revealed three themes including family–child interactions, families as teachers, and families as emerging advocates. From the second research question, three themes emerged including frustration, challenges, and collaboration.

Table 3. Codebook

Code	Code Explanation
Challenges	Challenges that families identify when working with the school -How schools communicate with families -"Backpack" -Schools not communicating with families
Collaborating	How families and schools work together
District Policies	District RtI policies
Family–Child Interactions	How families interact with their children -Play -Schoolwork -Reading
Frustration	Frustration with school Frustration with homework Frustration with how to help my child
Home–School Communication	The communication between the home and school -Letters home -Phone calls -Emails
Families as Advocate	Families learning/using advocacy skills
Families as Teachers	Families in the roles of teachers/tutors in the home
Partnering With the School	How the family works with the school
Problem-Solving	Shared goals, working toward a common problem/solution -Typically around school work -Reading
RtI	Response to Intervention
School Communication	How the school communicates with the families/home
Strategies	Strategies used in teaching at home
Structure	How the RtI system is set up
Whose Responsibility	Whose responsibility it is for communication

Changes in Family–Child Interactions

To remain authentic to the voices of the families, quotes from family interviews were not altered and reflect the register of the speaker. Three themes,

family-child interactions, families as teachers, and families as emerging advocates emerged from the data collected from the first research question.

Family-Child Interactions

Often families reported that the school (teachers) sent homework that was frustrating and difficult to understand. Family participants reported not having the prerequisite knowledge or skills and tools to support their child's learning in the home. Sometimes they reported missing learning tools such as crayons, a calculator, and other items. More often, family participants reported that they did not understand assignment directions or how to begin to help their child learn. For instance, during our first family session, one mother reported that her son's teacher sent home practice word cards, but the "flashcards...he's not interested in 'em; he sees it as a chore, not as fun, and he just doesn't want to do it." Ms. P. further commented on the school work sent home by saying, "You might understand, you might not; it's kinda' frustrating." Another family described similar feelings regarding homework. As Mrs. S. stated, "Sometimes I'm stumped, like I have no idea how I'm supposed to teach her this; you know, sometimes it is hard for me to understand." Repeatedly stating, "I am not a teacher," Mrs. S. was visibly upset and frustrated because her initial interactions with her child about homework were unpleasant, and she felt that she did not have the tools to improve how she worked with her daughter. Comments like the one made by one mother, Mrs. D., were very similar to those of other families: "They send home paperwork [homework], and I've got to figure out how to help my daughter understand it."

These family frustrations negatively influenced how the children and their families worked together. In some instances, the tension created by work sent home made some of the families less interested in participating in their child's schoolwork and afterschool activities as it was a source of conflict and strife in the home. The activities and strategies we identified were student-specific based on problem-solving with the family while looking at CBM reading benchmarking data, word identification fluency (WIF) CBM data (when applicable, as many of the children were being progress monitored with WIF probes), and biweekly progress monitoring data. Repeatedly, families reported the desire for their child to be successful in school; however, they were unsure how to teach or provide support at home. For example, during the second family session, while reviewing a sight-word activity, Mrs. F. repeatedly questioned how to help her daughter by asking, "Is this how I do it?" In this example, the mother was unsure of her ability and lacked confidence in her understanding of how to present the task to her daughter. Initially, many of the families identified the family-child interactions as "family time," although these times were

not necessarily learning time or even homework time. As we worked together, these families grew into “teachers at home” looking at the strategies and games as the new kind of “family time.”

Families as Teachers

A second emerging theme delves deeper into the role of families as teachers in the home. This theme moves beyond the activities presented and facilitates family involvement in the beginning stages of problem-solving at home. Family participants were asking how they could help their children and requesting specific learning strategies they could use with their child. Each family reviewed student progress monitoring data, and they determined the direction of supports their child needed. This process empowered families to take ownership of their child’s learning. For example, Rob (student, Family 4) loved dinosaurs, so I created a Dinosaur Word Game with T-Rex cards under the direction of the family. Shared problem-solving was the backdrop to family sessions, and by creating and focusing on a short-term (home) objective based on progress monitoring data, Ms. P. and her son worked together on an activity that helped improve Rob’s reading decoding skills. Ms. P. also reported during Family Session 4 that Rob demonstrated an interest in his progress monitoring graph; he “wanted to know his goal, where the star was,” so she used the home graph as a motivation tool while working with her son. Ms. P. was advocating for her child and incorporating the positive strategy of goal setting to engage her son in learning. In another example, this same mother shared her experience as a “teacher at home”:

All this working with Rob in reading and his brother’s tagging along, I think his little brother is gonna pick it up [snaps finger] just like that! Yeah, Rob’s getting it...like we’re actually on list four and five, and I think the next time I’m going to go to five and six. I mean he’s getting the words; I mean he has a problem with some of them, but I mean it’s all in just practice. I also have used the game cards as practice flash cards.

These families became teachers for their children and reported an increase in the time they spent engaged in learning activities or homework together. Many of the families had parallel experiences. For example, during a family session with Mrs. A., I was quietly encouraging and coaching Mrs. A. while she was practicing a skill with her son. When I shared with her, “That was great. You did a nice job interacting with your son, reinforcing his decoding,” she proudly stated, “That’s what we do all the time!” The findings indicated that families felt more comfortable in the role of teacher at home once they received support. For example, Mrs. S. recalled what strategies or activities she felt were the most helpful to her and her family:

Well, we've done all your activities, and those are helpful; we played the Pizza Game again today. She loves it because she doesn't realize she's reading. We are also making sure that she is touching the words, looking at the letters, and trying to sound it out if she doesn't know.

The participant families were beginning to own the learning that was happening in their homes. In essence, these participants were establishing themselves as the "teacher" and taking ownership of learning in the home.

Families as Emerging Advocates

As families became empowered with knowledge regarding RtI and their child's needs, they appeared to be more inclined to participate in the problem-solving process not only with me but also within the school. It seems that this step in the collaborative relationship between a family and the school empowers the family to be a support system for their child. One example included Mrs. A., who became a more empowered parent. While talking about being an advocate, she emphatically stated, "My son knows that I'm responsible for helping him, too; he's going to hold me accountable just like I'm going to hold him accountable." Some families were beginning to feel more invested in the process of the family sessions as well as the problem-solving that took place. For example, Mrs. A. described her experience during Family Session 4 as she was looking at her son's progress monitoring graph:

I can see where he's definitely shown some growth, and I can also see sometimes while he's home he's also struggling, and everything that you've given me is definitely helping out....He's excited to work with the things that you have given to us, and it's not hard. I can see where it's definitely helping him; I can see that.

The findings suggest that when families feel empowered to be a part of the problem-solving process, then they are more likely to increase their involvement in their child's learning at home and school, thus extending learning into the home and making school learning relevant at home.

Empowered families can advocate for what their child needs. In this example, Mrs. A. was using a skill she learned, looking at her son's data, and making a statement about the data, which helped develop a plan for our next meeting. Repeatedly, families stated that their children were "reading more." As families felt more comfortable and connected to the issue, they were more involved in working with their children. The result was a family connecting to the child's learning and, therefore, becoming more skilled in making decisions regarding what their child might need and barriers that need to be addressed. One family reported calling their child's teacher and requesting additional information regarding their daughter's success in class because they wanted to help their daughter more at home.

Mr. S. shared his impressions after looking at his daughter's progress monitoring graph and reflecting on teaching in the home:

It could be a coincidence, but you know since we started meeting, the numbers have gone up, so something happened, you know. I know you've [to the mom] been frustrated working with her, and some of the ideas you've given us immediately out of the box that we've been working on, my wife no longer calls me complaining that she's too frustrated.

These opportunities empowered families to become emerging advocates for their families by slowly building confidence in their ability to support learning in the home and becoming an active participant of a learning team which is a vital component of student achievement.

The data suggests that by using the conceptual framework of Family–School Partnership and problem-solving, families developed skills and strategies for working with their children. Several of the families were able to move beyond the activities I provided and began to problem-solve activities with their children. As a result, many of the families began to develop advocacy skills. With support, families were able to help their children and become more connected to the family–school partnership. In looking at progress monitoring data, families were able to engage in conversations about their child's learning in a non-threatening, positive manner. These findings suggest that these changes happened because families were provided with supports and were invested in the problem-solving process.

Family Intervention and Family Engagement

The themes that emerged from the data associated with the family intervention and family engagement in school were *frustration*, *challenges*, and *collaboration*.

Frustration

The first theme that developed was *frustration*. Initially, many of the families reported feeling frustrated by the school, especially how the school communicated information. Mr. and Mrs. D. voiced their frustration during the second family session, "The school doesn't communicate. They just send everything home in letters." Family participants desired discussion, a person to talk to on the phone, or face-to-face conversation without educational jargon. Ms. P. expressed the same frustrated sentiment, sharing that "they just send stuff home with no explanation." To mitigate this frustration, Mr. S. wanted the school to know that his family does care about their child.

It's just...you guys need to know how to reach out to us and that we care enough to help out. We need to know who to talk to so that we can

say, we're having a disconnection here, and if it wasn't for this kind of intervention [the study], I don't know how we would connect with the teacher. I wouldn't have even known she [daughter] was in Tier 2!

Families articulated frustration in many different ways. Mr. and Mrs. A. were frustrated with how the school sent "mixed messages," wanting families to be involved in evening activities such as family nights but then not helping parents understand how their child was performing in school. For example, Mrs. A. shared, "They're doing a lot of stuff for fundraising and parties, but I'm interested in academics." When asked how the school approaches partnership with families, one parent team reported that they felt the school does not approach partnership. Mr. S. stated emphatically, "Does it?" Then his wife shared her thoughts, "The school hasn't changed their approach, but you have helped us tremendously. Ultimately, it is up to us to get something moving and to find out what she [daughter] is doing in class."

The level of frustration expressed by the participant families varied, but there was a direct connection with lack of home-school communication. For instance, Mr. S. was frustrated with the communication at parent-teacher conferences: "I got 15 minutes with the teacher. There were families scheduled before and after our conference, and I felt like the teacher just didn't have time for me and my questions." When I probed Mr. S. further, he said he felt like they would be imposing on the teacher. These findings suggest that the frustrations expressed by the participants also presented as challenges to being engaged in their child's learning.

Challenges

The next theme that emerged was *challenges*. Families identified challenges in many different ways. These ranged from the challenges of involvement in the school because of time constraints (e.g., school schedule not matching work schedule), the challenge in understanding the school culture, and the challenge of understanding end of the school year expectations for students. In many ways, these challenges were real barriers to involvement, either perceived or actual. Often families reported that one of the most significant challenges for them was the lack of human response. Mr. S. identified the lack of shared communication between family and teachers as a significant challenge:

From my perspective, there may be a handoff issue from the teacher to us, so we're not reinforcing what the teacher is doing. We don't know what our daughter is doing [in school], so we can't reinforce [the learning], and the teacher can't reinforce what we're doing [at home], so it's kind of challenging.

Many of the families reported feeling torn and at a loss for information, and although there were “Family Nights” and “Spring Sings,” they were not activities that included learning support. The participants were searching for ways the school could embrace families outside of the usual narrow-minded view of family involvement in school through an obligatory participation in fun-fairs and other school-based activities. Mr. S. shared, “It would be nice if the teacher...would be able to say what they did this week so we could reinforce it.” Another participant echoed the message of the challenge of sharing information. Mrs. F. believed that the school did not explain what her daughter was doing in school. She wanted the school to tell her “specifically what to do to help her child.” Families wanted concrete ways they could be a part of learning and to know how they could support their child academically, not just through family fun nights. In essence, families were looking for opportunities to collaborate with school staff.

Collaboration

The final theme that emerged from the data was *collaboration*. Families consistently reported that they wanted to collaborate with the school, but they needed support to enter into such a collaborative relationship. As Mrs. A. passionately stated during our last family session together, “We conquered this thing together and not as individuals, and that’s what I’ve been looking for this whole school year.” Participant families were unsure whom to talk to and how to ask questions. Most importantly, some families were afraid and concerned they would offend or upset the teachers. Initially, participants reported not understanding their role in student learning. As Mrs. A. said, she wanted a person with whom she could connect: “I just...I need somebody to turn to cuz I don’t know what to do.” Another participant shared, “27 kids...yeah, there’s no way she [teacher] can be present for every parent that comes by, so I greatly appreciate your being able to work with us one on one.” Similarly, Mr. & Mrs. S. were searching for connections and an opportunity to collaborate as well. For many families, having a person from school to communicate with was invaluable. Sometimes this person could be the co-collaborator with the family, and sometimes they could be the first voice for the family serving as support while families begin to feel like they can contribute to the conversation. For example, Mr. and Mrs. S. shared that they were searching for a person to work with and expressed their feeling about collaborating during the family sessions:

I feel like (chuckles) we’ve got someone on our side, and someone’s helping us out here, because before it was just mayhem; we’re forearmed now. Like before I’d sit there and say...I don’t know how to do this, but now I do.

Many of the participants searched for a person to work with and expressed similar feelings about collaborating during the family sessions.

The data suggest that actual and perceived barriers of time, human connection, and fear of upsetting teachers often impeded family involvement. A lack of understanding and communication between the school and the families influenced family participation and connectedness to the school and their child's learning. Serving as the binding force, the current infusion of time and human connection due to the study activities helped families increase their involvement in school. At some level, there appears to be a stalemate as to who will begin the conversation first—the families or the school. Ultimately, families reported that they wanted to collaborate with school personnel, but barriers were impeding that involvement.

Discussion and Implications

In analyzing the data, I found that families wanted to be involved in their child's learning beyond peripheral participation. Families were frustrated by a lack of understanding of what was happening in the school and, in particular, with their child's learning. The families learned about the RtI process and the school jargon (i.e., terms) associated with RtI and problem solving. Through this study, families became teachers in the home, and—more importantly—they became advocates for themselves and their children. Families became involved in their child's learning because they believed that they could help their children (Hoover-Dempsey, & Sandler, 1997). I also found that by encouraging family engagement through the problem-solving process, efficacious behavior grew. As one participant, Ms. P., specified, "Families should play a major role if they want their student to succeed." Families in this study became more comfortable in their new roles, and, significantly, became collaborative partners.

Initially, families reported interactions superficially, for example, "spending time together;" however, as families were provided with concrete activities and skills they could use, their involvement and interaction with their child changed. Many of the families revealed that they were stymied by the school work that was being sent home. The findings revealed that families needed support to be able to help their children. Lack of time and not understanding materials sent home fueled the lack of engagement. Two of the families in this study were bilingual (speaking Laotian and Spanish, respectively). A considerable amount of their educational perspectives were filtered through their own cultural beliefs and personal educational experiences. As a result, personal experiences influenced how these families initially chose to be involved. For

example, several of the families were interested in learning more about RtI and what was expected of their children, but because of their own unsuccessful experiences while in school or their preconceived expectation of family engagement, they were initially hesitant to become more involved. This interest was a significant finding because people in the school environment often assume that families do not want to be involved, but in reality, families do want to be involved (Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Jeynes, 2012). Personal educational experiences or fears may hinder family involvement. However, using student data and collaborative problem-solving at the forefront of all conversations, schools can help bridge barriers by using data to engage families in educational discussions and problem-solving.

Results of this study mirrored previous studies. Chrispeels and Rivero (2001) found that, in working with Latino families, there was a disconnection between the home and the school. Specifically, many of the families believed that the role of the family in a child's learning was secondary concerning the school and that the family role was to be peripherally involved. The participants in Chrispeels and Rivero's study similarly discovered the importance of family involvement in a child's learning. Findings from the current study suggest that *family-child interactions* are improved when families find a common objective through data and then are given the opportunity to collaborate and problem solve. Time at home is not something that can be controlled by the school; however, as families were engaged in helping their child and were actively reviewing data, the amount of time that they spent "working" with their child was reported as increased.

The current study also revealed that as families became more involved in learning about their child's academic needs and the school expectations of student achievement, they were more actively involved in their child's learning to the extent of serving as "teachers in the home." The theme *families as teachers* emerged after families became invested in problem-solving and in using their child's data as a focusing event. Many family participants reported a lack of skills or background knowledge to help their child. The findings from this study revealed that once provided with support and jointly created goals, activities, and opportunities to collaborate with a teacher, the shift into the role of teacher at home appeared promising as families were reporting being more involved and progress-monitoring data was reflecting a positive trend. Similar to this study, Fishel and Ramirez (2005) found that parent tutoring on the single subject of reading was considered promising. Their study validated their tutoring strategy for improving student learning, which suggests that providing families with skill-specific activities with a definite start and stop are beneficial to families as they work with their children.

The theme *families as advocates* was a valuable finding because it revealed that as families were collaborating and being supported through the problem-solving process, they were beginning to “own” the responsibility for their child’s learning, and, consequently, advocacy skills developed. This finding suggests that advocacy might be due to the opportunity to safely practice activities with another person (the researcher) before engaging with the child, as well as families having a clearer understanding of their role in student learning which is tightly connected to collaboratively reviewing student data and developing instructional goals.

Similarly, Harrison (2008) found that families were more connected to the problem-solving process when they better understood their role in collaborating with the school-based team. When communication barriers were averted, families became more “connected” to the problem-solving process, although the family voice was missing from the Harrison study. The opportunity for family voice highlighted in the current study provided great insight into the ideas and perceptions that many of the families felt and believed.

The theme of *frustration* was common among the participants in the current study. Many of the participants identified feeling frustrated by methods used by the school for communication with families. Families identified communication through the backpack as a significant frustration. I initially made the same mistake when attempting to gather participants for this study. I assumed that sending a note in the backpack was a quality mode of communication with families as it was general practice at Tree Grove School. However, after a lack of response, I had to alter how I reached out to families and communicate in a more personal way through phone calls. This finding suggests that families want and need a personal connection rather than countless pieces of paper sent home. Families in the current study indicated that they wanted to talk to someone who could directly answer their questions. Some of the families perceived that there had been a lack of communication and felt blindsided when we first met to look at CBM data. These families reported not knowing what was being taught at school and lacking an understanding of what was expected of students. Furthermore, many of the families identified that they were unaware that their child was receiving tiered instructional supports in reading.

In a parallel study, Drummond and Stipek (2004) found that when families were less familiar with the school curriculum or the strategies used to teach their children, they were less engaged in teaching at home. My study found that although families wanted to be involved, they were hesitant because they lacked skills to support their child or they did not even realize that their child needed support because of poor communication. Family involvement hinges on collaborative communication opportunities achieved through

family–school problem-solving events. It is imperative that schools move away from the isolative approaches used in the past and engage families in dialogue centered on solutions found together to reduce frustrations.

Families identified a variety of *challenges*, but common challenges included communication barriers and timing barriers (e.g., school schedule, family schedule). Families also revealed that it was difficult to be involved in their child's learning because often they did not understand what was being taught or how to support their child's learning best. Researchers such as Christenson and Sheridan (2001) and Sheridan and Kratochwill (2010) argue that establishing open, reciprocal problem-solving can mitigate the challenges that many families face in working with schools. In light of this finding, schools should share what subjects are taught, how subjects are taught, and what families can do at home to support their child's learning. Such sharing of information was not occurring regularly at Tree Grove, and families were again isolated from student learning.

Data and information can be a powerful tool, especially when presented without comments, allowing the participants to review and think about what the data might be saying (Sheridan & Kratochwill, 2010). If schools are afraid of awkward conversations about students struggling in school, then allowing the data to “speak for itself” is a meaningful way to garner family support and involvement. Without a shared responsibility and open communication, schools will continue to perpetuate the same “learning in a vacuum” mentality. Further, without a shared responsibility, students will likely not achieve success, and families will continue to participate on the periphery. While most schools are doing a better job of using data within the context of the school day, they still can improve by using data to work in conjunction with families.

Families discovered the importance of *collaborating*. Unfortunately, several of the participants held cultural and personal beliefs which limited conversations and allowed school personnel to control the communication flow. For example, several families believed it was the responsibility of the school to contact and engage families in discussions of student concerns. This familial assumption resulted in no communication initiated by either the families or the school. Comparably, Peña (2000) found that language barriers, as well as cultural differences between parents and schools, impacted parental involvement. This finding suggests that families need to be empowered to collaborate and that role construction (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1995, 1997) plays a significant part in the families entering into a collaborative, problem-solving relationship. Similarly, Reschly et al. (2007) found that through family–school collaboration and problem-solving, student learning and achievement were improved. This study found a dominant common thread among the families

regardless of social status, educational experience, or ethnicity: they were motivated to be involved in their child's learning but were unsure how to support or advocate for their child. Schools engaging families in the act of problem-solving can improve the family-school partnership regardless of the background of the family.

Implications

There are several lessons learned from this study that directly connect to recommendations for practice for school districts and schools wanting to authentically engage families to improve student learning and establish a positive family-school culture.

Engage Families in Problem-Solving

The assumption that families are not interested in academics or learning more about their children's education presents a myopic view of families. Schools and school districts should engage families in understanding RtI by explaining the school processes and the strategies for supporting diverse learning needs in the classroom. Schools can accomplish this by providing opportunities to families, during convenient times, to learn more about RtI. It is imperative that these learning opportunities move beyond the obligatory letters sent home via a backpack or through the mail, but instead become face-to-face interactions that provide human contact as well as an opportunity for families to ask questions, even if the questions are uncomfortable for the teacher or school staff. Specifically, once a team identifies a student as requiring a Tier 2 intervention, the family should be included in a problem-solving meeting that shares data as well as provides opportunities for shared collaboration regarding data and instructional supports. Schools and families should meet every 8–10 weeks to evaluate progress-monitoring data through a variety of means including face-to-face meetings and electronic check-ins. This research validates that schools engaging families in open dialog and providing a nonjudgmental, welcoming environment have a more considerable influence in gaining family support. Assigning a grade level team member to be the point person for families who have children receiving Tier 2 interventions could accomplish this task. This individual would regularly share progress monitoring data and facilitate communication between home and school to engage families actively in the learning process.

Establish Relationships With Families

At the beginning of the school year, schools should evaluate the family-school partnership, as a standard, to determine what the culture and understanding are of the family-school connection. Just as schools are now

regularly benchmarking the effectiveness of general education instruction (e.g., reading, math) through the use of CBM and other school-based assessments, so too must schools engage in assessing family understanding of core knowledge. In the present study, families repeatedly reported they were looking for a “touch point” person who could serve as an advocate for the family as their child was receiving tiered supports. This study suggests that schools should provide face-to-face communication with families so they are more likely to feel invested, accountable, and therefore become more involved. Family–school collaboration can be achieved through home visits or offering more flexible meeting times for families. If the child continues to need support, school staff should meet individually with families to develop and target shared goals as well as including families in the data teaming process.

Address Barriers

Another lesson learned from this study was the importance of understanding the various barriers that exist in schools or are perceived to exist in schools. Barriers add to the general lack of communication and can impede family involvement. Families in this study identified several obstacles that impeded involvement, including “backpack” communication (number one on the list), teacher and school jargon, and school time. In this study, many of the families reported feeling overwhelmed by the daily volume of papers sent home, so they either ignored them or just never received them because they were “lost.” Several families identified that they did not understand the papers sent home from school, including homework. If papers are sent home, schools should meter the volume and frequency. When homework is sent home, teachers should provide clear examples and resources that can empower families to support their child’s learning beyond the school day.

Second, families indicated that teachers and schools often used language that they did not understand. Schools need to reduce the use of academic jargon because it alienates families and creates a culture that is not collaborative or inclusive. Academic jargon places teachers in the role of expert and parents in the role of apprentice. The participants reported feeling that they did not belong because they were less knowledgeable than the teachers, and even though participants desired involvement, these families believed that they had “nothing to offer” to their child’s learning.

Schools should consider personal barriers such as the educational comfort level of families. Families might feel uncomfortable visiting the school. Just as teachers meet students where they are academically, schools must also meet families where they feel most comfortable. Problem-solving together helps to achieve this. The process of problem-solving gives all parties a role in educating the student and empowers families to be involved.

Limitations

Several limitations of this study need to be acknowledged. First, this study includes self-reported data gathered from family sessions and from field notes and “brain dump” (Saldaña, 2009) memos, which can be subjective because self-reporting data cannot be verified through other sources. Although member checking and intercoder agreement were used as tools to support the data gathered, self-reported data has limitations. Second, this study took place during the second semester of a school year. Although there were numerous opportunities to problem solve with families, it would have been better to collaborate with these families for the entire school year. The findings might be different if the study started at the beginning of the new school year. A third limitation of this study was the small and unique sample size collected from a convenience sample of families of children in Grades K–1 who were receiving Tier 2 reading interventions. The study would need to be repeated with more participants, including a broader range of families with students in higher grade levels to generalize findings. A fourth limitation is a potential personal bias. I worked at the school where the study took place, although I did not have direct contact with the family participants or their children on a daily basis (i.e., I was not the teacher of record, nor did I provide direct or indirect service to the students); however, this is a bias that needs to be considered. I made every effort to separate my role as special education teacher from my role as researcher. Finally, it is essential to consider the qualitative nature of interviews and coding for themes as this type of research may be subject to different interpretations other than those presented in this study. Conducting family sessions with a broader audience would be prudent for greater potential for generalization.

Conclusion

As members of a collaborative team, families have incredible value because they bring crucial information about the whole child. However, schools and families typically do not collaborate with each other because families are isolated from tiered instructional supports and the problem-solving processes. This lack of collaboration may be due to family barriers, social status, language and cultural barriers, or preconceived notions that families do not desire involvement in their child’s learning resulting in families being unequivocally absent from student learning conversations and then castigated for not being involved. While schools have frank discussions fueled by data, families are not at the discussion table supporting or refuting the plans for implementation. The findings of this study suggest that families need and desire authentic engagement in supporting their child’s learning beyond the school day. Without

schools providing a supportive environment and encouraging shared problem-solving, it is difficult for families to feel connected or valued in the process. Consequently, families may disengage or feel that they do not have the “teacher skills” needed to support their child’s learning. When families supported their child’s learning at home and actively participated in problem-solving around their child’s progress monitoring data, families reported feeling more connected to their child’s learning and sought strategies to extend learning at home resulting in positive outcomes for students and families alike. Families indicated that they enjoyed establishing a partnership with a designated person and felt that they were a crucial member of their child’s learning team. Family–school collaboration is essential in empowering families so that they become involved, active participants and team members on their child’s problem-solving team rather than peripheral bystanders waiting for school personnel to contact them or give them solutions.

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