LEVERAGING RESOURCES: EXPLORING COMMUNICATION PRACTICES BETWEEN ELEMENTARY EDUCATORS AND BLACK CAREGIVERS

A Capstone Report

Presented to

The Faculty of the School of Education and Human Development

University of Virginia

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Education

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by

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May 2024

Abstract

Early literacy education supports the academic and social development of children, and caregivers play a critical role in this development. (Brown, 2013; National Early Literacy Panel, 2008). However, regardless of the vital role caregivers play in early literacy, many educators reported caregiver-educator collaboration and communication centering literacy. Research shows that bilateral communication acts as one of the most effective actions educators take to improve Black caregiver-educator collaboration and partnership (Baker & Rimm, 2014; Sheldon & Jung, 2015). This study is situated in a suburban, Title 1 elementary school in Virginia where anecdotal evidence identified marginal improvements in their literacy screener for students and persistent strained communication efforts between caregivers and educators. This qualitative case study sought to address this challenge by prioritizing the perspectives and needs of caregivers. Data analyzed included semi-structured interviews with diverse Black caregivers to gain insight into their experiences and perceptions regarding literacy communication. Additionally, literacy communication documents were analyzed to triangulate data and comprehend the nature and quality of communication. Major findings include:

1. A trusting relationship is essential for effective educator-caregiver communication.
2. Caregiver's perception of the educator's dedication impacted their communication.
3. Even though educator communication was often positively received by caregivers, this process was complex with a number of elements that could hinder or support communication efforts.
4. Attention to the interactions between caregivers and educators positively impacts communication and relationships.

5. Limited practical application of asset-based beliefs and collaborative decision-making in communication practices had detrimental effects on communication outcomes.

The findings informed recommendations for improving future communication practices, emphasizing the importance of maintaining relational trust through intentional, collaborative efforts integrating anti-deficit communication components.

Keywords: communication; anti-deficit communication, caregiver, literacy, parent-teacher collaboration; asset-based beliefs; Black caregivers and students

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Dedication

I dedicate this work to you, my son, Hendrix. We started this journey when you were just two years old, and now you are a big guy in kindergarten! Thank you for keeping me inspired during the late nights and early mornings. Your “mommy, you can do this” has meant more than words can say. I love you.

This capstone is also dedicated to all of the teachers and families who have felt their voices are silenced, and their struggles do not matter. I hear you, I see you, and I dedicate my work to supporting you as you work to change the lives of the little ones you hold dear to your heart.

Acknowledgements

Although this doctoral degree is issued to me, I cannot take full credit for its completion. I have successfully reached the end after three long years due to the support of the following individuals:

My advisor, Dr. Tisha Hayes – we met in undergrad almost twenty years ago! Your Word Study class sparked my passion for supporting students and families with all things literacy. This introduction to the world literacy has come full circle to this doctoral journey, and I thank you immensely for your sharing your expertise. I also thank you for your words of encouragement, especially the first semester. You helped me through one of the toughest seasons, and I am forever grateful.

My committee members, Dr. Vincent Baxter and Dr. Judy Paulick – I greatly appreciate your thoughtful critique, patience, kindness, and wisdom.

My professors, classmates, and friends at UVA – this journey is one that is difficult to describe, but you each understood the pressure, frustration, and passion. Thank you all for the million-and-one edits you each have done for me and for being a listening ear when I needed it most as well as a constant inspiration.

The teachers and families – volunteering your time and expertise to sharpen my understanding has been an invaluable resource to me throughout this study and even before it began.

My friends – thank you ALL for the encouragement. The care packages, the texts and calls asking how things are going or the random "Hey - Dr. Lawrence," the mini parade encouraging me during my first semester, the many editorial notes all the way from South Africa, the thoughtful back-and-forth about my research topics, the always appreciated doctoral Tik-Toks, and many more moments of love and support have helped me beyond measure, especially when I felt this journey was not possible.

My family, especially my parents Chris and Maccie Lawrence, my sister Crystal Lawrence, my niece Cleo, and my son Hendrix – this degree truly is a result of the love and encouragement you all have provided. You know what this journey felt like for me even when I was silent. Thank you, Mom, for making sure I had healthy meals and was always hydrated. Thank you all for stepping in to care for Hendrix when I needed extended time on my laptop – something you always did with joy. I am forever thankful. Cleo and Hendrix, I hope with this completion of my doctoral degree you both understand that there is nothing impossible for you to complete. Each of your confidence in me is appreciated with every fiber of my being.

My very closest confidant, Jesus Christ – there is nothing I can do without you walking beside me, and this completion is only a testament of your presence. Many verses have kept me motivated along the way but during this last "leg" Psalms 23:6, provided me with comfort and encouragement: "Surely your **goodness** and **love** will **follow** me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever." Also, the promise of goodness and love actively

pursuing me every day of my life helped me to *know* that I will have all that I need to complete whatever tasks that lie ahead.

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CHAPTER 1: Introduction

Using an excerpt from a previous project completed by the researcher, a Hendrix Elite Academy[a] (HEA) caregiver expounded on experiences with their child's teacher concerning literacy communication:

> She told me on the report card he is having trouble reading words, so we went to the Dollar Tree and got some cards to practice…I wish I knew how to help him better, he will get frustrated, and I just feel silly…don't want to guess if this activity is helping or not… (personal communication, April 2022).

In that project, caregivers expressed a desire and dedication to supporting their children, but there was an underlying disconnect between home and school. Despite claiming a good relationship with their child's teacher, only some interviewed caregivers could accurately or confidently characterize their child's literacy progress or ways they could support their child's progress (personal communications April 2022). Communication efforts educators see as straightforward and transferable may actually be unclear to caregivers. The willingness for collaborative communication of both caregivers and educators, alongside the challenges they face, motivated the current study. This capstone will concentrate on how the classroom educator and the caregiver communicate concerning children's literacy development.

National Reading Trends

Education is commonly understood as an equalizing opportunity, helping ameliorate experienced disparities among various groups of people (Anderson et al., 2010; Delpit, 1988; Foster-DeMers, 2012; Turner, 2019). In this way, educational success can combat poverty and

[a] All names are pseudonyms.

social inequality (Chance, 2010; Chaney, 2014; Love, 2004). Researchers and educators are particularly interested in literacy – a subset of education – as a vital part of education because it impacts every aspect of life (Brown, 2014; Chance, 2010; National Early Literacy Panel, 2008).

Literacy proficiency is revered as one of the most critical academic skills a student can obtain and one of the best predictors of success in school and life (Hosp & Fuchs, 2005). Because of the intertwining of literacy in all subjects (Chance, 2010; Fang, 2014), it can be deduced that failure to read well may negatively impact other subjects (Olsen et al., 2014). However, despite the known importance, continued literacy failure persists nationally. Inadequate reading skills not only have a negative impact on one's overall academic achievement, but limited reading skill is also linked to an increased risk of school dropout, attempted suicide, incarceration, depression, anxiety, and negative self-esteem (Alesi et al., 2014; A. Henderson et al., 2007; Hosp & Fuchs, 2005; Ishimaru, 2020; Literacy Statistics, n.d.; Sheldon & Jung, 2015; The Reading League, 2020). Adults who are illiterate are more likely to be unemployed, underemployed, or imprisoned (Chance, 2010; Chaney, 2014; Literacy Statistics, n.d.; The Reading League, 2020) and, therefore, less likely to be able to support their families, contribute to the economy, and pay taxes (Chance, 2010; Chaney, 2014; Cooter, 2006; The Reading League, 2020). Ensuring that all children learn to read is a matter of both social justice and economy (Literacy Statistics, n.d.; The Reading League, 2020).

Nationally there are reading achievement gaps for all children when compared to proficiency standards, but there are significantly larger gaps for specific student subgroups (NAEP, 2022). Student performance on the 2022 National Assessment of Educational Performance (NAEP) indicates that only 33% of all fourth-grade students performed at or above proficiency levels in reading. However, when analyzed closely, data illuminated even worse

outcomes for Black students. On the 500-point scale used in NAEP reading assessments, White students scored an average of 227 points, while Black students scored an average of 199 points. This indicates a 28-point performance gap exists between White and Black students in reading proficiency. On a national level, Black fourth-grade students scored 28 points lower than White students in reading, with 83% of Black students scoring at or below the Basic level. Only 17% of Black students performed at or above proficiency levels compared to 41% of White students. Middle-class White students experience reading challenges, but researchers contend that America's high illiteracy rate is ultimately a class and race issue (Chance, 2010; Chaney, 2014; Literacy Statistics, n.d.; The Reading League, 2020).

Importance of Early Reading Instruction

Reading is a complex process with numerous factors influencing reading proficiency (Beers, 2003; Kilpatrick, 2015; Kintsch & Kintsch, 2005; Moats, 2020a). The foundations of good reading are the same for all children, regardless of their gender, background, or special learning needs (Brown, 2014). Although reading is an automatic and seamless activity for proficient readers, it is not a natural process (Lyon, 1998). Our brains are not fully evolved to process written language as they are with processing spoken language (Moats, 2020a). Therefore, we are not "wired to read," and most require explicit instruction for success in reading (Moats, 2020b).

Early Reading Outcomes and Black Students

Early reading instruction plays a key role in later outcomes. When examining low literacy performance, particularly that of Black students, research suggests that literacy failure can be attributed to insufficient opportunities for exposure to quality early literacy instruction (Chance, 2010; Chaney, 2014; Dagen & Bean, 2020). Literacy achievement gaps begin early and persist

for many Black students, as evidenced by NAEP (2022) data where fourth-, eighth-, and twelfth-grade students remained stagnant, averaging around 83% at or below Basic in reading across these grades.

The commonly used term “achievement gap” is often used when discussing achievement for those of color. Deficit theorizing is often an underlying active power in discussions using this term – the achievement gap (Love, 2004; Trent et al., 2004). Love (2004), however, identifies academic achievement inequities as an “opportunity gap” as she points out issues of equity such as access to high-quality preschool or rigorous curricula or oppressive caregiver relations. As students advance through the grades, a lack of critical literacy skills for college and job readiness means their gifts are lost to society (Turner, 2019). Naming is a powerful tool, as it disrupts the cycle of unvoiced oppression and acknowledges the opportunity gaps for marginalized communities, shifting the focus from the intellectual capacity of the student to the education system (Mapp & Bergman, 2021; Love, 2004; Trent et al., 2004). The current study will examine the opportunity gap, specifically the missed opportunity for equitable knowledge transfer between educators and caregivers due to ineffective communication.

Power of Early Intervention

Researchers underline the necessity of students effectively meeting and maintaining their set benchmarks from the start of school to ensure later success (Wanzek et al., 2018). In other words, the kindergarten through third-grade years are crucial in influencing state and national assessments administered after third grade (Spark et al., 2014). In the context of this study, the emphasis will be on the primary grades, Kindergarten to second grade, as literacy skills acquired during these years serve as a vital transition for students. This capstone will explicitly investigate communication in the context of literacy because of literacy's relevance in primary education

(Cho et al., 2020; Moats, 2020b; NELP, 2008), and because literacy achievement is a social justice concern (Literacy statistics, n.d.; The Reading League, 2020).

Torgesen (1998) and Wood (2004) agree that students who receive intervention before age ten have a 95% probability of catching up, meaning that intentional interventions in primary grades could avert academic failure later in life. In response, recognizing early deliberate efforts implies that preventative measures can be implemented to prevent Black students' reading failure (Chance, 2010; Chaney, 2014). Student reading success is a core obligation of educators; however, it is vital to remember that reading success or failure is a shared responsibility between educators and caregivers (Moats, 2020b). While this is not the only way to positively impact student achievement, partnerships between educators and caregivers are vital tools just waiting to be deployed (Byrk, 2010; Mapp & Kuttner, 2013; Sheldon & Jung, 2015).

Importance of Family Engagement

Many of today's school reforms are developed in response to inequities in educational achievement, demonstrated by data generated in grades three and above (Broer et al., 2019; NAEP, 2022). These reform initiatives include new curriculum adoptions, changes in school leadership and teaching staff, initiatives to increase teacher quality, and, most recently, a drive for greater parent involvement (Broer et al., 2019; Foster-DeMers, 2012; Mapp & Kuttner, 2013; Torgesen et al., 2007). Nevertheless, it is important to understand the essential role of families in education.

Epstein's (1995) seminal work offered a detailed view of the six types of ways schools can involve families in education:

1. Parenting – helping families establish home environments that support child development.

2. Communicating – designing and using effective forms of communication about programs and children's growth.
3. Volunteering – recruiting and organizing help and support in schools.
4. Learning at home – providing families with information about how to help their children at home.
5. Decision-making – including parents in school decisions.
6. Collaborating with the community – identify and use community resources and services to strengthen schools, families, and student learning and development.

An intentional focus will be placed on communication as a form of family involvement in education with this capstone project. As caregiver-educator partnerships can be considered a contemporary focus in educational practice, Epstein's study (1995) gave a deeper understanding of caregivers' crucial role in education. One essential note is the term 'families' is not limited to traditional households, meaning families are not restricted to the biological mother and father and their child. This adds a layer of diversity to home and school partnerships (Muentner & Charles., 2020; Poehlmann et al., 2010). As a result, the term 'caregiver' will be used throughout the study to designate individuals who reside with the child and are accountable for the child's well-being (Fantuzzo et al., 2004).

Although caregivers offer their children numerous valuable services, this research focuses on how they act as the child's first and most crucial teacher because of their significant impact on the child's future academic endeavors (Eliot, 2010; Fernald et al., 2009). Research shows that caregiver engagement in their child's learning is strongly associated with 1) socio-emotional development (Baker & Rimm, 2014), 2) fewer absences (Sheldon & Jung, 2015), 3) higher academic performance (Dagen & Bean, 2020; Harvard Graduate School of Education,

2014; A. Henderson et al., 2002), and 4) increased connectedness to the school context and motivation (Hammond, 2015; Moll et al., 1992). As a result of these long-term advantages from early childhood to adulthood (Jeong et al., 2021), decades of US policy have been devoted to developing this relationship.

National Policies Addressing Caregiver-Educator Relationships

In 1965, President Lyndon B. Johnson signed the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) into law (Sousa & Armor, 2015). ESEA acted as a civil rights law to understand President Johnson's belief that our nation's primary goal should be for each U.S. citizen to have full education opportunities (Sousa & Armor, 2015). As part of ESEA, Title I was established with the original goal of improving the educational attainment of children from low-income households (Torgesen et al., 2007). ESEA also emphasized strengthening and maintaining family engagement through family-focused programs (Molden, 2016). ESEA ensures that families have access to important information about their schools and that families participate in decision-making processes (United States Department of Education, 2010).

The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2001 redefined ESEA's goal for equitable learning opportunities for all children (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.-b). NCLB highlighted where children were making progress and where they required further assistance, establishing the goal of 100% proficiency for all students (U.S. Department of Education, n.d-b). NCLB substantially changed the Title I characteristics in the 2002-03 school year (Torgesen et al., 2007). Particularly, NCLB attention is placed on communicating school performance to students' caregivers (Torgesen et al., 2007).

The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), signed into law on December 10, 2015 (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.-a), represented a significant milestone in education policy. It was

President Barack Obama's reauthorization of the 50-year-old Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), affirming the nation's enduring commitment to equal opportunity for all students (U.S. Department of Education, n.d-a.; Molden, 2016). However, ESSA was not solely about family-school communication and relationships; that aspect was just a small part of the legislation's broader objectives. One of the aims of ESSA was to improve communication with caregivers, requiring schools to interact with them using easily accessible formats (Gadie, 2020). Furthermore, ESSA required schools to construct home-school agreements outlining how educators and caregivers will collaborate to promote student achievement (Linquanti et al., 2016). Essentially, ESSA valued bilateral communication as a tool to fulfill the mission of increased school-to-home connection to promote educational opportunities for all. However, as seen with previous policies, converting policy into practice is sometimes difficult despite the acknowledged impact of caregivers on student academic achievement (Bamm & Rosenbaum, 2008; Gadie, 2020; Molden, 2016).

Communication as a Key Component of Engagement

If educators desire to redress identified educational inequities, one promising method is supporting the practical application of policy mandates such as caregiver engagement (Gadie, 2020; Mapp & Kuttner, 2013; Molden, 2016; Sheldon & Jung, 2015). A growing body of research suggests that an essential requirement for effective partnerships between educators and caregivers is grounded in effective communication (Bryk, 2010; Cortez, 2020; Ishimaru, 2019; Khalifa, 2018; Sheldon & Jung, 2015). As Epstein (1995) noted in her six types of ways to involve caregivers, regular and effective communication is key to creating a cooperative connection between families and schools, as it is in every relationship (Gadie, 2020).

Essentially, communication efforts, which are primarily established by the educator (Molden, 2016), can aid or inhibit caregivers in activities that take place in schools and at home that are aimed at making the child's educational goals achievable within and outside of school (Myende & Nhlumayo, 2022). Therefore, it is implied that educators benefit from creating an atmosphere that is open, trusting, and inviting (Ishimaru, 2019; Molden, 2016). When effective systems are present, communication between home and school contexts can act as a catalyst to address academic issues, such as literacy opportunity gaps; thus, educator-caregiver relationships must be carefully investigated (Clarke & Comber, 2020; Gadie, 2020; Pitty-Murillo, 2012).

It is assumed that practicing educators "… possess the requisite skills, knowledge, confidence, and belief systems…" to develop effective partnerships that reflect family engagement standards (Mapp & Kuttner, 2013, p. 5). Dagen and Bean (2020) recommended two major foci when seeking to establish partnerships with caregivers: "…[applies an] asset-based approach [where] both parties are valuable to come to the exchange…[and] seeks to engage parents as co-constructing a shared agenda…" (p. 351). Essentially within this reformed view of partnerships, caregivers and educators are positioned as equals with significant value to the student's success (Ishimaru, 2014). This repositioning of power is grounded in effective communication (Carasso, 2022; McWayne et al., 2022). Effective caregiver-educator communication strengthens bidirectional partnerships by valuing family voice and knowledge (Lee, 2018). Due to this increased connection, caregivers commit to aligning efforts with educators for a common goal (Baxtor, 2018; Ishimaru, 2014; Mapp & Kuttner, 2013) such as increased literacy outcomes.

Statement of the Problem

Research confirms and aligns, asserting that a student's family is widely acknowledged to play a significant role in a child's academic success (Bryk, 2010; Clarke & Comber, 2020; Harvard Graduate School of Education, 2014; A. Henderson et al., 2002; Moll et al., 1992; Teale, 1986). Caregivers can support educational initiatives with their children through interactions during everyday activities while supporting their school-based learning once formal school begins (Kambouri et al., 2022). Strong caregiver-educator partnerships have long-term positive impacts on student educational outcomes. However, regardless of the comprehensive acknowledgment of caregivers as primary agents of change in students' academic achievement, there is uncertainty about the partnering process and educators' role in caregiver engagement (Ihmeideh & Al-Maadadi, 2020; Hildreth et al., 2018). One factor deserving attention when considering effective caregiver-educator partnerships is the quality of the communication (Carasso, 2022; McWayne et al., 2020; Nnachetam,2010).

Effective caregiver-educator partnerships are established and maintained through a system of interdependent actions: collaboration, communication, trust, and respect (Ishimaru, 2019). Research indicates a gap between educator attitudes about caregiver engagement and practice (McWayne et al., 2022), and this disconnect can lead to unilateral communication where educators share information without setting up a context of trust and respect or inviting collaboration and consistent communication (Mapp & Kuttner, 2013; Scott Stein & Thorkildsen, 1999). This type of unilateral communication can, and does, cause both educators and caregivers to become frustrated (A. Henderson et al., 2007; Ishimaru, 2020). Educators desire to partner with caregivers on behalf of students but often need strategies for sustainable, authentic partnerships that encompass bilateral communication (L. Henderson et al., 2020).

Simultaneously, caregivers often lack the resources to effectively advocate for their children and partner with their child's teacher (Mapp & Kuttner, 2013). Therefore, unilateral educator-centric communication can likely have negative repercussions on collaboration goals.

When analyzing low literacy performance, especially that of Black students, the problem of partnerships is given a new dimension. Research suggests that literacy failure can partly be attributed to insufficient opportunities for quality early literacy instruction (Barnett et al., 2020; Chance, 2010; Chaney, 2014). With early intervention opportunities in place, children have the opportunity of detection of and intervention for academic challenges early on; this, in turn, creates a strong foundation of literacy skills, significantly increasing a child's potential of long-term academic and life success (Borre et al., 2019; Foster-DeMers, 2012; Sheridan et al., 201; Wanzet et al., 2018).

Black families often benefit from early quality literacy experiences as they can potentially reduce gaps in literacy achievement (Chance, 2010; Chaney, 2014; Comber, 2014; Dagen & Bean, 2020). When seeking to address opportunity gaps, particularly with Black students, the development of school-home partnerships through improved bilateral communication acts as an effective action (Baker & Rimm, 2014; Chaney, 2014; Epstein, 2001; Gaide, 2020; Henderson et al., 2002; Sheldon & Jung, 2015; Walker & Dotger, 2012). Despite the widely acknowledged correlation between schools that foster positive partnerships with students' caregivers and academic success, strained relationships between caregivers and educators persist.

Establishing effective collaborative partnerships between caregivers and educators relies on building the capacity for educators and caregivers to develop a culture of connection through awareness as educators and caregivers dismantle preconceptions, identify caregivers' needs and

assets, and engage in intentional early literacy communication. Therefore, the current study aims to examine literacy caregiver-educator communication occurring at HEA. Effective communication is marked by the bidirectional exchange of information and resources; thus, this study seeks to better understand and support HEA Black caregivers as they partner with educators around their children's literacy goals.

Utilizing an exploratory case study approach, the following research questions guided this study:

- Research Question 1: What are HEA Black primary caregivers' perceptions and practices of school-to-home communication with primary grade educators in regard to student literacy development?
- Research Question 2: Based on perceptions and practices, in what ways do current communication practices facilitate or hinder effective partnerships between HEA primary grade educators and Black caregivers?

Purpose of the Current Study

This capstone project will be conducted at The Hendrix Elite Academy, located in a Virginia suburb, serving approximately 500 students in pre-kindergarten through fifth grade. HEA is a Title 1 school, which means that at least 40% of the student body comes from low-income families (VDOE, n.d.). Low-income households include those earning less than 100% of the federal poverty threshold (FPT) and those earning between 100% and 199% of the FPT (Koball et al., 2021). To assist with understanding the FPT, a low-income household is defined as a family of four earning $30,000 or less per year. Title 1 schools are allotted funds to improve the educational experience for all children, regardless of their income level, including free and reduced lunches (VDOE, n.d.). At HEA, 99% of students, or 487, are eligible for free lunch

(NCES, n.d.). Racially, HEA serves 63% Black, 26% White, 4% Hispanic, and 6% Multi-racial students.

The school's administration has emphasized the importance of caregiver communication and academic engagement while also acknowledging that this is an area for improvement. The current study will focus on communication around student literacy achievement in primary classrooms, specifically Kindergarten and second grade. Literacy is a particular area of investment at HEA due to assessed risk demonstrated by the state screener - Phonological Awareness Literacy Screener (PALS). In the 2022-2023 school year, there was only a slight decline in the percentage of students scoring below benchmark on PALS in Kindergarten (from 39% in fall to 31% in spring) and second grade (from 58% in fall to 54% spring). Despite identified progress, the persistence of these scores highlights ongoing literacy challenges. Recognizing this demonstrated need, HEA is committed to a school-wide focus on evidence-based reading instruction alongside aligned efforts to collaborate with caregivers to support primary students' literacy development.

When caregivers are actively engaged, children are more likely to practice reading and writing outside of school, which boosts literacy development in general. (Guthrie & Wigfield, 2018; Hayes & Berthelsen, 2020; Kupzyk, 2011; Pak & Weseley, 2012). More specifically, caregivers can significantly influence their children's decoding and encoding skills and their ability to build meaning through daily home reading, among other things, making them a priceless resource for student literacy success (Durkin, 2013; Foster-DeMers, 2012; Mullan, 2010; Sylva et al., 2008). Effective literacy communication with caregivers can act as a pathway to support children's early literacy development, benefiting both student achievement and the caregiver-educator partnership (Jordan et al., 2000; Chaney, 2014; Clarke & Comber, 2020).

Although HEA educators recognize the importance of the caregiver-educator relationship, they continue to view communication with caregivers as inadequate. Anecdotal insights from a previous project with HEA's Kindergarten caregivers and educators suggested that one aspect of the caregiver-educator relationship that may be especially problematic for caregiver engagement is the quality of literacy communication with caregivers. One parent recalled report card communication, "… I see that she is above, but what does that mean… I don't even know what is normal or expected of parents… " (J. Jones, Personal communication, April 8, 2022). This quote underscores the importance of clear, focused communication; caregivers were unsure of their child's development and left guessing as to how they could support their child despite the explanations provided in the report card. After further discussion with HEA Kindergarten educators during that project, they concluded that most communication efforts at HEA are unilateral and teacher-centric. According to Epstein's (2007) theory of overlapping spheres of influence, caregivers' interactions with schools may be positively impacted if they have a positive experience with school-to-home communication (Gadie, 2020; Pitty-Murillo, 2012). Thus, further attention to the quality of communication occurring between HEA primary educators and caregivers is imperative.

Conceptual Framework

The theoretical framework, Family-Centered Practice (FCP), is rooted in principles of Family-Centered Theory (FCT). Carl Rogers, a psychiatrist in the late 1930s, practiced client-centered therapy where the individual was treated as a person of worth and significance, respecting the client's capacity and right for self-direction (Bamm & Rosenbaum, 2008). Rogers shifted from client-centered therapy to family-centered therapeutic methods coining this approach as Family-Centered Theory (Bamm & Rosenbaum, 2008).

In the late 1970s, Family Centered Services (FCS) evolved from FCT (Rosenbaum et al., 1998). FCS consists of values, attitudes, and approaches toward services for children with special needs and their families (Rosenbaum et al., 1998; Rouse, 2012). Importantly, FCS focuses on the climate of what "should" occur in parent-professional interactions (S. King et al., 2004; Rouse, 2012; Rosenbaum et al., 1998). FCS recognizes that each family is unique, is the constant in the child's life, and is the expert on the child's abilities and needs (P. King et al., 2003). Together, the family and service providers work to make informed decisions about the services and support the child receives (S. King et al., 2004). In FCS, the strengths and needs of all family members are considered (S. King et al., 2004).

Carl Dunst, in the late 1980s, applied principles of FCS from the pediatric healthcare field to interactions between classroom educators and caregivers, coining this transfer as Family-Centered Practice (FCP) (Dunst, 2002). Dunst presented a "...discussion on the rethinking of family intervention practice to view families within a 'social systems' perspective" (Rouse, 2012, p. 19). Within this framework, similar to FCS, the family is considered a constant in the child's life; thus, the relationship between caregivers and educators is highly valued (Allen & Petr, 1998; Bamm & Rosenbaum, 2008; Dunst, 2002; P. King et al., 2003; Rosenbaum et al., 1998). Dunst (2002) defined FCP as having both relational and participatory components, as these practices act as principles for "...engaging families, especially those that traditionally have not been involved in their child's education and schooling" (p. 139). In essence, FCP provides a systematic approach for educators seeking to establish a partnership with caregivers (Espe-Sherwindt, 2008). Its practices are identified under the following four categories (Trivette & Dunst, 2000):

1. Caregivers and educators share responsibility and work collaboratively.

2. Practices strengthen caregivers' educational engagement.
3. Practices are individualized and flexible.
4. Practices are asset-based, highlighting caregivers' strengths.

A key aspect of FCP is family-centeredness, which Dunst (2002) explains as:

> "... characterizes beliefs and practices that treat families with dignity and respect; individualized, flexible and responsive practices; information sharing so that families can make informed decisions; family choice regarding any number of aspects of program practices and intervention options; parent-professional collaboration and partnerships as a context for family-program relations …" (p. 139).

FCP, similar to FCS, values the establishment of effective partnerships, which are dependent on respectful asset-based perceptions of the family, information sharing through bilateral communication, valuing family choice through the inclusion of the family in decision-making, and encouragement of individualization (Bamm & Rosenbaum, 2008).

Application of Theory to Communication

It has been widely recognized that learning outcomes for young children are significantly enhanced with effective partnerships between educators and caregivers (A. Henderson et al., 2007; Mapp & Kuttner, 2013; McWayne et al., 2022; Moll et al., 1992). This relationship is powered by communication, and communication within the school context is typically established by the classroom educator (Molden, 2016). When establishing a reciprocal relationship, as suggested by FCP, caregivers are invited to participate in their child's education and an exchange of expertise between caregivers and educators is welcomed (Hampton et al., 2023; King et al., 2004; Moll et al., 1992; Rouse, 2012). The caregiver is positioned as a major change agent in FCP, which is reflective of an asset-based perspective because educators identify

and leverage the existing resources caregivers bring to the educational process (King et al., 2004). Given this understanding of the power of reciprocation, communication between families and educators within schools is a critical aspect in determining the quality of family engagement, which could impact student achievement (Foster-DeMers, 2012). FCP assumes family-centered communication as a method to improve home-school relationships (Hampton et al., 2023; Rouse, 2012).

FCP offers a framework to assess current communication and better guide future recommendations, focusing on the climate of what *should* occur in parent-teacher interactions (Dunst, 2002). Using this framework provides a lens for me to understand what influences and impacts communication between primary caregivers and educators at HEA. FCP pushes the investigation of the educator's soft skills (Bates & Morgan, 2018), beliefs, and attitudes toward families while also exploring their simultaneous incorporation of family-centered collaborative communication and individualized practices with caregivers (Dunst, 2002). Family-centeredness acts as a significant feature in my capstone work. With a grounding of family-centeredness, partnership between educators and caregivers is valued, which is supported by respectful and reciprocal communication. These interactions help families make informed decisions concerning their children (Dunst, 2002; P. King et al., 2003).

Theory Assumptions Related to the Problem

Drawing from the theoretical underpinnings of FCP, the conceptual framework guiding this capstone, Anti-Deficit Communication (ADC), has been specifically developed by the researcher to explore the complex interplay of familial dynamics, socio-cultural influences, and systemic factors. This tailored framework, ADC, acts as a strategy to utilize FCP's core elements of family-centeredness, with a deliberate emphasis on applying family-centeredness to

partnerships with marginalized communities. When educators aim to enhance caregiver-educator interactions, they must adopt an intentional approach, such as FCP. Importantly, ADC's practices and beliefs attempt to restore the classroom community as a safe place for historically marginalized families by continually posing, "How can we help families to rebuild expectations, give them back hope, and create dreams?" (Carpenter, 2007, p. 667). Supporting educators in reframing families involves providing resources and training that emphasize empathy, cultural competency, and collaboration, enabling them to understand and address diverse family needs, fostering stronger connections and inclusive environments. Historically, educational and social policy in the United States has promoted a deficit framing of Black families (Ishimaru, 2020). Thus, ADC directly aims to counteract deficit-based narratives about Black families by emphasizing their strengths, resilience, and assets instead (Ishimaru, 2020; Espe-Sherwindt, 2008; A. Henderson et al., 2007; Mapp & Bergman, 2021).

This capstone focuses on Black caregivers who have suffered discrimination in the past or are now facing discrimination due to traditional schooling techniques, based on Ishimaru's (2020) inquiry on the historical deficit lens placed families of color. Because HEA primarily serves low-income Black families, educators must consciously recognize caregivers' lived experiences and perceptions concerning communication efforts (Blizard, 2012; Espe-Sherwindt, 2008Mapp & Bergman, 2021). Caregivers' educational experiences, for instance, have an impact on educators' communication; hence, those who have had unfavorable experiences in the past may find it difficult to engage in new situations (Ishimaru, 2020; Mapp & Bergman, 2021). ADC emphasizes how communication serves a crucial part in influencing attitudes and perceptions and how educators can promote greater equity and understanding by utilizing affirming language and messages (Espe-Sherwindt, 2008; Hampton et al., 2023). Moreover, ADC prioritizes the

conscious desire to implement practices that create and restore relational trust, particularly with Black families (Bryk, 2010; Ishimaru, 2020; Mapp & Bergman, 2021).

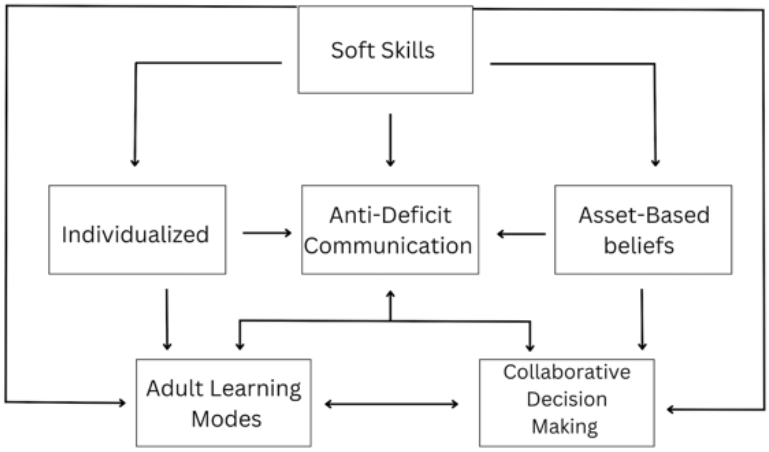
Anti-Deficit Communication's Components

With ADC, there is an emphasis on how expertise is shared between educators and caregivers since *how* something is communicated is just as important as the information delivered (Blizard, 2012; Espe-Sherwindt, 2008). The approach employed with ADC utilizes the same ideas as FCP, namely capacity building for effective caregiver partnerships. However, ADC focuses on systematically applying these principles to marginalized populations. ADC addresses capacity building for all stakeholders to establish communication that transforms the dialogue from problem-focused language to more positive, strengths-based, and affirming messages (Espe-Sherwindt, 2008; A. Henderson et al., 2007; Ishimaru, 2020; Mapp & Bergman, 2021). The ADC strategy highlights marginalized groups' contributions and achievements, celebrates their cultural heritage and diversity, and reframes their experiences more positively (Espe-Sherwindt, 2008; A. Henderson et al., 2007; Ishimaru, 2020; Mapp & Bergman, 2021).

ADC is comprised of five components that guide educators in relationships with caregivers: soft skills, individualized, asset-based beliefs, adult learning modes, and collaborative decision making. Each component is integrated, affecting one another. The interplay across these components can lead to successful and effective communication with marginalized families. ADC's components are illustrated in Figure 1.1, providing a visual of how each component is dynamic and interactive.

Figure 1.1

Anti-Deficit Communication Components



Note. Adapted from Rosenbaum, 2011

Using a three-level framework, ADC incorporates FCP concepts and provides guidance for literacy communication with HEA caregivers and educators. First and foremost is the framework's essential premises or assumptions educators have about caregivers (Rosenbaum & King, 2009). Second, each premise is followed by a guiding principle explaining the conditions in caregiver-education communications (Rosenbaum & King, 2009). The third level denotes crucial educator behaviors that are the product of assumptions and guiding principles. See Table 1.1 (Rosenbaum & King, 2009).

Assumptions

ADC's first component, individualized, embraces the understanding that all caregivers are unique, requiring an individualized approach (Rosenbaum & King, 2009). Asset-based beliefs, the second component, prioritizes the conscious acknowledgment of biases and negative narratives toward caregivers while also focusing on caregivers' strengths in student literacy development (Hammond, 2015; Mapp & Bergman, 2021; Moll et al., 1992). The third

component, collaborative decision-making, which employs asset-based beliefs, acknowledges caregivers as having equal value in decisions regarding student literacy development (Hampton et al., 2023; Mapp & Bergman, 2021; Roberts & Siegle, 2012). To sustainably implement effective communication that leads to equitable partnerships, adult learning modes, the fourth component, must be utilized with caregiver communication efforts. Finally, the fifth component, the execution of soft skills, functions as the base for each specified component in every interaction with caregivers.

Guiding Principles

Intentional effort to understand caregivers' values, cultures, resources, and needs fosters individualization, promoting equitable collaboration within the classroom (Hampton et al., 2023). Adopting an asset-based belief system acknowledges caregivers' unique perspectives as assets and recognizes them as influential agents in students' academic journeys. Collaboration hinges on empowering caregivers with meaningful decision-making roles (Mapp & Bergman, 2021), supported by adult learning principles in communication and learning opportunities. Prioritizing soft skills at the onset of school cultivates trust between caregivers and educators, enhancing effective communication and sustaining collaboration throughout the school year.

Educator Behaviors

Educators can enhance communication by tailoring their approach to suit caregivers' preferences, such as preferred modes of communication (Nagy, 2011), and considering their work schedules (William & Sanchez, 2013), as well as identifying strengths they can contribute to the classroom (Kenly & Klein, 2020). Applying asset-based beliefs involves educators critically examining past interactions with caregivers, analyzing power dynamics, and striving for equitable relationships centered around student literacy development. While recognizing

caregiver assets, educators commit to fostering family-centered forms of literacy communication, where caregivers play active roles in decision-making. Encouraging caregivers to reflect on and provide feedback ensures that learning opportunities and communication remain family-centered and effective (Hunter et al., 2017). Soft skills are crucial for the effectiveness of educator behaviors and encompass qualities such as active listening, cultural awareness (Delpit, 1988; Mapp & Bergman, 2021), constructive conversation facilitation (Bates & Morgan, 2018), and most importantly, empathy (Dunst, 2002; Espe-Sherwindt, 2008).

Table 1.1

Anti-Deficit Communication Framework

	Level 1: Assumptions	**Level 2: Guiding Principles**	**Level 3: Educator Behaviors**
Individualized	Caregivers are unique.	Each caregiver *should* be treated as an individual.	Administer needs assessments Believe and trust caregivers
Asset-Based Beliefs	Each caregiver, regardless of their background or circumstances, inherently possesses valuable strengths and insights that positively enriches the students' educational experience.	Differences *should* be valued as strengths.	Acknowledge power dynamics Take an equitable view of each other's role in student literacy development
Collaborative-Decision Making	Caregivers know their child best.	Each caregiver s*hould* have the opportunity to have meaningful decision-making for their child.	Share information using caregiver friendly terms Use reformed conference and literacy development communication tools
Adult-Learning Modes	Caregivers benefit most when educational engagement is tailored to practical, relevant, and self-directed experiences.	Communication and learning opportunities *should* always incorporate adult-learning principles.	Use effective workshop formats Implement engaging and interactive conferences

Soft Skills	Caregivers have their child's best interest as central focus and deserves respect.	A trusting foundation *should* be prioritized at the onset of school and intentionally maintained.	Demonstrate cultural competency and personal awareness of biases

Note. Adapted from Rosenbaum & King, 2009

Each component outlined in Table 1.1 includes vital aspects of ADC modes and will be further explored in subsequent chapters. Practical theory implementation has challenged past researchers for numerous reasons but mainly due to shifting paradigms (teacher-centric to family-centered), limitations on professional development required for systemic changes, and ever-changing diversity of caregivers (Bamm & Rosenbaum, 2008). This study will provide a practical application of anti-deficit communication between educators and caregivers at HEA that has the potential to positively impacts student literacy development.

Capstone Organization

This introductory chapter provides an overview of the study by describing the research's background, purpose, and significance. In Chapter 2, I critically discuss literature on communication between educators and caregivers, focusing on effectively communicating with Black caregivers. Throughout Chapter 2, I will underline the significance of employing intentional efforts, outlined in the study's Conceptual Framework, to ensure that family-centeredness is applied practically in all communication endeavors. The Third Chapter outlines the research design used to execute the study, focusing on the data collection and analysis methods. The Fourth Chapter will deliver the study findings in the form of data collected and analyzed. The Fifth Chapter will discuss the findings' implications for practice and research as guided by the findings and current literature.

Definition of Terms

In the following section, I present the definitions of terms that will be used throughout this capstone:

Bilateral Communication: When educators add feedback opportunities, the consequence is a true exchange of expertise that promotes bilateral communication (Bryk & Schneider, 2003; Chaney, 2014; Epstein, 2001; Gaide, 2020). Bilateral communication involves an interactive dialogue between educators and caregivers (Bryk & Schneider, 2003; Greene, 1989). Conversations may occur during telephone calls, written or digital messages, home visits, parent-teacher conferences, open houses, and various school-based community activities (Olmstead, 2013).

Caregivers: Caregivers are not limited to being the child's biological parents; they can also include but are not limited to, cousins, uncles, stepparents, grandparents, and other adults whom the child resides with and who ensures their well-being (Fantuzzo et al., 2004).

Communication: A systematic process in which people engage to generate and interpret meaning, which can be formal, informal, written, digital or spoken (McWayne et al., 2022; Molden, 2016; Nnachetam,2010; Svlaj & Sylaj, 2020; Wood, 2009). Communication is also a transactional process in which people generate, share, and regulate meaning within the context of situations and relationships (Cambridge, n.d.; McWayne et al., 2022)

Educator: In this study, the term educator is defined broadly as individuals with teaching credentials who work with children in school settings. It is recognized that other individuals can act as potential educators in the sense that, in many instances, they build a relationship with

families to enhance children's learning (e.g., counselors, speech therapists, principals, tutors, family members, friends, etc.). However, when the term educator is used, it refers to the child's classroom teacher.

Family: Within this study, the term family moves away from the strict definition of two biological parents and their children living in the same home. Family can refer to two biological parent families, one-parent families, blended families, extended families, adults and children living in the same home, and other people who live together and identify as a family (Wasik & Hermann, 2004).

Family Engagement: Family engagement, efforts are based on integrating family knowledge with school knowledge (Dagen & Bean, 2020; Ishimaru, 2019). Additionally, engagement designates caregivers as highly valued partners in education with the belief that caregivers act as change agents who can transform schools (Baxter, 2018; Ishimaru, 2014, 2019).

Family Involvement: Family involvement is a deficit-based approach that privileges normative school-centric behaviors (Ishimaru, 2019). Caregivers deemed 'involved' comply with specified practices resembling school-based knowledge, beliefs, and expectations (Dagen & Bean, 2020; Doyle & Keane, 2019; Ishimaru, 2019; Merga & Mat Roni, 2018).

Historically Marginalized: Historically marginalized populations are those that have withstood and continue to withstand discrimination, unequal access, and exclusion based on imbalanced power structures (e.g., economic, political, education, health, social, and cultural) that are

typically based on race, ethnicity, gender identity, sexual orientation, ability, immigrant status, and religion (Nadal et al., 2021).

Partnership: Partnerships as the combined effort of educators and caregivers working together for the purpose of academic and personal success of the student (Ishimaru, 2019). Educators and caregivers, by working together, can build a strong relationship with the same goal: student achievement (Bryk & Schneider, 2003; Ishimaru, 2014; Mapp & Kuttner, 2013; Moll et al., 1992).

Primary or Primary Grades: This term is employed consistently in this capstone and will continue to refer to grades ranging from Kindergarten through second grade. Throughout the capstone there are references to educators and caregivers as primary caregivers and primary educators, in these cases the meaning is synonymous as primary grade educators and caregivers of primary grade children.

Unilateral Communication: Unilateral communication resembles teacher-centric, where the educator is positioned as the sole provider of knowledge and expertise (Ishimaru, 2019). Information is shared by educators without setting up a context of trust and respect or inviting collaboration and consistent communication (Mapp & Kuttner, 2013; Scott Stein & Thorkildsen, 1999).

CHAPTER 2: Literature Review

Despite wide consensus in research that acknowledges the significant potential the family has in positively influencing early school aged-children's literacy development (Brown, 2014; Clarke & Comber, 2020; Cooper et al., 2009; Eliot, 2000), there are varying opinions as to how best to foster engagement between the home and school. The issue of caregiver-educator engagement challenges is rooted in the quality of communication (Carrasso, 2022), which can strengthen or undermine the relationship between family and school (Nnachetam, 2010). Therefore, intentional communication efforts can support caregiver-educator partnerships (Foster-DeMers, 2012; McWayne et al., 2020; Sylaj & Sylaj, 2020). Implementing effective communication between parents and educators has challenges, and this issue seems exacerbated within minority racial groups, including Black families (Delpit, 1988; Chance, 2010; Chaney, 2014; Mapp & Bergman, 2021). This literature review will establish and defend the argument that anti-deficit approaches to communication can improve home-school relationships, specifically related to literacy achievement in this capstone.

This chapter examines relevant research and literature for this study. The literature review will begin by anchoring the reader on the essential nature of caregivers in children's academic development, with a focus on its correlation to literacy outcomes (Chaney, 2014; Delpit, 1988; Foster et al., 2016; McWayne et al., 2019; Tatel-Suatengo & Florida, 2020; Taylor, 1983; Wasik & Sparling, 2012). This first section will specifically cover the necessity of connecting the child's most influential environments, namely home and school, emphasizing the importance of considering race (Foster-DeMers, 2012; Mapp & Bergman, 2021; Sylaj & Sylaj, 2020). The second section will review the literature concerning communication. This-section includes common forms of caregiver-educator communication and discusses how "systems" can

impact communication intent (Clear, 2018). The third section explores the journey to equitable collaboration. This exploration seeks to also navigate barriers to effective communication, including educator limited capacity, home-school dissonance, caregiver educational experiences, and deficits-beliefs, as well as their associated practices as they apply to relational trust. The chapter concludes by identifying and describing practical recommendations for establishing and sustaining relational trust necessary for anti-deficit communication.

Essential Nature of Caregivers in Academic Development

Chapter 1 establishes literacy as a determinant of not only academic success but also one's overall well-being throughout life. As a result, purposeful recognition of the caregivers' role in a student's academic development is critical, because caregivers can positively shape a child's academic trajectory (Tatel-Suatengco & Florida, 2020; Wasik & Sparling, 2012). When considering home literacy environment and home-school connections, some studies particularly highlight the significance of acknowledging the exchange of resources and valuing home environments to support student academic outcomes (Auerbach, 1989; Cochran-Smith, 1986; Morrow, 1993; Teale, 1984). The Family Literacy Commission, established in 1991, analyzed state family literacy and found that existing ideas and programs tend to view families through their deficiencies rather than through the potential assets of their rich heritages and experiences (Morrow et al., 1993). Notably, the literature indicated a strong emphasis on school-based knowledge value, meaning attention was primarily directed toward how caregivers can learn from educators, with little attention to the value of caregiver knowledge (Morrow et al., 1993). Even though the Family Literacy Commission's work was completed thirty years ago, questions about how much the interaction between the home and classroom environments should be valued persist to this day.

Decades later, researchers Wasik and Sparling (2012), building upon previous research, also found interest and value in the rich literacy experiences occurring at home. They identified both oral and written supports of language and literacy development in homes. Wasik and Sparling (2012) identified four distinct styles of reading present in their participants' homes: labeling, child-centered, text reading, and combinational. These findings suggested many forms of embedded literacy in each home. This further builds the argument for leveraging home literacy practices through effective educator-caregiver communication. Caregivers, when adequately supported, can increase the opportunities for children to practice early literacy skills at home, which benefits children's literacy outcomes (Kupzyk et al., 2011).

Recently, researchers have shown an increased interest in the relationship between school and home, and findings support that when caregivers are consistently engaged with educators, their children experience positive academic outcomes (Carasso, 2022; Li et al., 2023; McWayne et al., 2019; Svlaj & Sylaj, 2020). Ishimaru (2019) acknowledges several interdependent variables that impact caregiver-educator alignment; the variable of primary focus is effective communication, as it can positively impact caregiver engagement with educators (Carasso, 2022; McWayne et al., 2020). Race is an essential aspect in the conversation of family partnerships. Educators must acknowledge and reflect on how educational systems are embedded in White American middle-class norms and values (Case, 2002; Delpit, 1988; Love, 2004). As student populations grow in diversity (National Statistics of Education, 2020), there also grows potential incongruency between minority caregivers and educators that can negatively impact caregiver-educator partnerships (Baxley & Boston, 2009; Bolgatz et al., 2020; Delpit, 1988; Chaney, 2014; Guerra & Wubbena, 2017; L. Henderson et al., 2020; Mapp & Kuttner, 2013).

Intentional Consideration of Race in Home-School Partnerships

Bridging home and school requires careful consideration of race (McWayne et al., 2019). In the next section, I will explore home-school partnerships with an intentional consideration of race, the urgency for Black caregiver engagement, and national reading deficits for Black students alongside their long-term impacts. The section will close with an in-depth exploration of the Black educational experience, which will also include the influence of the culture of power, detailing how it impacts caregiver-educator partnerships. To better understand the complexities of implementing effective communication with caregiver-educator partnerships, this section of the literature review aims to give readers a foundational understanding of the distinctive experiences of Black students and their families.

The Urgency for Black Caregiver Engagement

The Black educational experience is not monolithic and is fundamentally distinct from the White experience (Chaney, 2014; Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997; Huguley et al., 2021). Black fourth-grade students nationally averaged 28 points lower than White students in reading, resulting in 83% of Black fourth-grade students scoring at or below Basic in reading (NAEP, 2022). When examined further, this reported failure is even more alarming for two reasons. First, scores reported as Basic do not mean one has mastered the linguistic abilities and decoding skills required for grade-level comprehension. Instead, Basic suggests partial mastery of the knowledge and skills needed for grade-level comprehension (NAEP, 2022). Second, given that literacy performance is comparable between fourth (83% at or below Basic), eighth (84% at or below Basic), and twelfth graders (83% at or below Basic), a disproportionate number of Black students are on the road to functional illiteracy (Chance, 2010; Chaney, 2014; Cooter, 2006; NAEP, 2022).

Given that early literacy performance predicts later literacy attainment (Hosp & Fuchs, 2005), a stagnant trajectory can be anticipated as sheen by these NAEP data spanning fourth to twelfth grade. Furthermore, these scores demonstrate that the achievement gaps begin early and persist. Many Black high school students do not acquire the literacy skills and knowledge necessary for college and career success, and as a result, their gifts are lost to society (Turner, 2019). There are numerous potential causes for documented literacy failure in Black students; however, this study will focus on caregiver-educator communication. This *opportunity* gap is exacerbated by the underutilization of caregiver resources, which represents missed opportunities to access crucial support and services (Mapp & Kuttner, 2013; McWayne et al., 2019, 2022; Li et al., 2023).

Historical View of the Black Caregiver's Educational Advocacy

The Black educational experience in the United States has been overshadowed by racism, the driving force in the tragic history of the ineffectiveness of education for all (Bartz & Kritsonis, 2019). With the decision Plessy v. Ferguson in 1896, the precedent-setting notion of "separate but equal" was established (Ashford-Hanserd et al., 2020; Bartz & Kritsonis, 2019). The Plessy judgment reflected a dominant perception that racial differences existed fundamentally and were hence immutable by law (Ashford-Hanserd et al., 2020; Groves, 1951). As a result, racial inequity, which was prevalent throughout the Jim Crow era, reverberated in public education (Ashford-Hanserd et al., 2020).

During the Jim Crow Era, schools designated for Blacks only were vastly inferior to those attended by White students (Ansalone, 2006). Namely, the allocation of resources significantly differed in segregated schools. Oftentimes, Black classrooms were devoid of textbooks or blackboards with fundamental topics taught by instructors with the most minimal

educational qualifications, many of whom had not even passed the eighth grade (Irons, 2004). Approximately 90% of all Black secondary schools were essentially elementary schools that provided an extra year of education (Ansalone, 2006). To summarize, Jim Crow schools subjected Black students to crushing limitations (Ansalone, 2006).

Black caregiver's commitment toward advocacy, a cultural model that will be further discussed later in the chapter, formed a sense of agency in the face of institutionalized racism during the Jim Crow Era (Ansalone, 2006; Allen & White-Smith, 2017; Bartz & Kritsonis, 2019). Despite facing seemingly insurmountable circumstances, Black caregivers have persevered and overcome obstacles in the pursuit of education for their children (McGee & Spencer, 2015). This pattern was evident during the era of Jim Crow Era (McGee & Spencer, 2015). Caregivers joined intentions with educators and community members to challenge subordinate educational conditions (Ansalone, 2006; Jones, 2012; McGee & Spencer, 2015). For instance, in 1936, The Committee for Better Schools in Harlem (CBSH), founded by Black caregivers, helped influence the city's decision to build four additional schools in Harlem between 1937 and 1941. Through effective communication efforts, CBSH formed close connections with Black educators in practically every Harlem school and began lobbying for physical upgrades, free meals, and better working conditions for educators (Jones, 2012). It is crucial to recognize that the advocacy for integration extended beyond racial motives, highlighting that those who supported integration did so for reasons beyond racial considerations.

Desegregation efforts were not motivated by the need for integration to enhance student self-esteem but rather served as a strategy to attain improved educational resources and opportunities (Jones, 2012; McGee & Spencer, 2015). Despite representing a dark period in

American history, examining the Jim Crow era requires a deliberate examination of the factors that facilitated the success of a significant number of Black college graduates and countless others who greatly benefited from schooling and collaborative efforts between caregivers and educators (Fairclough, 2001; Gates, 2020). This underscores the importance of implementing supportive practices that prioritize and nurture the caregiver-educator relationship. Caregivers play a pivotal role as advocates for both academic achievement and lifelong success.

Black Educational Experience

A child's experiences before their formal school years have a formative role in shaping school readiness and can explain gaps in an array of skills many educators observe in kindergarten students (Kenly & Klein, 2020). Unfortunately, Black students often experience more pronounced gaps in school readiness (Albritton et al., 2016; Baxley & Boston, 2009; Chaney, 2014; Delpit, 1988; Kenly & Klein, 2020). Kenly and Klein (2020) explored the generalized academic disparities between Black and White students and highlighted the challenges Black students face during their primary years of schooling. Some examples of the challenges are the overrepresentation of Black students in special education (Kenly & Klein, 2020), income disparities limiting access to high-quality preschool education (Albritton et al., 2016; Kenly & Klein, 2020), higher suspension rates (Losen et al., 2015), and underrepresentation of Black students in gifted programs (Grisson & Redding, 2015).

Identifying these challenges communicates the urgency for ensuring Black students have access to high-quality early childhood literacy instruction and programs (Kenly & Klein, 2020). Research suggests that early targeted interventions significantly improve student trajectories (Ehri et al., 2007; Kraft et al., 2018; Schwartz, 2005; Suggate, 2010). This, in return, implies that using early intentional efforts in literacy can act as a preventative measure against Black

students' reading failure (Chance, 2010; Chaney, 2014), thus directing attention to collaborative partnerships between caregivers and educators.

Although poverty should not be correlated with ethnicity or race, Black students live in poverty much more than their White peers (Thomas & Fry, 2020). Additionally, students who live in poverty have less access and fewer opportunities to high-quality literacy programs and may attend schools with ill-prepared educators who have limited educational experiences (Chaney, 2014). Intentional, positive support of Black caregivers, particularly those with lower socioeconomic status (SES), is one strategy to combat the opportunity gap demonstrated by NAEP.

Baker (2013) suggested that caregivers' home literacy engagement might be one mechanism by which children learn sophisticated language and literacy skills that can positively influence early reading achievement. Similarly, Borre et al.'s (2019) study with 82 lower SES Black and Latino preschool students who participated in an intervention that supported family literacy engagement had long-term positive results. The findings pointed to the importance and potential power of family literacy to overcome the negative associations that SES and race can have on literacy outcomes (2019). Caregivers exposing children to reading and other language-influenced activities outside of the classroom generally allow for academic advantage (Chaney, 2014; Hart & Risley, 1995), which can influence elements of power.

The Influence of the Culture of Power

In the culture of power, the rules reflect the culture that has power, and acquiring power is easier when explicitly told the rules of the culture (Delpit, 1988). Portes (2005) defines equity as ". . . all groups of citizens having (proportionally) comparable school learning outcomes regardless of cultural history, gender, or ethnic background" (p.11). Inequity in the classroom is

an educational and social issue (Baxley & Boston, 2009). Schools prepare students for jobs (Radcliffe & Bos, 2013), and one's job determines their economic status (Delpit, 1988). As a result, the overall educational experience is inextricably linked to power because education has the potential to influence one's social and economic advancement. Delpit (1988) explains the enactment of power in the classroom as codes or rules for participating in power.

Examining elements of power experienced in the classroom may address the larger matter of caregiver perception of home literacy engagement. We can look to the power imbalance beginning in a child's earliest classroom experiences; for example, Black households, on average, report lower enrollment in high-quality preschools (Puma et al., 2012), higher enrollment in underfunded schools, and restricted access to rigorous and receptive literacy instruction (Turner, 2019). Whether these factors directly apply to caregivers' perceptions of home literacy is unclear. Moreover, questions remain such as whether or not Black caregivers are made aware of their essential contributions to their child's academic success and if they have a sense of agency in their child's academic development (Foster-DeMers, 2012).

To briefly summarize, this section supported an acknowledged theme across the literature, family engagement can positively shape a student's literacy – and life – trajectory (Goodman, 1980; Mapp & Kuttner, 2013; Pitty-Murillo, 2012; Teale,1986). To have effective communication, which drives the relationships required for effective partnerships, caregivers, particularly Black caregivers, require intentional consideration (Clarke & Comber, 2020; Li et al., 2023; McWayne et al., 2019, 2022). In schools, middle-class, White American values are commonly represented (Bryan & Atwater, 2002; Delpit, 1988; Huguley et al.,2021; Love et al., 2021; Reynolds, 2010). Educators must understand that not all families, especially those from different cultural backgrounds, approach these relationships similarly, and they should refrain

from treating all relationships uniformly (Delpit, 1988; McWayne et al., 2022; Molden, 2016). Transitioning from uniformity in perceptions of families aligns with established models of caregiver-educator partnership (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Dunst, 2002). This transition emphasizes the importance of collaboratively setting learning priorities and goals for children, cooperating in information-sharing and decision-making, taking responsibility for children's progress together, and monitoring goal attainment together are all emphasized (Sheridan et al., 2011).

Defining Communication

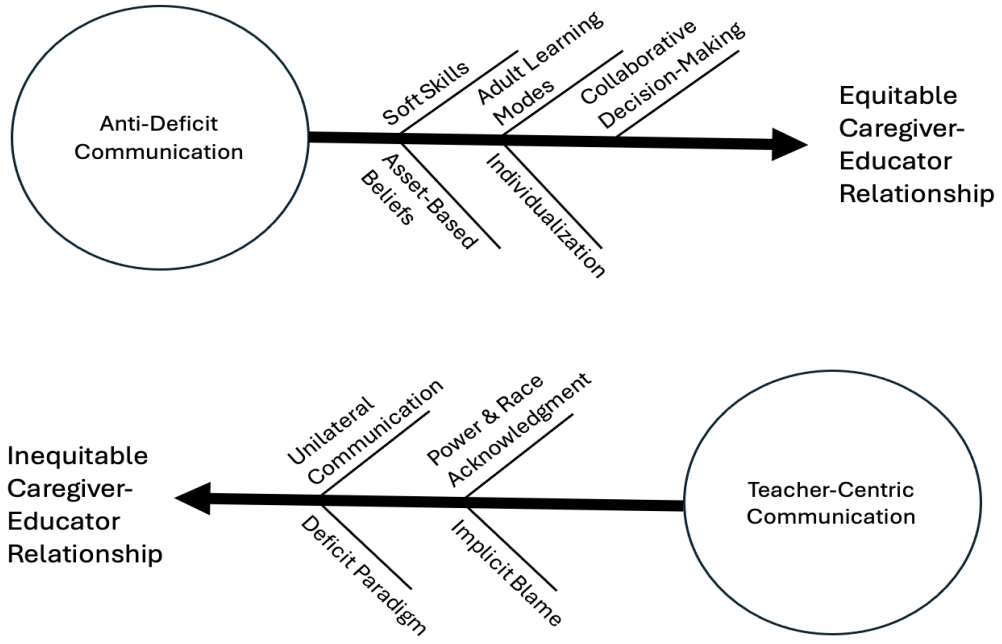
According to the Cambridge Dictionary (Cambridge, n.d.), communication is the exchange of information and the expression of emotion that can lead to mutual comprehension, acknowledgment, and acceptance of one another's feelings—understanding each other's messages and goals through communication results in a strong connection between caregivers and educators, which can foster productive engagement. Conversely, ineffective communication acts as a significant barrier in any organization, but in this study, the focus will be on its impact on the school context, as it can damage caregiver-educator relationships (Dunst, 2002; McWayne et al., 2019; Molden, 2016; Svlaj & Sylaj, 2020). Both parties, caregivers and educators, must establish and maintain relationships by accepting and acknowledging one another's knowledge and feelings (Larkin, 2003; Foster-DeMers, 2012). In particular, communication can improve or worsen caregiver-educator interactions (Nagy, 2011; Sylaj & Sylaj, 2020).

Figure 2.1 depicts the relationship between communication and caregiver-educator partnerships, as well as inefficient and effective practices based on an understanding of the conceptual framework underlying this capstone, ADC. Educators are typically skilled in the art of teaching; however, they also need to be skilled in the strategies for effective communication (Graham-Clay, 2005). Bower and Griffin (2011) challenged Epstein's (1995) framework, which

was discussed in Chapter 1, for it explained caregiver participation in schools. They argued that Epstein's (1995) framework failed to convey how caregivers are, or desire to be, active in their child's education, particularly in low SES and minority schools. Bower and Griffin (2011) proposed an individualized and asset-based approach where classroom educators form relationships with families and collaboratively determine family needs and desires (Espe-Sherwindt, 2008; Mapp & Bergman, 2021). In addition to using soft skills, actions and gestures, and adult learning modes, which are key components of the conceptual framework that guides this study, it is imperative that caregivers are regarded as equal partners in student learning (Blizard, 2012; Espe-Sherwindt, 2008; Mapp & Bergman, 2021).

Figure 2.1

Communication and Caregiver-Educator Relationships



Note: The images above illustrate how communication forms impact caregiver-educator relationships.

Common Communication Methods in Primary Classrooms

In classrooms, communication refers to developing opportunities for bilateral communication between caregivers and educators (Gu, 2017; Molden, 2016). This exchange of information usually includes students' progress and school-related information (Gu, 2017). Communication in primary classrooms can have many different formats and purposes, ranging from 1) formal written communication, 2) informal written communication, 3) assignments, 4) conferences, and 5) workshops. Effective classroom communication and its effects on caregiver engagement will be clearly defined in the following portions, discussing common classroom communication formats and their purposes. Table 2.1 provides a brief overview of communication methods that this section will thoroughly explain.

Table 2.1

Overview of Common Communication Methods

Communication Methods	Examples	Best Practices
Formal Written Communication	• Newsletters • Parent tip sheets • Report cards	• Attend to the aesthetics and brevity of newsletter while also ensuring usage of parent-friendly jargon • Briefly relay literacy skills for practical home application through usage of parent-friendly jargon and acknowledgement of caregivers' efforts. • Provide a comprehensive overview of the student's academic progress using clear, concise language that explicitly describes student performance and goals.
Informal Written Communication	• Spontaneous communication formats (e.g., emails)	• Caregiver friendly language, opportunity for bilateral communication concerning student-specific learning progress.

Assignments	• Homework Activities	• Choose activities intentionally directed to classroom learning goals and independently accessible for caregivers and students.
Conferences	• Parent-Teacher Conferences	• Prioritize equitable talk time and co-production of goals.
Workshops	• Training sessions	• Family-centered in design, draw upon caregivers' interests, concerns, and goals.

Formal Written Communication. Written communication can improve collaborative partnerships between educators and caregivers (Molden, 2016; Steward & Goff, 2005). This dissemination of information about what is happening in the classroom allows caregivers to engage and enhance communication between them and educators (Molden, 2016; Pitty-Murillo, 2012; Steward & Goff, 2005; Sylaj & Sylaj, 2020). Newsletters, parent tip sheets, and report cards are common examples of formal written communication (Friedman & Frisbie,1995; Molden, 2016; Steward & Goff, 2005).

Newsletters. Open communication keeps families current on the happenings of the classroom. Newsletters are a convenient communication tool for educators to include caregivers in the day-to-day happenings of the classroom and instructional goals and processes (Nagy, 2011). This communication tool acts as an avenue to provide caregivers insight into home learning activities to support literacy instruction and their child's personal literacy goals (Steward & Goff, 2005).

Generally, newsletters should be attractive with attention to neatness and not exceed two pages front and back (Steward & Goff, 2005). Additionally, there is an increased likelihood of caregiver interest in newsletters containing personal information about their child, such as student work and accomplishment, birthdays, and celebrations of family events (Steward & Goff,

2005). According to the National Standards of Family-School Partnerships, written communication within newsletters must be parent-friendly (PTA, 2021). This means that instructional terms must be clearly specified for caregivers to access on their own readily, which may promote bilateral communication leading to positive impacts on the home-school relationship (Molden, 2016; Nagy, 2011; PTA, 2021; Steward & Goff, 2005). Recently, apps like Class Dojo and ClassTag, a class app used at HEA, have become a common newsletter-type mode of communication. Class apps like ClassTag allow caregivers an efficient way to be informed of their child's literacy expectations and instructional goals (Olmstead, 2013). These apps can also serve dual modes like newsletter and parent tip letters. While also has features that allow text-like communication to occur between caregivers and educators.

Parent Tip Letters. Another formal written communication tool is instructional Tip-Sheets or Parent Tip Letters (Steward & Goff, 2005). Parent Tip Letters act as a tool to further support caregivers with their child's reading development (Steward & Goff, 2005). The teaching methods provided in Parent Tip Letters align with current classroom reading instruction and are designed to be short, quickly absorbed messages (Steward & Goff, 2005; York et al., 2019).

Parent Tip Letters can positively impact student literacy performance by increasing caregiver knowledge of the practical application of literacy skills and promoting bilateral communication (Molden, 2016; Nagy, 2011; Steward & Goff, 2005). York and colleagues (2019) discovered that incorporating brief words about strengthening literacy skills into routines enhanced caregiver engagement and, ultimately, student literacy data. In addition to ensuring the methods in Parent Tip Letters are succinct, educators should send the letters home frequently and include three crucial elements: "a) a compliment to the child's or parents' efforts with learning, b) a consideration or convenience statement, and c) the content tips" (Steward & Goff, 2005, p.71).

As shown in Figure 2.2 the educator acknowledges the caregivers' personal efforts with supporting their child's learning while also taking into account their personal schedule.

Figure 2.2

Parent Tips Letter Design

October 3, 2023

Dear Families,

We are six weeks into the school year, and I realize how important you are in helping your child read at home. In class, we are listening to the individual sounds in words to help strengthen our reading skills. Knowing that you have a busy schedule, I would like to give a few, simple tips that might come in handy to support your child in reading.

1. During toy clean-up time, ask your child to put away the toys that begin with ____ (say the letter sound of choice).
2. Hide objects around the room and ask your child to find objects that end with (say the letter sound of choice).
3. While in the car (be sure to look at our list prior to driving) use words from attached list and ask, "What sounds lives in the middle of the word ____ (cup, mat, pig, red, etc.)?"

Practicing sound isolation in different word positions will help your child learn to connect letters to sounds. This is a skill we practice in school to build their word reading accuracy and fluency. Thank you for supporting us in just the perfect way!

Mrs. Kind

Note. Steward & Goff, 2005.

Report Cards. Report cards communicate with caregivers about students' academic performance (Friedman & Frisbie, 1995). Educators can communicate student success and progress to caregivers using a reporting form of chosen academic traits and symbols used to characterize student progress regarding the stated academic trait (Friedman & Frisbie, 1995). Report cards are traditionally sent home at the end of each quarter (Molden, 2016). Other schools use additional communication of academic progress through progress reports sent alongside report cards, typically mid-quarter (Guskey, 2010; Jongsma, 1991; Ohlhausen,1994).

Researchers have determined that oftentimes information communicated in report cards needs to be clarified, meaning there are significant differences in interpretations between caregivers and educators (Chansky, 1963; Guskey, 2010; Waltman & Frisbie, 1994). Therefore, educators need to use clear and concise language, removing educational jargon, so that key information concerning student progress can be efficiently communicated (Aidmen et al., 2000; Guskey & Link, 2019: PTA, 2021). Report cards should offer caregivers a complete, comprehensive picture of their child's academic progress with explicit description of student performance and goals (Guskey, 2020; Guskey & Brookhart, 2019). Tuten (2007) offered insight that report cards shared during parent conferences help communicate the complexity of student progress that numeric or alphabetic grading cannot completely capture. Importantly, educators should explain the progress the student has made while also sharing areas that require additional support rather than foregrounding the conference with unmet benchmarks. This action of foregrounding progress can increase caregivers' reception of information (Alderman, 2013; Brookhart, 1993; Tuten, 2007). Additionally, offering student improvement suggestions and inviting caregiver feedback enhances the effectiveness of report card communication and caregiver-educator partnerships (Brookhart, 1993; McMillan et al., 2002; Tuten, 2007).

Informal Written Communication. Communication does not always have to include complex structures for effectiveness (Keen, 2007; York et al., 2019). Informal communication modes, such as hand-written notes or emails, are often spontaneous positive communication methods sent intermittently between formal communication modes (Keen, 2007). These messages may include—but are not restricted to— a note about a student's humorous moment, high-frequency words practice, or progress with a warm-up decodable passage (Keen, 2007; Steward & Gouff, 2005). Lastly, they should adhere to caregiver preferences and accessibility (Grujanc, 2011; Kraft, 2017; Molden, 2016; Nagy, 2011; York et al., 2019); for example, some caregivers may prefer text messages to phone calls, but others may not have easy access to texting and prefer hand-written notes or phone calls.

These positive, even though brief, interactions can add up. For example, Kraft and Dougherty (2013) found that frequent personalized phone calls positively impact student engagement and academic outcomes and promote stronger caregiver-educator relationships. On the other hand, text messaging, has become favored by some caregivers over traditional phone calls home (Lazaros, 2016). York and colleagues' (2019) research consisted of an eight-month-long text-messaging program, READY4K! of 1,031 caregivers of preschoolers. Participants received three weekly texts with support, reinforcement, and follow-up advice for the caregivers about a particular academic ability (York et al., 2019). Although the participants' children began the study with lower literacy levels, their research demonstrated that the children's literacy skills had significantly improved (York et al., 2019). These results suggest that text messages and similar technologies are helpful communication tools that foster caregiver engagement and positive student literacy outcomes (York et al., 2019).

The frequency of informal written communication depends on context (Molden, 2016), but the following general guidelines should be applied (Steward & Gouff, 2005). Schools should develop preemptive strategies to maintain open contact lines with parents (Wanat, 2011). As with formal communication, informal communication should be caregiver-friendly with limited educational jargon (PTA, 2021; Wood, 2009). Moreover, these informal modes of communication should allow for an intentional increase of positive messages concerning student literacy progress (Weiss et al., 2010) as well as opportunities for open bilateral communication (Carasso, 2022; Whitaker & Hoover-Dempsey, 2013), building partnerships between caregivers and educators that can positively impact the quality of educational experiences (Hafizi & Papa, 2012; Keen, 2007).

Assignments. Assignments sent home for completion can bridge students' classrooms and their homes (Nagy, 2011; Jones, 2001) as well as encourage student and caregiver interaction (Nagy, 2011). Assignments sent home can bridge students' classrooms and their homes (Caplan et al., 2005). They can also encourage caregiver-child interactions within this academic context. A common primary assignment are homework activities which are described in the following sections.

Epstein and Van Voorhis (2001) insist that "homework may be designed to guide and promote positive communications between parent and child" (p. 182). Educators create practice opportunities for caregiver-child home literacy engagement that may resemble classroom instruction and expectations (Epstein & Van Voorhis, 2001). Researchers have found that when educators align homework assignments with student learning needs and provide feedback, student achievement improvements are observed (Rosario et al., 2018; Xu et al., 2022).

However, Bennett and Kalish (2006) caution against excessive homework and the need for teacher training in effective homework practices.

Despite their best intentions, educators' practices can undermine caregiver engagement (Bembenutty, 2011). Homework assignments should not be carelessly printed and sent home (Nagy, 2011). Research encourages educators to take charge of choosing or creating assignments that are meaningful, interesting, and of high quality so that 1) students at all achievement levels, including those with low ability, can complete their assignments, 2) students benefit from their effort, and 3) caregivers, despite personal education levels, can appropriately and effectively support their children's education (Epstein & Van Voorhis, 2001).

Conferences. Parent-Teacher Conferences are another avenue to involve families in their child's education (Nagy, 2011). Educators typically hold conferences with caregivers at scheduled times for home-school communication of individual student progress (Epstein, 1986; Molden, 2016). This form of formal communication is typically held once or twice a year for elementary students (Nagy, 2011; Popovska et al., 2021). Conferences are an additional avenue to establish partnerships with families and promote engagement through involvement in decisions about their child's education (Epstein, 1987; Nagy, 2011).

Caregivers offer a wealth of information for educators, but if unacknowledged, this resource is lost (Nagy, 2011). Traditionally, educators dominate conferences providing the majority of information and using allotted talking time (Nagy, 2011). However, effective communication, as previously established, is an exchange of ideas, beliefs, and information (Larkin, 2003; Legerstee & Reddy, 2007). Therefore, conferences should be used to promote partnerships for more equitable talk time and co-production of goals. Greene (1998) furthers the sentiment regarding bilateral communication in conferences, "When these occasions are true

conversations rather than one-sided reports, both parties can offer useful perspectives on the student's educational growth" (p. 9). To increase caregiver attendance, some schools offer incentives for attendance (e.g., a drawing for prizes). Other schools consider convenience by offering a choice for meeting times or locations (L. Henderson et al., 2020; Khalifa, 2018).

Workshops. Workshops, or training sessions, act as another opportunity for educators to communicate literacy goals and expectations (Schwartz, 1999). This communication tool can be interactive (Hunter et al., 2017). Workshops can include creating activities to promote home literacy interactions that align with classroom and student literacy achievement (Howell & Stenberg, 2002; Hunter et al., 2017; Ortiz & Ordoñez-Jasis, 2005).

Educators seeking to create effective workshops benefit significantly from designing workshops from an asset-based perspective (Clarke & Comber, 2020; Hunter et al., 2017). This means the workshops' construction and implementation draw upon the caregivers' strengths, interests, concerns, and goals by involving them in the workshops' design, implementation, and evaluation of their own children's development (Baker, 2013; Clarke & Comber, 2020; Hammer et al., 2005; Hunter et al., 2017; Kupzyk et al., 2011; Sawyer et al., 2018). When educators include opportunities for feedback, the results are a genuine exchange of expertise, promoting bilateral communication (Bryk & Schneider, 2003; Hunter et al., 2017; Nnachetam,2010).

This section outlined communication opportunities that educators commonly use, ranging from newsletters to homework assignments to workshops. However, when employing these tools, educators must understand what constitutes as effective communication (Sylaj & Sylaj, 2020). Despite the importance of communication, issues persist, mostly because educators are frequently skilled at teaching but lack the knowledge and skills required for effective communication with caregivers (Bates & Morgan, 2018; Mapp & Kuttner, 2013). ADC provides

educators with a perspective to explore positive communication practices targeted specifically for caregivers from marginalized communities. Learning about individual caregivers can lead to the creation of a classroom community that promotes caregiver-educator collaboration (Espe-Sherwindt, 2008; Hampton et al., 2023; Paulick et al., 2022). Neglecting to properly communicate, or failing to leverage bilateral possibilities, not only deprives educators from establishing strong home-school relationships but also prevents educators from harnessing caregivers as change agents in student academic success.

The Journey to Equitable Collaboration

The rationale for investigating effective communication that fosters cooperative relationships between caregivers and educators in this section of the literature review is split into two sections exploring: 1) coproducers of literacy achievement through effective communication and 2) the navigation of barriers to effective communication. First, I will discuss how effective communication can set educators and caregivers up as coproducers of literacy achievement. Using the understanding that "…collaboration is a dynamic process that operates on multiple levels, from broader structures to everyday moments" (Ishimaru, 2020, p. 40), an intentional distinction between involvement and engagement will be made as understanding this will guide communication efforts. The literature to follow is divided into four sections: 1) alignment and its benefits, 2) elements of the partnership, 3) systemic view of trust, and 4) the untapped resource, Black caregivers.

Coproducers of Literacy Achievement through Effective Communication

It is essential to distinguish between the definitions of traditional family involvement and current thinking around family engagement. Family involvement is a deficit-based approach that privileges normative school-centric behaviors (Ishimaru, 2019). Caregivers deemed 'involved'

comply with specified practices resembling school-based knowledge (Dagen & Bean, 2020; Doyle & Keane, 2019; Merga & Mat Roni, 2018), often leading to ignoring others' valuable literacy practices (Dagen & Bean, 2020). For example, with family engagement, efforts are based on integrating family knowledge with school knowledge (Dagen & Bean, 2020; Ishimaru, 2019). Additionally, engagement designates caregivers as highly valued partners in education with the belief that caregivers act as change agents who can transform schools (Baxter, 2018; Ishimaru, 2014, 2019).

Alignment and Benefits. Policymakers and researchers have long seen caregivers as key levers in improving student outcomes (A. Henderson et al., 2002; Ishimaru, 2019; Teale, 1986). In return, schools that foster positive engagement with students' caregivers profit from improved student academic outcomes (Bryk, 2010). This consequence is mainly attributed to increased student attendance (Sheldon & Jung, 2015), fewer discipline problems (Hiatt-Michael, 2001), and increased student connectedness with school and learning (Hammond, 2015). To better understand these reported benefits of engaged caregivers on student outcomes, it is essential to unpack how their presence supports student learning.

The Matthew Effect is a phenomenon whereby those who begin with an advantage build on that advantage over time, while those who begin with a disadvantage become increasingly more disadvantaged over time (Perc, 2014). It alludes to an outcome of growing disparities between the affluent and underprivileged while also acknowledging how a person's level of academic achievement can affect their socioeconomic position. Approximately 15.2 million individuals are living in poverty, underscoring the tangible scale of this issue (Low Income America, 2022).

As was previously stated in this Chapter, reading is the "mother "of all other subject areas and is an essential foundation for students' academic success. (The Reading League, 2020). The “currency of literacy” (Weeden, 2020) is the authority people have once they have acquired strong literacy skills and can use their education to determine the course of their lives. A person's ability to alter their financial situation due to their education is referred to as their "currency" (The Reading League, 2020). As a result, literacy achievement becomes a social justice issue since individuals who possess strong literacy skills can access higher education and qualification opportunities outside of traditional schooling, thereby favorably altering their own poverty trajectory (The Reading League, 2020). Unfortunately, not all students are afforded the “currency of literacy” (The Reading League, 2020).

Alignment between school and home benefits all involved, especially Black students. Reynolds and Clements' 2005 study of Chicago Parent Centers 1539 Black families found that for every year that caregivers took part in the effort, there was a 16% increase in the probability that the child would graduate from high school. Notably, 80% of students with caregivers who participated in the initiative for the entire six-year period graduated from high school, compared to 38% of children with caregivers who were not actively involved (Reynolds & Clements, 2005). Foster-DeMers (2012) found a similar connection between student academic achievement and caregiver engagement when using an instructional at-home plan (IAHP). The sample site comprised of 98 percent Black low-income households. IAHP was used in three different kindergarten classes at the same school for four years to inform caregivers of their children's essential literacy skills and goals.

IAHP consisted of three parts: conferencing with caregivers for goal setting, simulations of desired at-home skill practice, and multiple written communications regarding the student's

progress (Foster-DeMers, 2012). Conferences, averaging fifteen minutes, were held individually with parents or in small groups (Foster-DeMers, 2012). At the outset of the conference, the educator presented a summary of the IAHP's objectives and purpose (Foster-DeMers, 2012). Educators stressed the importance of at-home practice while outlining the value and significance of the caregiver's role in home practice emphasizing the student's goals from the Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS) evaluation (Foster-DeMers, 2012). Caregivers then watched demonstrations of how to successfully use the IAHP exercises with their children at home (Foster-DeMers, 2012). Each educator took additional measures to inform parents of the value of using developmentally appropriate practices at home and in the classroom (Foster-DeMers, 2012). The study resulted in a 50% increase of students at grade level and above grade level in the beginning of the year to the end of the year and a drop of more than 50% of students below grade level.

These positive findings indicate that educators may improve reading achievement by using focused communication techniques with caregivers, especially in Black communities and low-income households (Foster-DeMers, 2012; Moll et al., 1992). Additionally, aspects of family-centeredness, providing norms that respect and value families and using caregiver-professional collaborations as a framework, were applied throughout IAHP's design (Dunst, 2002). The asset-based mindset was incorporated into the design of IAHP and put into practice by explicitly encouraging caregivers to share their approaches and difficulties they anticipated encountering in the months ahead; their expertise was acknowledged and valued (Delpit, 1988; Foster-DeMers, 2012; Moll et al., 1992). Despite the accomplishments and significant advancements made within a community with high needs, there is uncertainty over IAHP's provision for the co-production of goals between caregivers and educators (Bamm &

Rosenbaum, 2008; Dunst, 2002; Hampton et al., 2023). Although there was inherent value for the caregivers' methods, IAHP resembles a hierarchal knowledge transfer, where educators establish and communicate literacy goals and dictate the literacy skill practice.

Elements of Partnership. A partnership is not produced with one singular action but through a system of interdependent actions: collaboration, communication, trust, and respect (Ishimaru, 2019). In other words, systemic changes are required if educators desire to reap the benefits of effective caregiver partnerships (Ishimaru, 2019; Mapp & Kuttner, 2013). A reciprocal relationship is illustrated when educators frequently and effectively communicate with caregivers. In return, educators are then provided critical information about the student (Moll et al., 1992). This communication is powered through caregiver-educator trust, fostering an open exchange of information due to caregivers and educators valuing each other's funds of knowledge (Bryk & Schneider, 2003; Ishimaru, 2014; Moll et al., 1992). Unfortunately, many educators and caregivers are plagued by numerous factors that impede this equitable collaboration that leads to a partnership. Oftentimes the absence of relational trust between caregivers and educators thwarts all attempts at communication.

Systemic View of Trust. Bryk and Schneider (2003) define relational trust as the "critical social lubricant" in school improvement efforts suggesting that relationships between caregivers and educators offer access to each other's resources to aid student academic success. Unfortunately, schools struggle, presently and historically, to establish relational trust (Hammond, 2015, L. Henderson. et al., 2020; Ingram et al.,2007; Mapp & Kuttner, 2013; Moll et al., 1992; Sheldon & Jung, 2015).

Educators are in the powerful position to "...either work on challenging inequities in schools or replicating them…" (Mundorf, 2019, p. 67). Despite this known factor, racism

insidiously manifests in schools. Historically, systemic efforts were made to impair the educational experiences of marginalized students (Au, 2016; Gregoire & Cramer, 2015; Oakes et al., 2018). Henry Berry, Virginia House of Congress, in 1832, stated, “If we could only extinguish the capacity to see the light, our work would be complete…” (Love, 2004, p. 236). This sentiment displays the prioritization to create and maintain the gap in access to educational opportunities for minorities. One might argue that the aforementioned quote reflects an antiquated perspective; however, these founding principles of alienation have aided in constructing the U.S. curricular framework that operates in schools today (Au et al., 2016).

Respect is a prerequisite for relational trust emphasizing the importance of recognizing that respect is subjectively rooted in individual values (Dillon, 2003). However, fear significantly affects one's judgments regarding respect and consequently hampers relational trust (Godefroidt & Langer, 2020; Renzl, 2008). In the caregiver-educator relationship, educators may react with fear when considering more equitable partnerships (Ishimaru, 2020). Fear can also be observed among caregivers. Reynolds (2010) explored fear in Black mothers engaged in impression management, as they sought to present themselves favorably to school officials to ensure their sons' needs were met. When caregivers perceive limited respect from schools, fear-based judgements arise and opportunities to build relational trust are lost (Godefroidt & Langer, 2020; Renzl, 2008).

An Untapped Resource: The Black Caregiver. It is crucial to recognize a key resource that is largely underutilized in the majority of American classrooms: the Black caregiver. This resource should be acknowledged before expressly analyzing the constraints that caregivers and educators face that prevent effective communication and equitable collaboration.

Knowledge and belief systems underpin most ideas about individuals and their activities (Bryan & Atwater, 2002). This knowledge is socially negotiated and known as cultural models, defined as "the unexpected, yet unspoken, mostly unconscious and taken-for-granted aspects of the world that contain shared implicit knowledge and involves the process of identifying the complex element of beliefs and knowledge" (Hamilton, 1996, p. 188). Cultural models are vital pillars in caregiver-educator partnerships because they form caregivers' beliefs, which drive caregivers' role in their child's education, expectations of educators, and overall decisions made regarding their child's education (Yamamoto & Bempechat, 2022). However, challenges can arise when there is a mismatch between the culture of schools and the culture that many Black caregivers bring to school (Bryan & Atwater, 2002; Delpit, 1988; Gal & Irvine, 2019). This mismatch happens when Black caregivers are expected to conform to behaviors, speech patterns, or attitudes that are consistent with the school's culture (Bryan & Atwater, 2002; Yamamoto & Bempechat, 2022). Educators, in turn, regard these caregivers as deficient and fail to appreciate the assets they bring to the student's education (Beneke et al., 2022; Bryan & Atwater, 2002; Huguley et al.,2021; Love et al., 2021; Yamamoto & Bempechat, 2022).

However, before delving into the cultural models held by Black caregivers, it is critical in research to recognize that SES, geographic location, and personal experiences all have a significant impact on Black caregivers' views on schooling (Bryan & Atwater, 2002; Huguley et al.,2021; Love et al., 2021; McDuffie & Crowther, 2023). According to parenting scholars, cultural models are multifaceted structures meaning that Black caregivers do not have monolithic experiences and beliefs (Fan & Chen, 2001; Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997; Huguley et al., 2021). However, there are general trends concerning Black caregivers' cultural models of schooling that must be understood in order to ensure more equitable relationships and effective

communication efforts between caregivers and educators (Cooper, 2009; Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997; Huguley et al., 2021; Love et al., 2021). The following trends will be examined within Black caregivers' cultural models toward schooling: the value of education and academic achievement, commitment to advocacy, the intentional building of community, caregiver engagement, the manifestation of cultural models and its impact on communication. Then the analysis will conclude with the counternarrative of Black caregiver engagement.

Cultural Model: Value of Education and Academic Achievement. Black caregivers, particularly those from lower SES populations, are frequently viewed as disengaged and with lower investment in their children's education (Allen & White-Smith, 2017; Cooper, 2003; Khalifa, 2018; Love et al., 2021). However, this notion is far from the truth when uncovering cultural models Black caregivers hold toward schooling.

Education has historically and currently been considered a practice of freedom in the Black community (Hooks, 2014). Education scholars writing about the history of Black schooling describe how Black caregivers invested in education during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries as a means of political and economic self-determination and racial uplift (Anderson, 1988; Fairclough, 2007). This same resolve and value for education is still pertinent to today's Black caregiver, as education is considered a means for social mobility and economic success (Allen & White-Smith, 2017).

Black caregivers have demonstrated a commitment to their child's academic success through traditional activities such as reading to their children, assisting with homework, attending school events, and promoting college attendance (Allen & White-Smith, 2017; Cooper, 2009; Love et al., 2021). Compensatory practices are also discussed within Black caregivers' perceptions of their role in their children's schooling (Huguley et al., 2021). In a qualitative study

of 28 caregivers and 26 of their children from six Title 1 schools in an urban district, Black caregivers agreed on the significance of being proactive in their child's education (Huguley et al., 2021). As evidenced by a participant's reaction,

> "At no point can you leave your child's destiny in one individual, in a [school] that is extremely overpopulated. [other parents express agreement] …The little pieces that they do get, cool... I want my son to know more than that, so I got him a workbook for each grade of his life…" (Huguley et al., 2021, p. 11).

The participants' value for education is evident in compensatory academic support at home proactively and responsively addressing their children's schooling experiences (Huguley et al., 2021). Another participant from Huguley's and colleagues' study (2021) shared similar values for supporting their child's education, "My family's from the South. So, education was always key. It was always education… education if you want to change your life or your community" (p. 13). Here the participant confirms their beliefs in education as a tool for social and economic advancement for their child. In the interview data, Allen and White-Smith's (2017) study of Black mothers regarding their beliefs and actions in their child's education corroborated similar cultural models, linking educational attainment to economic mobility. The caregivers shared how they individually pushed for academic excellence for their sons; one mother encouraged her son to obtain additional college credits while enrolled in high school, although the classroom educators did not insist (Allen & White-Smith, 2017).

In Cooper's (2009) study, only three out of the 14 mothers interviewed were considered traditionally involved as active site-based volunteers. Each mother, however, was devoted and deeply invested in their children's education, as confirmed by the following:

> "…through seeking specialized programs for their children with exceptional needs, visiting various schools to observe classrooms before choosing one, engaging in protest politics and speaking out against inequitable school policies, challenging administrators they judged to be inept, sharing school choice information with other low-income mothers, or traveling …for hours on public transportation each day to keep their children enrolled in the school they deemed superior to their neighborhood school…" (Cooper, 2009, p. 386).

Although Black caregivers' interactions with their child's schooling may not always align with traditional and mainstream expectations, their methods should not be discounted but instead respectfully unpacked, and differences should be viewed as valuable tools within the budding partnership between educators and caregivers (Dunst, 2002; Hugugley et al., 2021; Moll et al., 1992).

Cultural Model: Commitment to advocacy. The cultural model of valuing their children's academic success is inextricably linked to the obligation of Black caregivers to advocate. Black caregivers are fully aware of the various hurdles their children will face during their years of formal schooling, so they embrace advocacy as a responsibility in their child's education (Allen & White-Smith, 2017; Chance, 2010; Cooper, 2009; Love et al., 2021). This advocacy history dates to the establishment of public schools (Cooper, 2009). Advocacy is a cultural tradition founded on racial uplift, "…a desire to empower themselves and their children in educational systems that have historically oppressed them" (Cooper, 2009, p. 382). Allen and White-Smith (2017) noted Black caregivers' demonstration of educational care through advocacy under oppressive conditions. A mother provided proactive socialization by supporting her son in navigating microaggressions:

> "He came home one day and the lady [he works with] announces over the loudspeaker, "Come here boy" … I said, "talk to the lady." And he was like, "What am I going to say to her," and I said "well, you need to …just tell her nicely, I heard you, I didn't know you were talking about me. My name is Grant." But there's always … a few, that are going to make comments that you don't like." I said, "but you have to deal with them in a responsible way, respectful sometimes …" (Allen & White-Smith, 2017, p. 11).

Advocacy beliefs manifest when Black caregivers challenge unfair discipline incidents, question poor classroom instruction and systemic lack of rigor, and confront racialized experiences (Allen & White-Smith, 2017; Huguley et al., 2021; Love et al., 2021; Reynolds, 2010). Leveraging relationships to resolve social challenges for their children is also an example of advocacy (Huguley et al., 2021; Love et al., 2021). It extends into another dimension of cultural models held by Black caregivers, a strong sense of community within educational contexts.

Cultural Model: Intentional Building of Community. Researchers have uncovered tendencies in the literature relevant to the cultural model of Black caregivers, one of which is a more considerable emphasis on the role of community in their children's education (Allen & White-Smith, 2017; Fennimore, 2017; Huguley et al., 2021; Love et al., 2021). These collaborative approaches are intentionally made with school staff and other caregivers within the school, family, and community (Allen & White-Smith, 2017; Cooper, 2009; Huguley et al., 2021; Marchand et al., 2019). Cooper's (2009) study highlighted that participants shared their educational experiences and informational resources with other families in their neighborhoods. For example, a mother described gathering other mothers at her home and teaching them how to effectively make a written request to a school official (Cooper, 2009). Cooper (2009) also

reported how communal care existed with Black caregivers, as they frequently assisted one another:

> "…a mother working two jobs said [she relies on others] "And when I say "involved," that doesn't mean that you have to be at all the PTA meetings … because I don't do that, I don't have the time. But you almost have to do it like the village kind of thing where you involve your whole family…my sister and her son goes to the same school, so sometimes if she can make a meeting, and I just can't, then she'll bring me the information back… And if she sees something that's wrong, she speaks for me too" (p. 389).

Ally building with staff also supports their children's schooling. Huguley and researchers (2021) extracted from participants their value for initiating communication with school staff, "I communicate here with all the teachers. They have my number, if they're cuttin' up…call me. I will be right here …" (p. 11). Huguley et al. (2021) found that other participants agreed with the mentioned approach, forming relationships for monitoring purposes. Educators should adopt a more individualized approach to building relationships with Black caregivers, considering their emphasis on community building for monitoring purposes, as identified by researchers (Rosenbaum & King, 2009; Dunst, 2002; Huguley et al., 2021), which can significantly impact communication dynamics between educators and caregivers.

Cultural Models Manifested to Impact Communication. The described components of cultural models – value for education, commitment to advocacy, and emphasis on community – concerning schooling held by Black caregivers are frequently unknown or misinterpreted by educators, resulting in tensions between Black caregivers and educators when seeking to communicate (Allen & White-Smith, 2017; Cooper, 2009; Goodall, 2018; Huguley et al., 2021;

Love et al., 2021). Although educators desire caregiver contribution, they often place Black caregivers in deficit positions that dismiss and devalue their participation (Love et al., 2021). These deficit attitudes towards Black caregivers significantly impact communication because they impede Black parents' ability to support their children's education.

On the other hand, applying a family-centered approach (Bamm & Rosenbaum, 2008; Dunst, 2002) with marginalized communities, acknowledging and valuing the cultural models brought to schooling by Black caregivers leads to effective partnerships. With ADC, educators continuously rely on soft skills such as empathy while communicating with Black caregivers (Bates & Morgan, 2018). Implementing an asset-based beliefs approach could begin a process in which schools can learn about the cultural wealth of the communities in which they work (Mapp & Bergman, 2021).

Taking everything into consideration, this section of the literature review pertaining to the journey to equitable collaboration addressed the issues of defining, establishing, and maintaining equitable collaborations with caregivers, notably Black caregivers. The literature described how effective communication leads to collaborative partnerships that benefit both educators and caregivers. However, obtaining equitable collaboration necessitates relational trust and a purposeful concentration on interpersonal interactions (Foster-DeMers, 2012). As a result, being oblivious of educators' implicit biases and Black caregiver cultural models regarding schooling might unintentionally result in communication patterns that alienate and discourage caregiver involvement. Through the counternarrative (Delgado, 1989), marginalized families' voices provide a different perspective on perceived inactivity and current literacies. To more fully understand caregiver-educator communication, a review of the barriers to effective communication for caregivers and educators will be covered in the next section.

Navigation of Barriers to Effective Communication

To engage in effective communication, it is important first to investigate experienced barriers from both perspectives, caregivers and educators. Most educators enter the field without understanding the framework for establishing partnerships with caregivers due to limited devotion to this focus in teacher preparation programs (Bryk & Schneider, 2003; Epstein,1995; Zeichner, 2021). Additionally, practicing educators are not often provided the tools for effective family engagement through professional development opportunities (Chaney, 2014; Comber, 2014; Mapp & Kuttner, 2013). Similarly, primary caregivers from low-income and ethnically marginalized households frequently encounter various obstacles while attempting to communicate effectively and participate in their children's educational activities. (Chaney, 2014; Clarke & Comber, 2020; Li et al., 2021). The following section seeks to dismantle barriers educators and caregivers face by first intentionally naming them (Bergman & Mapp, 2021). First, educator barriers will be investigated through dangers of beliefs, teacher preparation programs, and professional development. Second, an analysis of caregiver barriers including mindsets and perceptions towards engagement and household factors. Lastly, an exploration of home-school dissonance as it presents barriers that equally impact caregivers and educators.

Educator Barriers

Collective capacity refers to how people work together in schools to improve student learning and lives. (Mapp & Kuttner, 2013; Sheldon & Jung, 2015; Walker & Riordan, 2010). As previously mentioned, there is a misconception that educators are equipped to establish collective capacity (Ishimaru, 2014; LaRocque, 2013; Mapp & Kuttner, 2013; Walker & Riordan, 2010). Educators are not successfully prepared or supported as in-service educators to implement and sustain home–school relationships (Mapp & Kuttner, 2013). Establishing

respectful and meaningful communication with diverse caregivers requires specific strategies (Chaney, 2014; LaRocque, 2013; Khalifa, 2018; Reynolds, 2010). Alternatively, without attention to educator capacity building, well-intentioned partnership efforts will fail (Mapp & Kuttner, 2013). Educator barriers are unpacked in two sections: 1) the dangers of beliefs and 2) limited family engagement training.

The Dangers of Beliefs. Rokeach (1968) asserted that beliefs are judgments formed, subconsciously or unconsciously, using inferences from what a person says or does. Beliefs impact the school context as they are an integration of descriptive (e.g., my students' parents are predominately Black), evaluative (e.g., these parents poorly support their children's reading goals), and prescriptive elements (e.g., we will always have poorly attended literacy events) (Rokeach, 1968). Beliefs are powerful filters that shape how educators view themselves, students, and their caregivers (Guerra & Wubbena, 2017). Adichie (2009) raised a similar point highlighted by Guerra and Wubbena (2017). She discusses the dangers of the single story, a held belief imposed on another without the balance of their perspective or reality explored. These beliefs are typically deficit-based as they validate negative perceptions (Guerra & Wubbena, 2017; Khalifa, 2018). Consequently, deficit-based beliefs serve as one mechanism for restricting successful home-school partnerships because it severely impairs communication.

Often caregiver and educator beliefs differ around appropriate and positive forms of communication and engagement (Gregoire & Cramer, 2015; L. Henderson. et al., 2020; Khalifa, 2018). In Henderson and colleagues' (2020) study, the interviewed educators expressed discontent with the quality of communication, and some described it as non-existent. Caregivers were often criticized for behavior that was not in line with the school expectations (L. Henderson. et al., 2020). For instance, disagreements between educators and caregivers resulted

in negative labeling of the latter, with caregivers being portrayed as argumentative and unconcerned about student learning. Essentially, educators held control over acceptable communication methods (Henderson et al., 2002; Mapp & Kuttner, 2013). However, tension occurs when educators only ascribe positive value to caregiver communication when caregiver participation aligns with school-centric or personal values and expectations (Comber, 2014; Henderson et al., 2002; Ishimaru, 2014; Reynolds, 2010). As a result, this belief system places stressors on the home-school relationship.

"Unspoken and often ignored dynamics influence how caregivers are seen and treated by educators, irrespective of their intentions…" (Bergman &Mapp, 2021, p. 8). Communication between educators and caregivers is complex because there is no monolithic norm. Educators often request caregiver support that unknowingly resembles managerial tasks, such as completing crafts (Epstein & Becker, 1982; Mapp & Kuttner, 2013). Nevertheless, these actions do not develop meaningful family partnerships. It is important to consider how educators view differences; are caregivers seen as assets or roadblocks in the educational process?

Limited Family Engagement Training. It is critical to briefly dissect the inadequate training that occurs in teacher preparation programs and during teacher professional development (PD). Educators are oftentimes leaving teacher preparation programs knowledgeable in content and pedagogy but with inadequate knowledge concerning effective partnerships with caregivers (Lee, 2018). As a result, attempts at engagement perpetuate the same hierarchical relationships that existed previously (Ishimaru, 2019; Zeichner, 2021). And unfortunately, PD concerning home-school relationships often misfires (Comber, 2014; Guerra & Wubbena, 2017; Lee, 2018; Mapp & Kuttner, 2013). When provided with home-school relationship content in PD, educators

report that content primarily is based on managing caregivers deemed difficult (Mapp & Kuttner, 2013; Khalifa, 2018) or content aligns with a more teacher-centric vision (Ishimaru, 2019).

Caregiver Barriers

Parenting is not a singular role but one that encompasses many joyous and taxing responsibilities (LaRocque & Darling, 2011). When formal schooling begins, the role as the teacher does not stop for caregivers. While it is critical for them to remain part of the child's educational team, their role shifts to a collaborative partnership with educators (LaRocque & Darling, 2011). However, some impediments can inhibit caregiver engagement, including but not limited to: 1) mindset and perceptions towards engagement and 2) household factors.

Mindset and Perceptions Towards Engagement. Zambrana et al. (2019) define caregivers' role construction as active beliefs shaped by their educational history, aiding educators and researchers in understanding how it influences family literacy engagement. Kim et al. (2020) note that caregivers may exhibit a "culture of silence" because of past educational history and current abilities that do not align with the school's culture. This 'culture of silence' can manifest in low conference attendance and low home assignment completion due to the belief of lacking the cultural and educational competence to support their child's education (Delpit, 1988; Doyle & Keane, 2019; Gregoire & Cramer, 2015).

Additionally, what educators view as disengagement or disinterest is perhaps a result of caregivers having a higher opinion of their child's academic performance or a misunderstanding of effective support (Gregoire & Cramer, 2015; Kim et al., 2020). Varied perceptions of active engagement between educators and caregivers are evident, with some caregivers emphasizing school attendance or resorting to prayer when school challenges occurred (Durand, 2011;

Gregoire & Cramer, 2015). Therefore, the definition of active engagement can differ significantly between educators and caregivers (Durand, 2011; Gregoire & Cramer, 2015).

Household Factors. Due to the uniqueness of the household, equally complex issues that affect caregivers' capacity for effective communication also arise. Parenting encompasses numerous responsibilities, often leaving limited time for activities deemed as nonessential (U.S. Bureau of Labor and Statistics, 2019). Williams and Sanchez (2013) explored the notion of time poverty as the activities that consume caregivers' time, at home or away from home, from school-related activities. The time between after school and bedtime is brief, which constrains consistent literacy engagement and communication with educators (U.S. Bureau of Labor and Statistics, 2019; Williams & Sanchez, 2013).

Home School Dissonance

Henderson and colleagues (2020) shifted the investigation of family engagement by considering how home-school dissonance (HSD) can impact how some caregivers and educators engage in the educational process. HSD is defined by differing values, beliefs, and behavioral expectations between home and school (L. Henderson. et al., 2020). HSD occurs when educators' beliefs and behaviors are incompatible with the caregivers' beliefs and behaviors (LaRocque, 2013). Khalifa's (2018) study of culturally responsive leadership relates to the chronic problem of competing epistemologies between home and school, illustrating continued tension. Educators and caregivers were interviewed to compare how individuals with community-based and school-centric epistemologies approach and understand educational issues from both perspectives. For instance, an educator noted, "[parents] should come into schools…because that is where education occurs…" which implies a restricted belief on where students can learn (Khalifa, 2018, p. 55). While in comparison, caregivers revealed that

attendance depended on work commitments and transportation limitations even though they expressed commitment to educational activities (Khalifa, 2018). These differing perspectives illustrate how misunderstandings can lead to deficit-based thinking.

Equipping educators and caregivers with tools and strategies is essential for navigating the complexities of home-school relationships, as unpreparedness may lead to a misalignment between intentions and actions (Guerra & Wubbena, 2017). Thus, when operating within the constraints of dissonance, it is important to understand how cultural differences and unvoiced value systems impact communication efforts.

Culture Differences as an Invisible Barrier. The potential for cultural dissonance exists when there is a mismatch between the educator's and student's family demographics (LaRocque, 2013). Currently, 79% of educators in the United States are White; by contrast, over 50% of learners are of color, presenting a potential for real and perceived cultural misunderstanding (National Statistics of Education, 2020). Cultural dissonance manifests in educational settings, named by Delpit (1988) as the culture of power. Delpit (1988) explains that enacting power in the classroom as codes or rules for participating in power typically reflects White, middle-class American norms. Within the culture of power, there is an unsaid expectation for home-school interactions that hinders and prevents the possibility of engagement (Delpit, 1988; Chance, 2014; L. Henderson et al., 2020; Mapp & Kuttner, 2013).

Caregivers may feel unwelcomed because of past and ongoing discrimination and oppression in schools and communities (Delpit, 1988; Doyle & Keane, 2019; Gregoire & Cramer, 2015; L. Henderson. et al., 2020; Khalifa, 2018). Therefore, they may intentionally limit communication efforts (Andrews et al., 2019; Cortez, 2020; Chaney, 2014; Henderson et al., 2002; Ishimaru, 2014). Reynolds (2010) explored the impact of cultural dissonance experienced

through the lens of Black caregivers. In her study, caregivers frequently reported subtle acts of racism manifested through microaggressions (Reynolds, 2010). However, a racial and ethnic match between educators and caregivers does not always ensure the removal of dissonance (Khalifa, 2018). Dissonance can occur when there is limited partnership training and opportunity to address biases (Andrews et al., 2019; Khalifa, 2018). Thus, it further necessitates equipping all educators with the tools to interact respectfully and effectively with caregivers in hopes of collaborative relationships built on trust.

Unvoiced Value System. Most studies and program efforts still predominantly concentrated as teacher-centric viewpoints (McWayne et al., 2022; Morrow et al., 1993). This is problematic because these well-intentioned efforts to foster family engagement frequently further highlight their disconnect from families. Carreón et al. (2005) indicated that while a school administrator expressed pride in the parent-organized activities, caregivers who were immigrants or ethnic minorities reported confusion regarding the significance of their involvement in such activities. Ultimately, the school staff's lack of contextual and cultural awareness contributed to lack of caregiver participation in school activities (Karoly & Gonzalez, 2011).

This gap between caregivers and educators limits educators' access to vital resources. According to the Funds of Knowledge (FoK) theory and the Family-Centered Practice theory, educators can enhance academic learning by utilizing the knowledge and skills children gain in their families and communities and bridging the knowledge and skill gap between school and home (Gonzalez et al., 2005; Hogg, 2011). The knowledge base researchers and educators can accrue through a family-centeredness approach with households can be treated pedagogically as cultural resources for instruction and learning in school settings, leading to a co-construction of knowledge (Dunst, 2002; Hampton et al., 2023; Li et al., 2021; Volman & 't Gilde, 2021).

Impacts of Anti-Deficit Communication

Davis and Museus (2019) conceptualized deficit thinking as consisting of four components: 1) a blame the victim orientation, 2) a grounding in larger complex systems of oppression, 3) a pervasive and often implicit nature, and 4) effects that reinforce dominant systems. Deficit thinking implies that people are to blame for their situation and fails to see that they live inside coercive structures that create suffering with no accountability (2019). With an emphasis on Black populations, systemic variables that shape differences in social and educational outcomes are ignored by deficit thinking (Chambers & Spikes, 2016; Delpit, 1988; Valencia, 2010). Historically, deficit thinking has been rooted in classist and racialized ideas that portray oppressed people as deficient (Bryan & Atwater, 2002; Delpit, 1988; Love, 2004; Yamamoto & Bempechat, 2022;). Deficit thinking is intrinsically linked to meritocratic ideologies, which mistakenly assert that everyone has an equal opportunity of success under existing social frameworks (Davis & Museus, 2019; Love, 2004). Deficit thinking insidiously acts as a symptom of systemic oppression, but it also encourages these oppressive institutions (Davis & Museus, 2019; Delpit, 1988; Love, 2004).

Anti-Deficit Communication Supporting a Paradigm Shift

Merriam-Webster (n.d.) defines anti as "of the same kind but situated opposite, exerting energy in the opposite direction, or pursuing an opposite policy." Thus, with an understanding of 'anti,' ADC aims to directly oppose Eurocentric education systems and narratives that conceal the cultural assets and expertise that students from diverse backgrounds—particularly Black students—bring to educational environments (Williams et al., 2020). With adaptative changes, individuals are tasked with learning new ways of thinking and interactions that require systemic shifts (Heifetz et al., 2009; Mapp & Bergman, 2021). Unsurprisingly, many educators do not

believe this sort of practice to be achievable; therefore, explicit models of equitable collaboration are a necessity, as seen in the five components of Anti-Deficit Communication (ADC) (Mapp & Bergman, 2021; Espe- Sherwindt, 2008).

Soft Skills. When analyzing the effectiveness of communication, it is critical to recognize that how information is communicated is more essential than the content of the information provided (McWayne et al., 2019; Molden, 2016; Svlaj & Sylaj, 2020). Soft skills, as opposed to content or technical knowledge, are intangible communication components. (Bates & Morgan, 2018). Soft skills refer to interpersonal and social skills (Hurrell, 2016) that can significantly impact communication effectiveness. Although definitions of soft skills vary, Parente et al.'s (2012) concept of soft skills pertains directly to the success of caregiver-educator interactions in this study. "…clear communication and meaningful feedback, resolving and/or managing conflicts, and understanding human behavior in group settings" (p. 1008). An intentional shift towards educator soft skills is an important component of the conceptual framework, ADC, guiding this capstone. The tensions created by HSD can create strained relationships; however, when humanity is restored to the communication practice, these tensions can be reversed (Gregoire & Cramer, 2015; L. Henderson. et al., 2020; Mapp &Bergman, 2021).

ADC seeks to acknowledge tensions with efforts to restore trust by intentionally applying soft skills in communication practices (Espe-Sherwindt, 2008). Mapp & Bergman (2021) identified these key elements as integrity and respect. For example, a demonstration of integrity for educators is to ask, "Do I keep my word with families?" (Mapp & Bergman, 2021, p.12). In Allen and White-Smith's (2017) qualitative study, the participants revealed their frustration and lack of trust after their child's educator failed to demonstrate integrity by never communicating

errors in grading. Regarding respect, Mapp and Bergman (2021) suggested that educators ask, "Do I show families that I value and care about them?" (p. 12).

Nonverbal soft skills also play a critical role. Seating arrangements in conferences, for example, can be set up so that educators are seated next to caregivers to demonstrate comparable expertise (Kayser, 2018). Moreover, attending to facial gestures, tone, and posture when speaking with caregivers can show respect and build trust (Bates & Morgan, 2018; Kayser, 2018). In the end, soft skills can greatly assist in the effectiveness of communication occurring between caregivers-educators (Bates & Morgan, 2018; Gisewhite & Holden, 2021; Matteson et al., 2016; Parente et al., 2012).

Asset Based and Individualized. Another necessary component for a paradigm change toward ADC is for educators to view caregivers through an asset-based lens. Using an individualized approach, educators use communication past the surface level to unearth knowledge concerning caregivers in their classroom (Espe-Sherwindt, 2008; Hammond, 2015; Park & Paulick, 2021). Cultural knowledge at a surface level refers to food or holidays observed, while deep cultural knowledge investigates cultural models, unconscious beliefs, and situational norms (Bryan & Atwater, 2005; Hammond, 2015; Park & Paulick, 2021). For educators to access individual cultural knowledge at a deeper level and view caregivers with an asset-based lens, they must learn caregivers' individual stories, experiences, and resources (Park & Paulick, 2021). Educators can use opportunities such as home visits and conferences to learn about caregivers on an individualized level (Hunter et al., 2017; Nagy, 2011; Park & Paulick, 2021). To ensure these exchanges do not perpetuate dominant narratives, stereotypes, and biases, Landson-Billings (1995) suggested educators keep the tenants of culturally relevant pedagogy in mind: 1) high expectations for all students, 2) cultural competence, and 3) critical consciousness.

Although empathy is an essential soft skill that must be used for effective caregiver-educator communication, Park and Paulick (2021) cautioned educators that when seeking a more individualized approach to be aware of empathy leading to a lowering of expectations. Even when caregivers share the challenges they face in their daily lives and personal barriers, it's crucial to maintain high expectations. For instance, this could involve offering multiple options or times for conferences to accommodate a grandmother who is juggling multiple jobs (Foster et al., 2008; Ishimaru, 2020; Molden, 2016). Mapp and Bergman (2021) encourage educators to reflect on how their communication practices are demonstrating cultural competence by asking, "Am I demonstrating to all families that I am competent and that I see them as competent and valuable caretakers?" (p. 12). Every facet of caregiver interaction is radically altered by an asset-based mindset and individualized approaches (Mapp & Bergman, 2021).

Collaborative decision making and adult learning. According to Davis and Museus (2019), educators should remember that successful communication with Black caregivers leads to productive relationships. Educators are not "giving voice" to Black caregivers; instead, they provide a welcoming environment, established through soft skills, to contribute to their child's educational experience (2019). Asset-based beliefs, as discovered through an individualized approach, enable educators to embrace caregivers as an unquantifiable resource for student learning fully (Davis & Museus, 2019; Espe- Sherwindt, 2008; Huguley et al., 2021; Love et al., 2021; Paulick et al., 2022; Park & Paulick, 2021). Caregivers, in essence, hold the key in how educators can make learning relevant and interesting for students (Paulick et al., 2022). Three dispositions –humility, valuing FoK, and listening – are required to achieve a point of collaborative space to foster trust and create space for instructors to learn (Paulick et al., 2022). Collaborative-decision making prioritizes the voices of nondominant families in efforts to

address the issues that are most important to them (Mapp & Bergman, 2021). A reprioritization is demonstrated when educators evaluate actions against respect as they ask, “Do I listen to, and value, what all families have to say?” (Mapp & Bergman, 2021, p. 12).

Situating communication opportunities through adult learning tenants ensures the effectiveness of collaborative-decision making between educators and caregivers (Hampton et al., 2023; Mapp & Bergman, 2021). Attending to the adult learner’s individual needs when planning opportunities for communication creates the power of “choice” (Saclarides & Lubienski, 2018). Practically, an educator could send out a Google form to the second-grade caregivers with topics for family literacy and open-ended response to detail challenges they have faced with communication previously (Molden, 2016; Nagy, 2011). This knowledge will allow the classroom educator to design learning experiences and tailor communication efforts to the caregivers’ identified needs.

Educator Development That Supports Collaboration

When provided with intentional training concerning equitable collaborations with the family, educators are better equipped for family partnerships in their school contexts (Cortez, 2020; Lee, 2018; Zeichner, 2021). Oppression and racism will never cease, but the development of educators’ mindsets and practices can interrupt the discourse of a deficit-based lens through which marginalized communities are viewed (Lee, 2018; Trent et al., 2013). The following sections of literature will explore deficit mindsets and the power of critical feedback and dialogue.

Addressing Deficit Mindsets

Awareness of the systemic nature and pervasiveness of racism begins with self-awareness of personal biases (Adichie, 2009; Hammond, 2015; Trent et al., 2013). Once aware

of internal misunderstandings, educators can adjust interactions leading to collaborative relationships (Cortez, 2020; Ishimaru, 2014). Educators must deliberately solicit caregivers' thoughts and preferences, rather than assuming that educational aims are congruent (Cortez, 2020; Delpit, 1988; Nagy, 2011).

Comber (2014) explored the importance of re-examining deficit assumptions about students and their caregivers using 20 educator participants. Key findings show that schools benefit from creating a space for educators to examine the impacts of deficit thinking on instruction and family relationships (Comber, 2014). The acknowledgement of biases, valuing family opinion and expertise, bidirectional communication and partnerships are strengthened (Baxtor, 2018; Comber, 2014; Gawande, 2007; Lee, 2018; Mapp & Kuttner, 2013),

Power of Critical Feedback and Dialogue

Unification of urgency and vision are key elements for organizational change; however, professional learning opportunities must be carefully designed and implemented for long-lasting change in practice (Reeves, 2009; Rohlwing & Spelman, 2014). These learning opportunities consider key factors of adult learning, reflection, and dialogue (Rohlwing & Spelman, 2014). Specifically, learning opportunities should challenge the adult learner to link existing knowledge with new understandings, establishing a stronger commitment to the learning aim (Biech, 2017; Hargreaves & O'Connor, 2018; Rohlwing & Spelman, 2014).

The Family Engagement Partnership (FEP) applied knowledge of adult learning principles through critical feedback and reflection (Sheldon & Jung, 2015). Participating FEP schools received an intensive capacity-building intervention to implement relationship-building techniques in hopes of improving student literacy outcomes (Sheldon & Jung, 2015). Educators received bi-weekly coaching and quarterly PD, where educators could reflect on engagement

efforts by receiving peer and expert support. This process aligns with Rohlwings and Spelman's (2014) stance on effective adult learning. Educators in the FEP were given the opportunity to reconceptualize challenges experienced with family engagement efforts resulting in deeper learning and commitment to engagement goals.

Partnership in Action

This final section will integrate identified requirements educators need to establish and sustain authentic partnerships with caregivers. Based on existing research and known best practices, home-school relationships thrive best when there is a concerted focus on developing educator capacity (Baxter, 2018; Cortez, 2020; A. Henderson et al., 2002; Mapp & Kuttner, 2013; Mapp & Bergman, 2019; Sheldon & Jung, 2015). Educators who are well-equipped for collaborative partnerships require: 1) intentional training (Mapp & Kuttner, 2013), 2) restorative practices for engagement (Bryk & Schneider, 2003), 3) implementation of critical reflection and feedback (Rohlwing & Spelman, 2014), and 4) investment school leadership (Khalifa, 2018). With the concluding sections, emphasis will be made on two initiatives and research on equitable, collaborative home-school relationships. It is crucial to prioritize addressing issues concerning trust before implementing any changes in family engagement (Mapp & Bergman, 2021).

No meaningful relationship is one-sided (Cortez, 2020), yet caregivers frequently describe their interactions with their children's school as unilateral communication (Comber, 2014; Khalifa, 2018; L. Henderson et al., 2020; Reynolds, 2010). This unilateral communication, in turn results in broken trust between home and school. Restoration of trust is not a simple task; it requires a series of intentional actions to foster desired open exchange with caregivers (Ishimaru, 2014). Although laborious, restorative practices are worthwhile because of confirming

research on the correlation between meaningful home-school relationships and student success (A. Henderson et al., 2002; Chaney, 2014; Sheldon & Jung, 2015; Teale, 1986).

In partnership with the Flamboyan Foundation, the Memphis school district has implemented a three-phase restorative practices approach to rebuild home-school relationships (Flamboyan Foundation, 2020). Successful implementation involves three key phases: 1) acknowledgment, 2) restitution, and 3) commitment.

With the *acknowledgment* phase, school staff purposefully seek to acknowledge and offer an apology for the harmful interactions that have severed the home-school bond (Flamboyan Foundation, 2020). This severed trust could have occurred in current schools or past educational contexts (Kim et al., 2020). Activities promoting restoration include: 1) home visits planned to identify and document knowledge in students' homes (Moll et al., 1992) and 2) listening tours to provide opportunities for caregivers to share their personal barriers to engagement and desires (Flamboyan Foundation, 2020). These activities benefit educators because they allow the opportunity to challenge held beliefs such as addressing personal biases and singular stories (Adichie, 2009) that have negatively impacted family interactions (Khalifa, 2018). Which is exampled from a parent from Mapp and Kuttner's (2013) study reported their sentiment after receiving a home visit,

> "What made me more engaged was the home visit. … For the teachers to take the initiative… to sit in my living room, and ask about me and my child, that really meant something to me. I used to always be…defensive. I'm not… anymore… At one time, I was so defensive I wouldn't hear a thing. Now, I trust… my children are… in good hands" (Mapp & Kuttner, 2013, p.14).

The information gained during the acknowledgment phase will power the *restitution* efforts, a remedy that addresses the acknowledged harm (Flamboyan Foundation, 2020). An elevated and more intentional viewpoint towards caregivers could charge staff to commit to regular non-academic events, coupled with increased positive communication (Flamboyan Foundation, 2020). Events could be community dinners where educators are encouraged to bring their families, celebratory and student performances.

Commitment is the final phase of restoration. Here staff communicates a willingness to turn away from identified harm and establish a commitment to a family-centered framework (Flamboyan Foundation, 2020). Academic Parent–Teacher Teams (APTT) is a model that repurposes traditional parent-teacher conferences focusing on group learning and collaboration between caregivers and teachers (Mapp & Kuttner, 2013). APTT meetings are held three times a year, 75 minutes for whole class meetings, and 30 minutes are allotted for individual meetings. Each meeting begins with an icebreaker and an opportunity to celebrate student progress. Next, parents are encouraged to share their experiences, both struggles and areas of success. During this portion, the teacher adds comments as needed while noting strategies for later usage. Next, the teacher provides parents with an individual folder of their child's performance so that when the teacher is providing an overview of where the class is performing, they are aware of their child's performance (e.g., 15 letter names and sounds are expected by November, and 70% of the class has exceeded, 15% met and 15% have not met this goal). The meetings close with an interactive and collaborative activity where teachers lead a modeled activity supporting home learning and parents assist with student goal setting. Although *commitment* is the final phase, restoration is an ongoing process where schools continuously audit engagement efforts to ensure family-centered partnership efforts (Nagy, 2011; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005).

Summary

The literature discussed in this chapter provided an understanding of the nature of communication, its importance, and careful consideration of effective communication with Black caregivers. Forming effective relationships with Black caregivers and exposing students to early quality experiences with literacy can potentially reduce identified gaps in achievement for Black students (Chaney, 2014; Chance, 2010; Delpit, 1988). Yet, educators will wrestle with accessing caregivers as a resource if trust and respect are not restored (Mapp & Kuttner, 2013). Regular and meaningful communication, as well as cultural knowledge and an asset-based perspective toward Black caregivers, are essential steps in developing and maintaining authentic and meaningful partnerships with Black caregivers (Chaney, 2014; Foster-DeMers, 2012; Mapp & Bergman, 2021; McWayne et al., 2022; Nnachetam, 2010; Steward & Goff, 2005).

The journey to equitable collaboration requires an understanding of the value and process of partnership supported by a clear knowledge of resources and cultural models held by Black caregivers (Baxter, 2018; Epstein, 1995; Huguley et al., 2021; Ishimaru, 2019, 2020; Love et al., 2021). However, not acknowledging Black cultural models can lead to a series of misunderstandings further inhibiting communication (Allen & White-Smith, 2017; Cooper, 2009; Goodall, 2018). Identifying barriers to communication such as home school dissonance, deficit beliefs, and caregiver views towards engagement can improve communication efficacy. Furthermore, as observed in this capstone's conceptual framework, ADC functions as a potent instrument to disable defensiveness and empower relational trust, resulting in improved student outcomes, including literacy achievement (Espe-Sherwindt, 2008; Mapp & Bergman, 2021). Despite awareness of the positive impacts of using a family-centered approach many researchers and practitioners have been challenged with the practical implementation due to the complexities

of the required paradigm shift (Bamm & Rosenbaum, 2008; Espe-Sherwindt, 2008; Heifetz et al., 2009; Ishimaru, 2020). With this capstone project, a key goal is to explore the literacy communication dynamics occurring between first-grade educators and Black caregivers at The Hendrix Elite Academy as having this knowledge will support recommendations on the practical application of the components of ADC for educators. The next chapter describes the design and methodology used in this qualitative case study including the context population and study sample, instrumentation, data collection and analysis, and limitations.

CHAPTER 3: Methods

The caregiver-educator relationship is an essential variable for schools desiring positive student academic trends (Foster-DeMers, 2012; A. Henderson et al., 2002; Sheldon & Jung, 2015). As in any relationship, regular and effective communication is the key to building this relationship (Li et al., 2021). This chapter describes the methods used to plan and implement the data collection and report the research findings on literacy communication occurring at Hendrix Elite Academy (HEA).

I have divided the chapter into four sections where I explore the methodology in great detail to ensure the ability of replication (Hancock & Algozzine, 2017). In the first section, the reader is introduced to the context of my research. Specifically, I provide a reintroduction of the purpose statement, a rational and design explanation, and an in-depth explanation of the context, sampling, and participants. In the second section, I provide my plan for investigating the HEA's stakeholders' communication dynamics. In this section, the instrumentation used to gather data, the data collecting process, and the data analysis plan are covered. The third section, which addresses the use of the study, outlines ethical considerations, the researcher's positionality, trustworthiness, and limitations. Finally, the chapter concludes with a summary of salient points.

The study focused specifically on communication about literacy achievement within the primary years, Kindergarten through second grade (A. Henderson et al., 2007; McWayne et al., 2022; Molden, 2016; Nagy, 2011; Wanat, 2011). The purpose of the study was to provide a more concentrated and in-depth investigation of the caregivers' perspectives and experiences concerning primary literacy communication at HEA by prioritizing the perspectives of a marginalized group, Black caregivers. A review of relevant literature suggests a gap in the practical application of effective ways to communicate student literacy expectations with

families from diverse cultural backgrounds (Bamm & Rosenbaum, 2008; Chaney, 2014; Epstein, 1995; Flamboyan Foundation, 2020; Henderson & Mapp, 2002). Using Anti-Deficit Communication (ADC), the conceptual framework guiding this study, I used the findings to provide a practical application of the components of ADC for educators. Due to the possibility that implementing ADC at HEA may raise primary literacy and create a snowball effect that will enhance Black children's academic performance throughout all grade levels. With this purpose in mind, I sought to investigate the following research questions:

1. What are Black caregivers' perceptions and practices of school-to-home communication with HEA primary grade educators regarding student literacy development?
2. Based on perceptions and practices, in what ways do current communication practices facilitate or hinder effective partnerships between HEA primary grade educators and caregivers?

Rationale and Design

A qualitative methods approach was chosen to develop a complete description and understanding of literacy communications between primary educators and Black caregivers at HEA. With qualitative methodology, there is an emphasis on discovery and description while also focusing on extracting and interpreting the meaning of an identified experience (Lincoln & Denzin, 2003; Merriam, 1998). Qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to interpret the phenomena using the meanings the participants bring to them (Aspers & Corte, 2019).

Qualitative researchers must first ascertain whether there is a compelling justification for their study (Creswell, 1998). Three criteria can be used to evaluate the suitability of a qualitative inquiry design. First, an analysis of the study's research questions should lead to *how* or *what*

questions calls (Creswell, 1998). This study examined *how* and *what* concerning literacy communications between HEA primary educators and caregivers. Second, the inquiry necessitates a detailed view of the topic. Because caregivers are the main recipients of communication, I felt it was critical to present an in-depth investigation of the existing complexity of caregiver-educator literacy communication by studying caregiver viewpoints. Third, the problem or issue will be best understood from the participant's perspective rather than the researcher's (Creswell, 2012; Hancock & Algozzine, 2017). Using qualitative inquiry in this study allowed me to collect data through participants sharing their complex and ever-changing perspectives regarding communication.

Case Study

Specifically, an exploratory case study design was selected for this research because it allowed me to explore the perceptions and experiences of primary caregivers and educators at HEA regarding literacy communications (Hancock & Algozzine, 2017). Additionally, by accessing their lived experiences, barriers and facilitators were unearthed in hopes of improved communication, potentially resulting in improvements in students' literacy achievement. Literacy is used as the context for the capstone due to its significant focus in the primary grades. Not only is a significant portion of a school day is devoted to literacy instruction and early academic screeners focus on literacy, but also early identification of potential reading difficulty is critical to not only future literacy achievement but also broader academic success (Cho et al., 2020; Cunningham & Stanovich, 1997; Hosp & Fuchs, 2005; Moats, 2020b; NELP, 2008).

Yin (2003) defines a case study has "an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident" (p. 13). Creswell (2013) adds that case study

research "…explores a real-life, contemporary bounded system, a case…" (p. 97). Yin (2003) explains that a case study relies on multiple sources of evidence which converge in a data-triangulating fashion and benefit from the prior development of theoretical propositions to guide data collection and analysis. I leveraged a variety of sources to effectively cope with the difficulties of separating the phenomenon from the context and the several factors of interest that could be discovered; sources of evidence for this study included document analysis, and interviews.

Study Context

HEA a Title 1 school in Virginia, is home to slightly under 500 students from pre-kindergarten to fifth grade. At HEA, 99% of students are eligible for free lunch (NCES, n.d.), with 66% identifying as Black. There is currently a school-wide dedication to transformative student learning experiences and an initiative for greater home-school connections. Dr. Lee[b1], the school's principal, has created numerous opportunities for educators and caregivers to interact such as academic family events, parent-teacher conferences, and student assemblies honoring their growth. Despite school-wide attempts to improve student literacy achievement and promote home-school partnerships, reading failure remains, and communication gaps between caregivers and educators continue to be noted.

Elementary schools in Virginia primarily use the Standards of Learning (SOL) and Phonological Awareness Literacy Screening (PALS) assessments to evaluate student literacy achievement and offer educators data to direct their literacy instruction (literacy.virginia.edu; Virginia Department of Education, 2010). According to the 2021-2022 SOL, 57% of HEA third-

[b]Pseudonym used to ensure privacy of participants involved or connected to study.

grade students passed the Reading SOL, whereas the district average was 71% and the state average was 73% (Virginia Department of Education, 2022). Fifty-six percent of Black students at HEA passed the Reading SOL. Table 3.1 displays PALS data for grades Kindergarten to Third Grade while Table 3.2 offers PALS data specific to Black students.

Table 3.1

HEA Kindergarten to Third Grade PALS 2022-2023 and 2023-2024 Data

	Fall 2022		Spring 2023		Fall 2023	
	Below	**At/Above**	**Below**	**At/Above**	**Below**	**At/Above**
Kindergarten	39%	61%	31%	69%	25%	75%
First Grade	37%	63%	32%	68%	36%	64%
Second Grade	58%	42%	54%	46%	46%	54%
Third Grade	76%	N/A	100%	N/A	76%	N/A

Note. Third grade students in the county are not fully assessed. All third-grade students participate in the Spelling portion of the PALS assessment. Only those who are already identified from the spring of their second-grade year are fully assessed.

Table 3.2

HEA Kindergarten to Third Grade PALS 2022-2023 and 2023-2024 Data for Black Students

	Fall 2022		Spring 2023		Fall 2023	
	Below	**At/Above**	**Below**	**At/Above**	**Below**	**At/Above**
Kindergarten	25% (20 of 79)	43% (34 of 79)	23% (18 of 78)	46% (36 of 78)	16% (12 of 76)	54% (41 of 76)
First Grade	28% (22 of 78)	42% (33 of 78)	18% (13 of 73)	48% (35 of 73)	26% (21 of 80)	45% (36 of 80)
Second Grade	45% (34 of 76)	33% (25 of 76)	43% (32 of 74)	36% (27 of 74)	35% (28 of 79)	33% (26 of 79)

Third Grade	57% (36 of 63)	14% (9 of 63)	64% (7 of 11)	0% (0 of 11)	60% (27 of 45)	20% (9 of 45)

Note. Information displayed are PALS scores for students identified as Black. These percentages were obtained from the total number students tested in kindergarten during the fall, as indicated parenthetical raw data numbers.

PALS uses leveled instruments to: 1) screen and identify students in need of additional instruction based on their Entry Level task scores and 2) identify specific skill deficits for students with individual task scores that do not meet a benchmark representing minimum grade-level criteria (literacy.virginia.edu). In the 2022-2023 school year, HEA saw a slight decline in the percentage of students scoring below benchmark on PALS for kindergarten and second grade. While any decline in students identified as "below benchmark" is notable, it is important to recognize that even with the reduction that nearly one-third of HEA kindergartners remained below benchmark. The second-grade results present a more troubling pattern. Despite ongoing efforts throughout the school year, the percentage of students scoring below the benchmark remained relatively high. At the beginning of the year, 58% scored below benchmark, and by the end of the year, approximately half of HEA second graders remained below benchmark. The observed lack of improvement in PALS data underscores the urgency of examining literacy communication practices at HEA. In essence, this research endeavors to maximize the use of caregiver and educator resources to address the literacy challenges confronting students at HEA efficiently.

Participants and Sampling

Qualitative research aims to purposefully select participants to gain meaningful insight into the studied phenomena (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Researchers using case studies can benefit significantly from this understanding of qualitative analysis. Williams (1991) defines a

case study as an in-depth analysis of "a particular group or individual chosen to represent—even exaggerate—social conflicts that our theories suggest are experienced in the wider society" (p. 225). Patton (2002) expands this definition of information-rich cases as "those from which one can learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of the inquiry" (p. 230).

Researchers who follow a case study design limit their sample to a group of individuals who are subject to similar conditions. The strength of a case study lies in its depth. Concentrating on a small group makes it possible to see the complexity of these people's lives. Qualitative researchers are not concerned with huge samples to study populations (Ishak et al., 2014); rather, they focus on their participants' relevance to the research topic (Flick, 2009). After the capstone proposal and obtaining approval from the Institutional Review Board for Social and Behavioral Research (IRB-SBS) as well as consent from HEA's principal and the school district, I sent invitations to caregivers only after obtaining permission from the classroom educator. Thus, I ensured that flyers were sent home only to caregivers whose permission had been granted by the educator, as illustrated in Table 3.3.

Table 3.3

Participant Representation Across Grade Levels

HEA 2nd Grade Educators	**Caregiver Participants**
Classroom A	Chris and Crystal
Classroom B	Sharri
Classroom C	Jeffrey
Classroom D	Educator did not participate
Classroom E	Educator did not participate

HEA 1st Grade Educators	Caregiver Participants
Classroom A	No caregivers chose to participate
Classroom B	Educator did not participate
Classroom C	Educator did not participate
Classroom D	Educator did not participate
Classroom E	Educator did not participate

HEA Kindergarten Educators	Caregiver Participants
Classroom A	Shante
Classroom B	Rudy and Jonas
Classroom C	Maccie
Classroom D	Cleo
Classroom E	No caregivers chose to participate

Caregivers

Prior to data collection, I attended Back-to-School night to introduce myself to HEA caregivers informally. An informal introduction was used in an effort to establish trust with potential caregiver participants (Hancock & Algozzine, 2017; Hatch, 2002). In Fall 2023, I selected participants from the primary grades, focusing on second-grade and Kindergarten Black caregivers. These two grades were accessible because educators permitted invitations and because caregivers in these grades opted to participate. I examined sampled participants' interactions with primary educators at HEA to delve into their past experiences and provide an opportunity for them to share their current communication with their child's educator.

During HEA's Back-to-School night, I informed and invited selected caregivers to the study by briefly introducing myself and overviewing the project and consent form. This invitation (See Appendix A) was shared in two ways: 1) distributed a written flyer and 2) an abbreviated version of the study with permission to contact.

I employed quota and snowballing sampling to obtain the caregiver participants for this study. Due to the specific focus of this study, communication with Black caregivers, caregiver participants will be selected using the following criteria:

1. Caregivers must racially identify as Black.
2. Caregivers must have had a child enrolled at HEA in Kindergarten, first, or second grade during the duration of the study. Second grade caregivers had to have their child enrolled during the 2021-2022 and 2022-2023 school years.

My goal was to obtain consent from 15 caregivers to reflect a diverse range of viewpoints on primary literacy communication at HEA to better understand their communication experiences. Reaching the preferred fifteen caregivers was problematic; therefore, I used a snowball sampling strategy, whereby participants were asked to refer other individuals they believed would support the study's focus (McGregor, 2018). To maintain school-community relationships, I secured support from classroom educators, although they were not study participants. Consequently, only Kindergarten and second-grade teams, along with one first-grade educator, agreed to participate. Table 3.1 displays the classrooms where caregivers were invited. Despite attempting to include first-grade caregivers, none agreed to participate. This led to a final participant cohort of nine caregivers, offering a concentrated yet relevant sample for this study's scope. Demographic questionnaires (see Appendix B) were used for each participant to provide context to the data collected. The questions from the demographic questionnaire were

selected to give insight into the background of the study participants, see Table 3.4 for caregiver demographic characteristics.

Table 3.4

HEA Caregiver Study Participants' Demographic Characteristics

Caregiver Name	**Child's Grade Level**	**Parental Status**	***Age Range***	***Members in the Home***	***Education Level***	***Household Income***
Sharri	2nd	Mother	31-40	1 adult 2 children	Bachelor's	$41, 000 - $80,000
Chris	2nd	Father	Above 50	2 adults 1 child	Some College	$20,000 - $40,000
Jeffrey	2nd	Father	31 - 40	3 adults 2 children	Some College	Above $80,000
Crystal	2nd	Mother	31 – 40	2 adults 4 children	Some College	$41,000 - $80,000
Jonas	K	Father	31 – 40	2 adults 3 children	Some College	$41,000 - $80,000
Cleo	K	Grandmother	Above 50	3 adults 2 grandchildren	Master's	$20,000 – $40,000
Maccie	K	Mother	31 – 40	2 adults 2 children	Master's	$41,000 - $80,000
Shante	K	Mother	31 – 40	1 adult 2 children	Some College	$41,000 - $80,000
Rudy	K	Father	31 – 40	2 adults 2 children	Some College	$41,000 - $80,000

Data Sources and Collection

Yin (1984) recommended that a strong case study include multiple sources of evidence. Therefore, I integrated two types of data collection for this study: semi-structured interviews and

document analysis. Table 3.5 summarizes the data sources, purposes, and alignment. Document analysis and caregiver interviews were employed to triangulate data. In this section, I describe the interview protocol and document analysis.

Table 3.5

Research Questions and Data Source Alignment

Research Questions	Interviews	Documents
What are Black caregivers' perceptions and practices of school-to-home communication with HEA primary grade educators regarding student literacy development?	X	
Based on perceptions and practices, in what ways do current communication practices facilitate or hinder effective partnerships between HEA primary grade educators and caregivers?	X	X

Development of Interview Protocol

In qualitative research, interviews aim to provide researchers with insights into individuals' perspectives (Patton, 1980), leveraging the unique viewpoints and practical problem-solving abilities of those closest to the issue (Baxter, 2018; Gawande, 2007). Interviews were an essential source of evidence in this case study. The construction of the interview instrument focused on the study's research questions and conceptual framework while also extracting salient themes found in the literature (Hancock & Algozzine, 2017).

To enhance accuracy and honesty in reporting experiences, the design eliminates potential response biases, and a panel of three educators with doctoral degrees and experience in working with marginalized communities reviewed and provided feedback on the questions. These questions were then field-tested with individuals resembling the participants, facilitating

protocol refinement by clarifying prompts, avoiding leading questions, and ensuring familiarity with recording instruments and adjustments before formal data collection (Yanchar et al., 2010).

The caregiver interview protocol was designed to support triangulation (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015) and to examine the extent to which Black caregivers agree that family-centeredness is used in communication attempts (see Appendix C). ADC serves as a strategy for implementing core elements of family-centeredness, specifically applying family-centeredness to partnerships with Black caregivers. Thus, the interview protocol questions were arranged into four groups to address the dynamics of literacy communication with caregivers and the values concerning the home-school partnership (RQ1 and RQ2).

- Asset-based beliefs: The first group of questions was designed to elicit caregiver perceptions of equitable communication within HEA communication practices.
- Soft-skills: the second group of questions sought to explore the participants' feelings of welcomeness and perceptions of educator soft skills during communication.
- Collaborative decision-making: the third group of questions aimed to uncover if participants are valued as key change agents in their child's literacy development. For instance, I inquired about caregivers' comfort level discussing their child's literacy skills with teachers, aiming to understand whether decision-making structures regarding their child's education are caregiver-centric or predominantly teacher-centric (Mapp & Bergman, 2021).
- Individualization and adult learning: the fourth group of questions was designed to discuss the specific communication obstacles faced by caregivers, explicitly soliciting their suggestions, thereby enabling the identification of areas where their needs are and aren't addressed adequately through current communication methods.

Development of Document Analysis Protocol

Document analysis used in qualitative case study research has a variety of purposes; its usage can provide context to the research subject and can also be used to verify findings from other sources (Bowen, 2009). Moreover, documents provide an advantage to the research process (Noel, 2008). Unlike interviewing, documents are unaffected by the research process (Noel, 2008), meaning "they are a product of the context in which they were produced and therefore grounded in the real world" (Merriam, 1988, p. 109).

The components of ADC are at the very core of the document protocol. Using a document protocol (Miles & Huberman, 1994) allowed me to identify whether selected literacy communication depicts family-centeredness in a way that includes the five components of ADC: 1) soft skills, 2) collaborative decision-making, 3) asset-based beliefs, 4) adult learning, and 5) individualization (Espe-Sherwindt, 2008; Dunst, 2002; Rosenbaum & King, 2009). To manage the extensive data, I devised a table-based system (refer to Appendix D) to organize each document sample, ensuring clarity on demographics, context, relationships, and relevance to research questions and the conceptual framework (Hancock & Algozzine, 2017).

Documents selected were used to inductively build categories related to the ADC framework, including family-centeredness (Dunst, 2002). I considered these documents alongside Black caregivers' interview data throughout document collection. I also used document collection to identify which practices currently implemented by individual HEA primary educators are perceived to facilitate or hinder communication.

HEA principal and reading specialist provided communication documents, representative of both grade-level and school-wide communication examples. I requested additional documents, prompted by references made by the Kindergarten caregivers regarding certain literacy

communication documents. Table 3.6 below outlines selected documents that were used in the analysis. These selected documents aided me in examining the discrepancy between the expectations and perceptions of bilateral communication measured among HEA's primary educators and caregivers and family-centeredness ideals. Furthermore, in alignment with the data derived from interviews, I identified the distinctive assets inherent within the caregivers and examined selected documents to ascertain the extent to which these assets were utilized, as well as to recognize any missed opportunities for engagement.

Table 3.6

Literacy Communication Documents

Communication Type	**Document Examples**
Formal Written Communication	● *Kindergarten Progress Report* ● *Kindergarten – 2nd Grade Report Card and Narrative Literacy Comments* ● *Plan of Reading Progress 2023 – 2024* ● *PALS Parent Summary Report*
Digital Communication	● *Two Kindergarten Class Newsletters* ● *Principal's Sunday Night Schoolwide Message*
Homework Assignments	● *Take Home Book Bag Note*
Grade-Level Workshop	● *Kindergarten Family Night*
School-Based Events	● *Books and Heroes of Reading Breakfast* ● *Food Lion Family Math and Reading Night*

Data Collection

Data collection during the fall 2023 semester started in late October and concluded mid-December. I designed a two-part data collection sequence. Phase one of data collection consists of individual interviews with caregivers. During phase one, these interviews provided an examination of the existing complexity of caregiver-educator literacy communication from the perspective of a diverse group of HEA caregivers. Phase two of the data collection consisted of document analysis. In the next section, I describe the data collection process used for each research instrument.

Interview Procedure

After initial approval and invitation to conduct research with HEA's stakeholders, I secured approval from IRB-SBS. Participants were provided the choice of an in-person interview at the local library, a Zoom meeting, or a phone call to ensure participant comfort (Hatch, 2002; Jacob & Furgerson, 2012). I audio recorded all interviews to enable accuracy with transcription and analysis of the interview responses, as suggested by Jacob and Furgerson (2012). Interviews ranged from 22 minutes to 35 minutes with an average length of 29 minutes.

Throughout the interviews, I took brief notes as I discovered examples of major themes, additional questions that arose, and reactions to my own thinking (Hatch, 2002; Jacob & Furgerson, 2012). Immediately after the interview concluded, I recorded my reflective notes to identify my personal bias and create an audit trail to promote trustworthiness (Hatch, 2002). Additionally, I conducted member checking with participants to validate emerging themes (Hancock & Algozzine, 2017; Hatch, 2002; Jacob & Furgerson, 2012; Maxwell, 2013) and gathered feedback on preliminary findings (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). After each interview, I requested a follow-up interview or phone call, email, or text exchange to address any questions

raised during the interview or comments (Hancock & Algozzine, 2017; Hatch, 2003) and ensure the accuracy of the preliminary findings from participants' perspectives. These member checks were valuable because they provided insights into documents that I was not previously aware of, which were made accessible through Kindergarten educators.

Document Analysis Procedure

Inclusionary criteria ensure systematic document selection and reduce irrelevant data collection (Gross, 2018). See Appendix D for the Document Protocol. The proposed documents (see Table 3.6) were evaluated for inclusion using the following criteria, which are ordered in a hierarchical order of relevance:

1. Documents are examples of literacy communication with a Black caregiver.
2. Documents fall under desired communication types: formal and informal written communications, digital communication, homework assignments, and parent-teacher conference forms.

I requested literacy communication documents from administrative educators. Additionally, following the completion of several interviews, references to certain documents prompted me to request these from the primary educators who were amenable to sharing them. Documents were analyzed and coded according to those that contained evidence that contributed or detracted from effective communication. Using Bretschneider and colleagues' (2017) guidelines, documents will be systematically and objectively organized by:

1. All documents determined of use will be printed.
2. Collect like communication documents together (e.g., all digital communication), compare, analyze; then compare to other documents collectively.

3. Organize the data contained examples that detracted from bilateral communication and those that contributed to bilateral communication.
4. Color code within documents that related to attributes of anti-deficit communication.
5. Note any specific language used across the documents (such as technical and informal), note inconsistencies, note authorship, and note dates.
6. Identify major themes that emerge from documents will be placed in a document to be used for analysis and findings.
7. Attend to organization continuously and maintain confidentiality.

Data Analysis

This section describes the data analysis procedures. Qualitative analysis transforms data into findings. The challenge of qualitative analysis lies in making sense of extensive amounts of data (Patton, 2015). I approached my data analysis using three phases (See Table 3.7), each of which included multiple steps from Braun and Clarke's (2014) six-step data analysis process: 1) become familiar with the data, 2) create initial codes, 3) identify themes, 4) review themes, 5) refine and name themes, and 6) produce a report of research findings.

Table 3.7

Phases of Data Analysis

Phase One ⟶	**Phase Two** ⟶	**Phase Three**
• Become familiar with the data	• Create initial codes • Identify themes • Review themes • Refine and name themes	• Produce a report of research findings

Phase One

In phase one, I desired to become familiar with the collected data. As the first and crucial step in thematic analysis, the main undertaking in this analysis phase is reading the data. Braun and Clarke (2014) suggested that "the point of phase [one]is to absorb the content of the data" (p. 100). In this phase, I read all the transcripts and document analysis, immersing myself in the data. No notes were taken during the first reading. Then, I read the transcripts and document analysis several times, highlighting important sentences and making annotations of first impressions from the data. Rereading the data helped me thoroughly comprehend the interview transcripts before investigating how the data aligned with codes previously generated through the literature study and document analysis. I worked through numerous thoughts and concepts that occur when finding broad themes from the data using analytic memos made during the data collecting and analysis process.

Phase Two

Phase two included coding data as I searched for and reviewed themes. According to Braun and Clarke (2014), coding begins once the researcher has grown adequately acquainted with the data. Coding begins with methodical and purposeful organizing data, transforming large amounts of raw data into small chunks of meaning. Initially, I built five categories to organize the codes: anti-deficit communication (ADC), non-use of ADC, family-centeredness: trust and respect, capacity, and later added expressed desires and challenges. The first coding round began with developing a priori codes (Blair, 2015). Next, within each category, I generated individual codes, these codes were created by pulling salient words and concepts from my problem statement, research questions, conceptual framework, and literature review (Blair, 2015). I then used these keywords to develop the initial codebook which is reflected in Appendix E.

Throughout the coding process, I kept analytical memos. These notes consisted of key ideas and questions concerning coding due to the limitations of my a priori codes (Bazeley, 2013). In order to give a deeper analysis of the data and transition from descriptive to analytical coding, I continually came back to my research questions and conceptual framework. For example, I would ask deeper questions about the data, such "In what different ways do they make sense of [trust]?" (Braun & Clarke, 2022). The results from both data sources were cross-referenced to identify consistency as well as convergence across the interview responses and document analysis.

To ensure data trustworthiness, a second round of coding, supported by my analytic memos, was employed to develop emergent codes. Taking time to pause, *using a fresh set of eyes,* was a helpful strategy I employed with the second coding round (Bazeley, 2013). Here, in vivo code development was used along with some condensing and removal of codes. For example, after examining Crystal's interview transcript I added the code "I don't need sprinkles and rainbows" to the Expressed Desires and Challenges (concerning literacy communication) category. In response to the analytic memo, I completed after her interview, I observed a recurring pattern wherein caregivers expressed frustration due to the discrepancy between being informed about their child's positive progress and the contrasting information presented in the received report cards.

Next, I searched for themes, sorting and collating all the potentially relevant coded data extracts into themes (Braun & Clarke, 2014). The interpretation process of coded data included viewing frequencies, patterns, synthesis and comparisons (G. Lovette, personal communication, April 15, 2022). I took analytic memos on each code organized by the highest frequencies of occurrence. Salient information was pulled from these organized codes coupled with multiple re-

readings of the transcripts and document analysis, allowing me to get "inside of the data" to uncover patterns and comparisons. In addition, I used a case display created to identify initial themes and develop a narrative in which the data is displayed graphically for analysis, see Table 3.8 (Hays & Singh, 2012). This process supported seeing a connection between document analysis and interview data. Additionally, the relationship between the two data sources was illustrated through a priori codes pulled from the conceptual framework. Findings developed through an iterative process and interpretative analysis of the participants' interviews and document analysis. The objective was to explore the caregiver's perspective on family-centeredness in literacy communication practices. The theme construction template I used during this process can be seen in Figure 3.1.

Table 3.8

Case Display Chart

Participants Interview Explanations	Patterns from Document Analysis	Connection to Conceptual Framework
Participants reported having a positive relationship with their child's current educator.	Various school and grade level events tailored to caregiver needs. Language choices used in documents aligned with family-centered components.	Soft Skills; Individualization
It was significant for educators to communicate specific literacy goals for students, demonstrating their competence in literacy knowledge.	Absence of individualized student literacy progress for all students in literacy communication documents. Detailed student progress and goals for students not meeting literacy benchmarks. Class-wide goals were generally communicated.	Adult Learning; Individualization; Collaborative Decision-Making
Caregivers described the communication they received as empathetic, despite the varied quality of the communication they encountered.	Multiple forms of digital communication, formal communication, and literacy events catered to caregivers. Attention is given to the time and location of events. Opportunities for shared-expert with family events.	Soft Skills; Asset-Based Beliefs; Adult Learning; Individualization

Caregivers shared surface-level collaborative experiences with educators or recalled instances where they did not feel valued.	Unilateral communication was the primary form of communication, where educators' expertise was valued in a hierarchal manner.	Asset-Based Beliefs; Collaborative Decision-Making
Several elements were required to establish and uphold trust between caregivers and educators. However, the communication they received could either undermine or bolster this trust.	Teacher jargon and vague reporting of literacy goals were observed in formal communication and some digital communication examples.	Soft Skills; Individualization; Adult Learning

Note. Information shared reflect initial themes developed.

Figure 3.1

Data Analysis Tables

Theme (1-2 sentences)		
Explanation of Interpretation (explain ways in which the patterns, categories, etc. support theme)		
Notes on Supporting Data **Codes:**		
Evidence 1: Location of Data (Filename): Code:	E1 excerpt	E1 Explanation for choosing (in what ways does it illustrate the theme?)
Evidence 2: Location of Data (Filename): Code:	E2 excerpt	E2 Explanation for choosing (in what ways does it illustrate the theme?)
Evidence 3: Location of Data (Filename): Code:	E3 excerpt	E3 Explanation for choosing (in what ways does it illustrate the theme?)

Note. Based on Bazeley, 2013

Phase Three

Phase three, the final phase, began once I fully established the final themes, which supported in my ability to write the final report describing the study findings. To enhance trustworthiness, I enlisted a peer reviewer to assist in the analysis process by offering feedback on my field notes, coding, and conclusions derived from the data. The findings will be shared in depth in Chapter 4.

Ethical Considerations

Merriam and Tisdell (2015) emphasized the significance of researchers conducting and reporting research ethically. To minimize ethical issues during this study, I thoroughly followed provided guidelines on considering these issues (Hancock & Algozzin, 2017; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015; Mertens & Wilson, 2019; Seiber & Tolich, 2015). Prior to data collection and formal interactions with participants, I received approval from the university's Institutional Review Board for the Social and Behavioral Sciences (IRB-SBS). This process ensured that my study was aligned with authorized, ethical research practices. Before participants began the interviews, I requested informed consent. The informed consent discusses the study's purpose, risks, participant rights, duration, possible study benefits, project confidentiality, dissemination of results, and researcher contact information (Sieber & Tolich, 2015).

Additionally, I continually reminded participants that they can withdraw from the study at any point. Privacy concerns can affect a subject's willingness to participate in research (Sieber & Tolich, 2015). Therefore, I tried to limit others' access to participants' information. To maintain confidentiality, I assigned all participants a pseudonym and all information in documents were de-identified to further maintain.

Researcher Positionality

Recognizing how the researcher's experiences and perceptions of the phenomenon under study may affect study design and data interpretation is crucial because qualitative researchers are frequently intensely invested in their research topic (Hays & Singh, 2012). My personal background and classroom experiences have impacted my position as a researcher investigating this problem of practice. This type of research appeals to me because of my upbringing. As a Black first-generation college graduate, I am intimately connected and fully aware of the cultural capital within a family to support their children's academic goals. I significantly benefited from positive caregiver-educator communication and experienced intentional efforts within our home from my first memories of a literacy-rich environment. My parents ensured homework completion, were involved in our classroom activities, and provided various exposures to support our literacy development.

I previously taught for ten years in Title I public schools serving historically marginalized communities in Virginia and North Carolina. During my classroom experience, I assisted in coordinating monthly family literacy events, implemented home visits, and incorporated caregivers in classroom instruction through volunteer efforts. As a classroom educator, I have seen the benefits students have received due to strong collaborative home-school relationships. I understand first-hand how effective communication efforts establish and maintain collaborative relationships, where anti-deficit communication is employed. These experiences have impacted my belief in the power of early intervention and alignment between home and school. Therefore, I assign high value to equitable collaboration between educators and families to foster early childhood literacy development.

As the owner and operator of a private tutoring service, I provide literacy instruction and individualized literacy communication with their caregivers. Because of a more personalized teaching approach, I can forge genuine connections with the enrolled caregivers and understand how their children learn best, as well as their literacy difficulties and advocacy needs. I have seen students' reading increase dramatically, and I credit much of this achievement to the ongoing bilateral communication.

Lastly, as a Black female researcher, I bring an acute understanding and perspective of racialized experiences within educational settings as a parent, educator, and student. This insider knowledge may increase the participants' level of trust and my capacity to understand the caregivers' experiences. Because there are consequently biases, I will use various techniques to encourage the trustworthiness of this investigation.

Trustworthiness

This section explains the four key aspects of my capstone study that contribute to the trustworthiness of the techniques and reported results. Credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability are among these elements. Each aspect represents the study's trustworthiness.

Credibility. Credibility is the degree to which the study's conclusions accurately represent participants' experiences for the sample under consideration. To ensure the credibility of my research, I used instrument credibility, triangulation, and member checking. Each of these three elements of credibility have been previously addressed in the chapter (see Data Sources and Collection). For example, in efforts for triangulation, I ensured a broad group of caregivers to thoroughly investigate the ways in which their communication contexts vary when they recount their experiences in Kindergarten and second grade (refer to Table 3.4).

Transferability. The degree to which findings relate to policy, practice, and future research, or the degree to which the findings of a qualitative study apply to other persons or places, is referred to as transferability (Maxwell, 2013). To allow for transferability, the investigator must offer "sufficient descriptive data" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 298). Data from interviews and documents were evaluated for thick, comprehensive descriptions that probed deeply into the research concerns. These rich details were supplied so that other practitioners and researchers may make well-supported decisions about the relevance of my results to their own context.

Dependability. Dependability refers to the degree to which research techniques are recorded and reliable (Leung, 2015). It is critical for the researcher to be able to replicate this study. Leung (2015) underlined that dependability demands a researcher to acquire the same or similar results every time they utilize the same or comparable methodologies on the same or comparable participants. To ensure the study can be replicated, I have provided a detailed methodological description, documented the data souces, and maintained a record of the data analysis process.

Confirmability. The concept of confirmability corresponds to the concept of objectivity. The inference is that the findings result from the investigation rather than the effect of the researcher's biases and subjectivity (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012). Although qualitative researchers recognize the futility of attempting objectivity, they must be reflective and demonstrate how their data can be traced back to its source (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012). As a result, the audit trail (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) was utilized to demonstrate dependability, which includes continual reflection in the form of journaling and memos, as well as a record of field

notes and interview transcripts, enabling the reader to critically examine the findings of the study.

A reflexive journal can establish confirmability (Wallendorf & Belk, 1989). A reflexive journal, according to Wallendorf and Belk (1989), is a "reflexive document kept by the researcher to reflect on, tentatively interpret, and plan data collection" (p. 77). Throughout my research, I kept a reflexive journal to record all events in the field and personal reflections on the study.

Summary

This chapter has presented the methodology that was used to determine HEA's primary caregivers' perceptions and experiences regarding effective school to home communication specifically with Black caregivers. I used an exploratory case study method to answer the following research questions:

1. What are Black caregivers' perceptions and practices of school-to-home communication with HEA primary grade educators regarding student literacy development?
2. Based on perceptions and practices, in what ways do current communication practices facilitate or hinder effective partnerships between HEA primary grade educators and caregivers?

The research design and approach, participant and sample, data collection instruments, procedure and data analysis I planned in order to address the study's objectives were all detailed. Furthermore, I have provided components of trustworthiness and ethical considerations highlighted to improve the study's accuracy. This method of data collection will enable me to obtain findings that will address the study's questions, which I will report in Chapter 4.

Chapter 4: Findings

This capstone study aimed to investigate literacy communication between caregivers and educators at Hendrix Elite Academy (HEA), focusing specifically on the experiences of Black primary grade caregivers. Effective communication involves a reciprocal exchange of information and resources. Therefore, this study aims to shed light on the perspectives, needs, and strengths of Black caregivers to inform educators and potentially enhance communication between educators and caregivers. To explore communication practices at HEA, the following research questions guided this study:

1. What are Black caregivers' perceptions and practices of school-to-home communication with HEA primary grade educators regarding student literacy development?
2. Based on perceptions and practices, in what ways do current communication practices facilitate or hinder effective partnerships between HEA primary grade educators and caregivers?

I recruited nine diverse caregivers from second grade and Kindergarten at HEA to investigate these questions (see Table 4.1).

Table 4.1

Caregiver Demographics

Participant	Household Details	Occupation
Sharri	Single Mother; twin daughters second grade; participant's grandmother supportive	Postal Worker
Chris	Married; second grade son; has three adult daughters who support son's academics	Small Business Owner
Jeffrey	Married; second grade daughter and one other child; grandmother lives within the home	Small Business Owner/Technology Field

Crystal	Married; second grade daughter and three other children; recently returned back to work	Former Homemaker and Homeschool Parent
Jonas	Lives with significant other; kindergarten son and three older children; travels often for work	Engineer
Cleo	Married; Kindergarten grandson and one other grandson	Retired
Maccie	Single mother; Kindergarten daughter and infant child; mother lives within the home	Full time student/ Former Middle school educator
Shante	Single mother; Kindergarten son and another child; co-parent very supportive	Daycare Director
Rudy	Married; Kindergarten son and another child	Small Business Owner

Each caregiver participated in semi-structured interviews to capture an in-depth investigation of the literacy communication experiences and perspectives. Interviews were conducted over eight weeks beginning in late October and ending in mid-December. To triangulate the data, I conducted document analyses, gathering school-wide and grade-level specific examples of literacy communication. Documents were provided in the form of flyers, printed digital documents (e.g., newsletters), blank examples of report cards, and caregiver provided progress reports. These documents were utilized to corroborate caregivers' perceptions and shed new light on practices mentioned, aiming to provide a more comprehensive understanding and address research question two effectively.

Conceptual Framework Overview

As detailed in Chapter 1, Anti-Deficit Communication (ADC), based on Family-Centered Practice (FCP), served as the conceptual framework guiding this study. ADC acts as a strategy to utilize core elements of family-centeredness, with a deliberate emphasis on applying family-

centeredness to partnerships with marginalized communities. ADC prioritizes the conscious desire to implement practices that create and restore relational trust, particularly with Black families (Bryk, 2010; Ishimaru, 2020; Mapp & Bergman, 2021). It hinges on five components that guide educators in relationships with caregivers: 1) soft skills, 2) individualization, 3) asset-based beliefs, 4) adult learning modes, and 5) collaborative decision-making. The integration of these components is emphasized, as their interplay contributes to successful and effective communication, particularly with marginalized families.

The components of ADC were instrumental in the data analysis process. Each component was either discussed or absent in participant interviews as caregivers shared their perspectives and described literacy practices. Additionally, the documents provided insights into these components, highlighting both their presence and absence to evaluate the effectiveness of communication documents. These factors will be explored within each finding presented in this chapter. Table 4.1 summarizes the connections between the findings and ADC components, as well as research questions.

Table 4.1

Alignment across Research Questions, Findings, and Conceptual Framework

Research Question	Findings	Connection to ADC Components
What are Black caregivers' perceptions and practices of school-to-home communication with HEA primary grade educators	1. A trusting relationship is essential for effective educator-caregiver communication.	Soft Skills; Individualization

regarding student literacy development?	2. Caregiver's perception of the educator's dedication impacted their communication.	Asset-based beliefs; Soft Skills
	3. Even though educator communication was often positively received by caregivers, this process was complex with a number of elements that could hinder or support communication efforts.	Adult Learning; Soft Skills; Individualization
Based on perceptions and practices, in what ways do current communication practices facilitate or hinder effective partnerships between HEA primary grade educators and caregivers?	4. Attention to the interactions between caregivers and educators has positively impacted communication and relationships.	Soft Skills; Individualization; Collaborative Decision-Making
	5. Limited practical application of asset-based beliefs and collaborative decision-making in communication practices had detrimental effects on communication outcomes.	Adult Learning; Asset-based Beliefs; Soft Skills; Collaborative Decision-Making

Family-centeredness in definition is a goal identified by administrative and classroom educators at HEA. However, the practical application of each component of ADC was deemed inconsistent when literacy communication practices were thoroughly examined in this study.

Ultimately, the various types of data that I collected address the research questions in an integrated way, enabling me to identify themes and the findings shared in this chapter:

- Finding 1: A trusting relationship is essential for effective educator-caregiver communication.
    - Theme 1.1: Importance of rigor
    - Theme 1.2: Child's comfort with educator
    - Theme 1.3: Communication frequency and mode of communication
- Finding 2: Caregiver's perception of the educator's dedication impacted their communication.
    - Theme 2.1: Asset-based language towards student
    - Theme 2.2: Classroom and school culture
    - Theme 2.3: Educator transparency
- Finding 3: Even though educator communication was often positively received by caregivers, this process was complex with a number of elements that could hinder or support communication efforts.
    - Theme 3.1: Multiple modes of communication
    - Theme 3.2: Empathetic actions within the communication
    - Theme 3.3: Educator- vs caregiver-initiated communication
    - Theme 3.4: Common advice provided to "read at home"
- Finding 4: Attention to the interactions between caregivers and educators positively impacts communication and relationships.
    - Theme 4.1: Individualized approaches to communication
    - Theme 4.2: Parent-teacher conferences

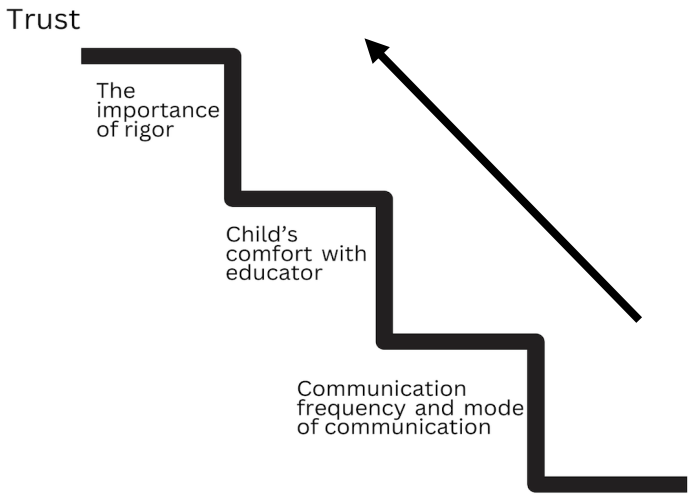
    - Theme 4.3: Presence of humanity in interactions
- Finding 5: Limited practical application of asset-based beliefs and collaborative decision-making in communication practices had detrimental effects on communication outcomes.
    - Theme 5.1: What is communication
    - Theme 5.2: Perceived dishonesty in communication
    - Theme 5.3: Weight of student success

Finding 1: A trusting relationship is essential for effective educator-caregiver communication.

Caregivers emphasized the importance of trust in fostering effective communication with educators. Specifically, they highlighted the impact of having either a trusting or mistrustful relationship with the educator on communication outcomes. Understanding how caregivers define safety at HEA is crucial. This section addresses research question one by exploring how caregivers' perceptions of communication from primary grade HEA educators influence relationships. It examines perceived rigor, the importance of a nurturing environment, and how trust is shaped by these factors. Additionally, it delves into caregivers' perceptions of their child's comfort with the educator and how communication frequency and mode influence trust and communication dynamics. Figure 4.1 illustrates caregivers' perceptions of what is needed to determine safe conditions about the educator. In the following sections, I will discuss three themes that examine how HEA caregivers built trust with their child's educators. These themes include the rigor of their child's education, which influenced their trust in the educator, as well as the level of comfort perceived by the child and the frequency and mode of communication used by the educator.

Figure 4.1

Steps Towards Trust



Theme 1.1 Importance of Rigor

As outlined in Chapter 2, I was familiar with the Black cultural models that prioritize academic achievement and emphasize the value of education. Consequently, I understood the potential significance for participants in understanding the academic rigor their child experienced. However, I underestimated the significant impact this knowledge would have on the trust dynamics between caregivers and educators. My perspective shifted when Sharri, my first participant, a mother of twin second graders, emphasized the importance of how children learn, not just what they learn. She expressed concern about her children simply sitting in class without engaging in meaningful learning activities. Sharri's distinction between valuing the learning process and content prompted me to reconsider the role of rigor. During our conversation, Sharri expressed positive sentiments towards one twin's teacher but held deep admiration for the other twin's teacher. This discrepancy prompted me to explore the differences

between the two educators. Upon reviewing the transcript, I realized that perceptions of rigor were a crucial but unspoken factor in Sharri's evaluation of the educators. As a result, I began to focus on perceptions of rigor as a key component of trust in the educator with participants going forward.

The data revealed a direct connection between the fulfillment of the caregivers' educational values and their rapport with educators, emphasizing the importance of effectively conveying these values in communication. Specifically, caregivers indicated that the perceived rigor in their child's classroom significantly influenced their interactions with educators. When educators were perceived to challenge students academically, caregivers tended to engage positively. For instance, Jeffrey recounted a parent-teacher conference where his child's advanced literacy was discussed alongside plans for further growth, reflecting a commitment to maintaining academic rigor. The educator shared, “Hey, your daughter read…much higher than second-grade level…but there is an opportunity here for comprehension…what the plan would be to fix that…” (Interview, November 7, 2023). He expressed appreciation for the quality of feedback received and initiated regular communication with the teacher. Similarly, Rudy shared his trust in educators who fostered a nurturing yet rigorous learning environment for his children, “...we have that trust and there's no anxiety about kind of the level of instruction he's getting” (Interview, December 19, 2023). In return, this led to positive communication and frequent contact with the teacher. Both Rudy and Jeffrey both mentioned that they regularly communicate with their child's teacher, at least once a month, and spoke positively about the teacher without being prompted.

Chris and Shante both expressed satisfaction with their child's educational experience despite facing challenges. Chris, whose son has ADHD, emphasized the importance of his son

being appropriately challenged by the teacher, which he believed was crucial for his son's progress. He appreciated the efforts of HEA educators in meeting his goals for his son's education. Similarly, Shante, a mother of a Kindergarten student, developed a strong admiration for her child's educator within a short period, appreciating the teacher's dedication to challenging her child academically. She expressed a unique adoration for her child's educator:

> "...when I tell you she works my baby, that's fine with me, work him! [She] tells me…I worked him hard today. Well, you worked him and started him off I will finish him off when he get home. I love it! I love her. I don't have nothin' bad to say about [her]. She's a sweetheart." (Interview, December 7, 2023).

Overall, caregivers' perceptions of the rigor in the classroom and how it is communicated to them directly impact the level of trust they have in educators. This trust is significant as it influences the caregiver-educator relationship, with the child serving as the link between home and school. Therefore, fostering a positive relationship between the child and the educator is crucial.

Theme 1.2 Child's Comfort with Educator

Upon closer examination of trust levels, it became apparent that most participants assessed their trust primarily through their child's perspective. When asked to justify their level of trust, parents often considered how comfortable their child felt with the teacher. While experiences of rigor were a significant trust factor, one caregiver's account diverged from this trend. Despite perceiving a lack of desired rigor in her grandson's kindergarten curriculum, Cleo still held the teacher in high regard due to her grandson's enthusiasm for learning. Cleo explained that her grandson's excitement for activities brought home from school demonstrated the

teacher's effective engagement, which ultimately influenced Cleo's trust and respect for the educator.

While reviewing my analytic memos, I noted a connection between Black Cultural models towards schooling and caregivers gauging trust through the child's lens. Caregivers who reported positive perceptions of educator communication also tended to share stories of how an educator demonstrated care of their child. Moreover, caregivers appeared more trusting of their child's educator when they child was comfortable with their educator and "happy" in the classroom. An identified cultural model evident in research of Black caregivers is the emphasis and intentional efforts for collaborative approaches with school staff *deemed* safe (Allen & White-Smith, 2017; Cooper, 2009; Huguley et al., 2021; Marchand et al., 2019). Jeffrey illustrated this practice when he shared how he determined HEA staff was safe and an integral part of his community needed for his child's success:

> "... we were walking through the building yesterday, like teachers who would not even our children's teachers make the point to like, speak to us and say hello and you know it is a very welcoming environment walking into that school every time we go there." (Interview, November 7, 2023)

He noted that observing his children's comfort with educators beyond their assigned classroom educators assured him that they are genuinely cared for at HEA. Consequently, he felt confident in placing his trust in the school. This underscores the significance of the entire school community embracing the practical implementation of soft skills, such as using children's names, maintaining eye contact, and offering high-fives, to foster relational trust.

Jonas, a father of a Kindergarten boy, recently moved to the school a few weeks before completing the interview. He passionately shared that he is very protective of his son and those

permitted to interact; however, when discussing trust, he declared "...I trust her, and I don't trust anybody with my boy!" (Interview, December 11, 2023). Without prompting he detailed how his son's educator removed his trust barrier:

> "...every time he comes home, he is always smiling and in a good mood and has great things to say about her [son's educator] ...If my boy, he's happy I'm happy. If he is good, I am good. [I asked him] Hey, how do you like your teacher and he loves her, that definitely plays a big part in like, I feel better" (Interview, December 11, 2023).

These ongoing positive interactions, much like those experienced by Jeffrey, fostered Jonas' trust in his son's educator. While I will explore how trust influenced conflict management and facilitated collaborative learning opportunities, I will first analyze the role of frequency and the mode of communication in the development of trust.

Theme 1.3 Communication Frequency and Mode of Communication

Participants emphasized that their trust in their child's teacher was influenced by the frequency and mode of communication. Open and frequent communication helped caregivers feel more welcomed and built trust. Their trust was reinforced by their desire to stay informed about their child's development alongside the ease of accessing available communication channels.

Quantifying the desired frequency of communication proved challenging, but qualitative descriptions of experiences shed light on its impact on trust. Maccie, a mother of a Kindergarten girl, indirectly highlighted the importance of proactive communication in maintaining trust with educators, "I like to know about things you know, in advance… I don't have a background in literacy, but if there's something that I can do at home to help my child be better. I'm gonna do it" (Interview, December 13, 2023). She valued receiving information in advance to address any

challenges effectively. For Chris, trust was built through face-to-face interactions over time, this was demonstrated as he shared:

> "I always started… with a certain level of trust and they've been real good with my son, you know, so [when I] really physically meet them and talking to them, interacting more with the actual teachers. It was like now I have complete trust" (Interview, October 30, 2023).

This indicates the significance of ongoing in-person engagement with educators, offering multiple opportunities for communication face-to-face over time.

Three other caregivers expressed similar needs for personalized communication frequency and mode. Sharri, a postal worker, appreciated the flexibility of receiving texts from her child's educator, even late at night, which allowed her to address questions or concerns promptly. Shante also valued the ability to quickly access information from her child's teacher, indicating a high level of trust and respect for the educator's role. Jonas echoed this sentiment, praising the educator's responsiveness and the accessibility of digital communication tools like ClassTag.

In contrast, Cleo had fewer interactions with the educator but still maintained trust by attending key events and expressing her communication goals. She emphasized "...just let me know exactly where my child stands and what do I need to do to keep them on track" (Interview, December 12, 2023). Receiving clear updates on her grandchild's academic progress and actionable guidance to support his success was important. Thus, trust was established through communication that provided specific information about her grandchild's academic status and actionable steps for improvement.

Summary of Finding 1

Participants indicated that their level of trust in educators significantly impacted their communication with them. In my research, I delved into how Black caregivers at HEA defined and experienced trust, aiming to understand its role in improving communication between educators and caregivers. Caregivers identified three key factors influencing trust: the academic rigor their child faced, their child's comfort with the educator, and the frequency and mode of communication. While participants emphasized the importance of high expectations for their child's academic performance, I also discovered that effectively conveying these expectations to caregivers played a crucial role in trust dynamics. Many caregivers highlighted that their child's positive experiences at school directly influenced their trust in HEA educators. Additionally, alignment between educators' communication and caregivers' goals and expectations was pivotal for building and maintaining trust. The timing and content of educators' communication were also significant factors in shaping trust dynamics.

Finding 2: Caregiver's perception of the educator's dedication impacted their communication.

Participants in this study shared how educator dedication to their children impacted their communication. This finding addresses Research Question one by highlighting how cultural, social, or contextual factors influence caregiver perceptions, which, in turn, affect communication practices regarding their child's education. These perceptions are crucial for understanding caregiver engagement with educators. Salient themes include how asset-based language shapes caregiver views, how classroom and school culture foster engagement, and the importance of educator transparency in building relationships with caregivers.

Theme 2.1 Asset-Based Language Towards Student

Each caregiver evaluated their child's educator's level of dedication, which impacted communication dynamics. Some caregivers explicitly acknowledged this correlation, while others required deeper exploration during interviews. As mentioned earlier, caregivers' primary entry point was through their children. Therefore, the use or avoidance of asset-based language with the child significantly affected communication. Essentially, caregivers' perceptions of how educators view their children shape their perception of the educator, influencing how they interact and communicate.

Framing of Potential Challenges. Tensions often arise when one party must address concerns with the other, a common occurrence in the educator-caregiver dynamic. Educators have a duty to inform caregivers about issues and address learning differences, despite the challenges of large classrooms. However, Maccie appreciated how her daughter's educator frames constructive conversations about academic progress. The educator emphasizes the child's strengths and positive qualities before discussing any potential concerns, which Maccie finds crucial for maintaining a balanced perspective. This approach instills confidence in the caregiver, demonstrating that the educator values and respects the child's well-being. While Maccie generally feels satisfied with the educator and comfortable communicating with her, she tends not to initiate discussions frequently.

Rudy consistently expressed appreciation for the updates he received from his son's educator, some of which were included in Classroom B's weekly newsletter. When asked to highlight his favorite newsletter, he noted an example where challenges were positively framed. The newsletter started by recapping the week's classroom events, despite it being an abbreviated week:

> “I believe the three days definitely threw a lot of them off schedule, as I spent a lot of time redirecting, giving energy hugs, and taking some extra quiet time out to reinforce listening skills. I hope that this upcoming week has us getting back to normal, now that we are going into a full week! I’m confident that your little ones are ready to bring their listening ears for tomorrow!” (Newsletter B).

In this excerpt, the educator addresses the behavioral challenges of the previous week but reframes them positively, emphasizing an asset-based view of the students. Phrases like "getting back to normal" and "I’m confident that your little ones are ready to bring their listening ears" demonstrate awareness of the class's usual excellent behavior and express faith in their ability to succeed, reassuring caregivers.

Similarly, Shante experienced a positive exchange when addressing her son's habit of falling asleep after lunch. Despite the recurring behavior, the educator did not judge or magnify the problem, maintaining a basis of mutual respect and trust with Shante. Shante's reference to the educator's continuous praises of her son throughout the interview indicates their shared belief in his potential, allowing Shante to lead and share suggestions for improving the learning environment. These asset-based beliefs are crucial for building strong relationships.

Attention Given to Observed Strengths. I would like to highlight two caregivers who expressed gratitude for their child's educator when celebrating their child's success. Jonas, new to HEA, met with the educator who informed him that his son was "slightly advanced," and they were working on a plan to maintain this level. Jonas has high trust standards, which was evident in his frequent passionate phrases where he explained how he typically “…trust no one with his boy..” (Interview, December 11, 2023). However, he was impressed by the educator's dedication and spoke proudly of her throughout the interview. Shante also showed appreciation by sharing

how the educator regularly sends her pictures of her son's achievements, such as writing sentences and presenting a project in class. This communication of celebrated achievements makes Shante feel valued and provides insight into her son's learning experience at school.

Absence of Asset-based Language. Not all caregivers received asset-based language. During Crystal's interview, she expressed feeling unwelcomed, experienced limited interactions, and considered unenrolling her child in first grade the previous year. One challenge she highlighted was the lack of acknowledgment and stimulation for her daughter's intellectual gifts by both previous and current teachers. Crystal suggested the need for alternative programs beyond the gifted program to challenge children who don't fit its criteria. She emphasized the importance of challenging all students and holding them to higher expectations. This suggests a perception that not all students are treated equally and that only students exceeding expectations receive specialized attention.

Theme 2.2 Classroom and School Culture

School culture significantly influences caregivers' comfort level with communication. Jeffrey and Rudy both expressed appreciation for their school's culture. Jeffrey highlighted the school's standard of excellence and the positive feedback from other families and community members, specifically mentioning HEA's "willingness…scheduled things outside of school starting that helps us feel welcomed in that environment" (Interview, November 7, 2023). He also noted the school's commitment to racial equality and respect for all families:

> "They treat every family the same. I love that there is some diversity there. I was in the office yesterday and I was just kind of sticking around and you'll see they treat a White family the same way they treat Black [or] Latino family the same …it's just been great for us and like they all know us on a personal level." (Interview, November 7, 2023).

These interpersonal actions contributed to a sense of respect, care, equality, and professionalism within the school community.

Rudy shared similar positive experiences about his son's educator, describing her as someone who consistently goes above and beyond and demonstrates a passion for her job. He highlighted her dedication to communicating with both students and caregivers, as well as her ability to provide insightful feedback on his son's progress. Rudy appreciated how she effectively communicated his son's current status, future goals, and overall objectives for the year. The educator's passion and devotion were evident in her attention to detail, respectful interactions, and commitment to creating a welcoming environment, all of which laid a foundation for constructive communication.

However, Sharri's first-grade experience and Crystal's encounters at HEA present contrasting sentiments. While I will offer detailed accounts of their differing experiences in a later finding, it is crucial to first recognize that not every caregiver encountered the high standard of excellence and the “above and beyond” actions described earlier.

Theme 2.3 Educator Transparency

Transparency and vulnerability, while complex, hold significant consequences in actions. Despite potential unfavorable views in professional settings, it's crucial to consider the theoretical framework, FCP, underpinning the study's conceptual framework, ADC. In a family-centered approach, educators are expected to embody transparency and vulnerability. Participants shared how educators' transparency directly influenced their interactions with the school and classroom educator.

Chris and Shante both attended HEA’s open house and had contrasting experiences. Chris felt underwhelmed by his initial interaction with his child’s educator, noting her tired

demeanor. Although she was engaged when they asked questions, Chris sensed a lack of enthusiasm. He later learned she was battling a cold, which he was unaware of at the time. In contrast, Shante's fears were dispelled, and she felt reassured about sending her child to school after the educator expressed deep care for the students, referring to them as her own. She recounted this moment as:

> "...she [her son's educator] cried…when you guys are not with them, they're with me and they're my babies. And right there. I was like, okay, yeah, we got a good one because that is just awesome for her to take those babies as her own. And knowing that, I'm comfortable with having my child comes to school…" (Interview, October 30, 2023)

This simple yet powerful act of transparency completely shifted this mother's apprehension and positively impacted her communication with the educator.

Similarly, Jonas appreciated the transparency of his son's educator. He felt she could encourage his son's creativity significantly due to his knowledge of the educators' travel history. Jonas expressed:

> "... she traveled out the country…So I feel like when it comes to traveling you get to meet different people, different cultures. And that helps you grow different experiences. So with her travel experiences that can bring something good as far as helping him think creatively" (Interview, December 11, 2023).

Recognizing their aligned values, Jonas believed the educator's travel experiences could positively influence his son's creativity, strengthening their relationship as caregiver and educator.

Sharri and Crystal felt limited in their communication with their children's educators due to perceptions of a lack of transparency. Sharri, accustomed to frequent communication in

kindergarten, desired a similar relationship in first grade but found the communication bland and frustrating. She pointed out educator answers to her questions:

> "How's learning going? Are they paying attention? Are they struggling in any areas?...[educator told her to read more] They can definitely read more. I'm like okay, it was just really bland…I feel like I'm just gonna get this same token answer" (Interview, October 30, 2023).

Similarly, Crystal found her first-grade parent-teacher conference confusing, particularly regarding the Phonological Awareness Literacy Screening (PALS) data discussion. The educator presented the numbers without explanation of their meaning and significance to literacy development. These caregiver experiences illustrate how a lack of educator transparency may lead to unproductive communication, hindering collaboration and caregiver engagement.

Summary Finding 2

This finding explored how HEA caregivers perceived their child's educators' care and dedication. As proven in the previous chapters, despite caregivers' unwavering commitment to their child's success, regardless of adherence to traditional schooling methods, this dedication is not always reciprocated and must be established and maintained through relational trust. Specifically, perceived educator dedication involves offering a balanced perspective of the child and maintaining high standards regardless of academic performance. Class and school culture significantly influence participants' perceptions of educator dedication. Actions such as attention to detail in the physical environment and communication practices, as well as equitable treatment across racial groups, contribute to sentiments of educator dedication. Additionally, educators' personal transparency can either strengthen or undermine communication, ultimately affecting partnerships between educators and caregivers.

Finding 3: Even though educator communication was often positively received by caregivers, this process was complex with a number of elements that could hinder or support communication efforts.

During data analysis, participants highlighted positive communication from both current and, in some cases, previous educators of their children. This finding addresses the first research question by shifting focus from mere perceptions to the specific practices caregivers have encountered from HEA primary grade educators. It also offers a glimpse into the second research question by briefly mentioning facilitators and barriers in communication practices. The upcoming section will explore four key themes revealing notable practices experienced by caregivers in this study: 1) varied communication methods, 2) empathetic communication, 3) initiation of communication by educators versus caregivers, and 4) common advice such as encouraging reading at home.

Theme 3.1 Varied Modes of Communication

Caregivers in this study noted that HEA primary grade educators used various communication methods to convey student literacy development, encompassing formal and informal formats, digital platforms, and literacy-focused events. In the upcoming section, I begin by explaining how literacy events and the formal literacy development of students were typically communicated. Then I briefly outline the communication methods recalled during interviews and the caregivers' preferred method. This section concludes with an exploration of communication methods that were either excluded or mentioned infrequently.

HEA's reading specialist explained how literacy events are communicated to families. Initially, student engagement is encouraged through morning announcements, followed by classroom educators distributing paper and digital flyers. These events are also mentioned in the

principal's weekly messages several weeks in advance. HEA sends quarterly report cards to all students except Kindergarteners in the first quarter. These report cards indicate academic progress and offer guidance for support or enrichment at home. Some Kindergarten educators provide a progress report at the end of November focusing on literacy and math development. The Plan of Reading Progress (PRP) is a state-required tool for caregivers of students scoring below benchmark on reading assessments, e.g., PALS, distributed during parent-teacher conferences or through phone calls. HEA's communication distribution describes their dedication to home-school interactions and the interview data also reflects this.

All second-grade caregivers mentioned attending or being aware of school-wide family engagement events and workshops. Jeffrey expressed excitement for the school year kick-off event, highlighting how HEA educators conduct meet-and-greet with HEA families at a local park. He noted that educators usually discuss family structures and teaching philosophies at this event. Kindergarten caregivers also acknowledged school-wide and grade-level workshops. Maccie shared, "… the meet- and- greet before school started and… a little learning with your kids' night… I feel like they attempt to do a good job of making the parents feel welcomed and included in their child's education" (Interview, December 13, 2023). These two literacy-related events provided opportunities for caregivers to physically engage with educators, which was beneficial since it helped caregivers feel more included in the learning environment. Furthermore, these interactions highlighted the significance of establishing effective communication channels that align with caregivers' preferences.

Regarding their preferred communication method, eight out of nine participants favored digital communication. Five participants specifically mentioned ClassTag and Class Dojo, digital classroom communication platforms used at HEA, as their primary choices. Three participants

preferred receiving text messages from their child's educator. Sharri justified her preference for digital methods by stating they were easily accessible and provided a record. During interviews, all participants mentioned time constraints as a challenge, indicating that messages sent to their phones were quicker to respond to amid daily demands. While Jeffrey and Crystal had differing views on ClassTag versus Class Dojo, they both advocated for HEA to use a consistent platform each year. Crystal also suggested that messages that could potentially lead to a tense discussions (e.g., limited progress, misbehavior) should be conveyed via phone call or face-to-face communication.

During the caregivers' interviews, not all literacy communication documents were discussed, including the weekly school-wide messages and the PALS reports. Despite HEA's principal generating weekly emails and voicemails for all enrolled families to provide updates on events and share important links, none of the participants referenced these messages. Perhaps these automated messages are not a worthwhile effort when compared to class-wide digital communication platforms like Class Dojo. Communication about PALS was endorsed by second grade caregivers but not widely by Kindergarten caregivers with three of four second grade caregivers versus only one of the five kindergarten caregivers. Cleo was the sole participant to mention informal communication methods such as paper flyers and educator notes.

Theme 3.2 Empathetic Actions within the Communication

Regardless of the communication format or caregiver questions and concerns, educator-initiated communication was generally approached with empathy. Empathy was assessed through the analysis of communication documents and the perceptions conveyed during caregiver interviews. This theme corresponds with the generalized sentiment of positivity

towards the child's current teacher and school community. Furthermore, document analysis data reinforced this observation through language choices and the structure of the document.

Most caregivers noticed disparities between the information provided on report cards and progress reports compared to what their child's educator communicated orally about literacy development. Shante and Crystal both experienced such discrepancies and, upon discussing them with the educators, received empathetic responses. The educators addressed their concerns respectfully and offered constructive feedback. Crystal recalled a situation where her child's score didn't align with the teacher's praise throughout the year. The teacher reached out to provide clarification and make a plan for them to work together. Similarly, Shante mentioned a situation where her child received a low score, but the teacher explained the progress and offered additional support. The educators' non-threatening approach fostered respectful communication, acknowledging the caregivers' emotions while also demonstrating empathy.

When talking about the tensions between Sharri's twins' learning challenges and her work schedule, she also shared a moment of empathy. She was frustrated by the twins' performance on assessments, even after they spent time practicing their weekly spelling words. She recalled the teacher's reaction in this circumstance:

> "She'll tell me how about you try doing this? Like, she'll give me different activities and scenarios to do and I'm like, Oh, my God…Why is this working out 10 times better…we can do it at home too. I feel so much better." (Interview, October 30, 2023)

When she shared "...how about you try doing this…" her tone shifted, and it was quite evident there was great appreciation for how her daughter's educator chose patience as well as giving insight into strategies that work in the classroom for home practice.

The documents examined revealed empathy in the language educators used and the positive structure of the document format. Consequently, I found that the documents began to address power dynamics between home and school positively. Despite the caregivers' general negative perception, a closer analysis of the report cards showed that the pre-selected narrative comments framed all comments, whether negative or constructive, in a positive light. For instance, phrases like "shows improvement in..." and "would benefit from..." were used to address academic challenges (HEA Report Card). The empathetic language was also evident in the Sunday night schoolwide message, where Dr. Lee's introduction as "Your Proud Principal" conveyed joy and value for HEA families (HEA message). Similarly, Classroom B's newsletter maintained a warm, inviting tone while remaining respectful and professional, addressing families as "lovely" and "our kiddos" (Newsletter B). These friendly references to families, along with recognition of their efforts at home, validate Rudy's claim in his interview. He highlights that the educator's meticulous attention to detail in every interaction demonstrates her passion, as it extends beyond a general overview of class interactions to encompass specific details.

Both the progress report and PRP were structured using empathetic language. They begin by highlighting students' strengths and frame deficit areas as opportunities for success, using labels like "Areas of growth" (Plan of Reading Progress) and "Grows" (K Progress Report). Additionally, both documents emphasize the importance of the home literacy environment by suggesting activities to support the learning goals discussed. For example, the PRP suggests caregivers turn on captions during movies and tell family stories to support students at home (Plan of Reading Progress).

Theme 3.3 Educator vs. Caregiver-Initiated Communication

I observed an interesting trend in responses regarding the frequency of communication, the importance of schooling elements and family contributions to academic growth. While all caregivers expressed deep dedication to their child's development, home literacy engagement, and dreams for their child, there were variations in caregiver-initiated communication. Interestingly, male caregivers tended to be the primary initiators of communication with their child's educator.

In Chapter 2, I explored Black culture models, where Allen and White-Smith (2017) noted the resilience of Black caregivers, who consistently advocate for educational equity even amidst oppressive conditions. This experience of advocacy was present in Chris' interview as he recounted a significant educational trauma from his first-grade year that fueled his commitment to engagement. He described encountering racism and his mother's strong advocacy against the unjust labeling of Black students:

> "... I have dealt with allllooot of racism…. definitely something you remember and never forget. At the same time my mother was very strong, she was always seen, everybody knew my mother at school… she [his teacher] was trying to push them [Black kids] off to a slow class... But my mom won't having it. So, it was another teacher [that] turned [to my mother] said, you know, Mrs. Lamp. … let me retest him and… there is nothing wrong with yo child and she [my mother] already knew won't nothing wrong. She stood her ground but that is what I mean by some parents are different, some of them didn't fight for their kids, and some of them ended up in a class that they didn't need to be in…" (Interview, October 30, 2023).

This experience instilled in Chris a sense of advocacy, shaping his approach to parenting. His narrative highlights the importance of caregivers being actively involved and "seen" in the school environment.

Rudy, Jeffrey, and Jonas expressed that seeking feedback from their child's educator is their responsibility, rather than the educator's. Similarly, Sharri initially took on a more hands-off approach during her twins' first-grade year but became more involved, labeling herself a "helicopter mom," particularly with one twin's educator in second grade, due to dissatisfaction with communication from the previous year.

Chris also highlighted the caregiver's role in initiating communication, suggesting that educators typically only communicate when there's a problem, placing the responsibility on caregivers to inquire about their child's school experiences. In contrast, Shante and Maccie, both with educational backgrounds, have a higher level of trust in educators and perceive it as their responsibility to initiate communication only when necessary. Moreover, they felt confident that educators will inform them promptly about any concerns.

Theme 3.4 Common Advice Provided to "Read at Home"

Literacy is a key focus in elementary education, particularly for Kindergarten to second-grade students, and educators emphasize the importance of family support at home. Caregivers reported receiving communication on how to support literacy development, with a common directive being to read at home. However, some caregivers received more detailed instructions, leading to contrasting views concerning literacy support.

Cleo expressed frustration with the advice given to support her grandson's literacy, feeling pressured to have him read despite being at an early stage of learning letters and numbers. Crystal shared similar frustrations, noting that the school's emphasis on reading with

her daughter felt repetitive and insufficient. This lack of tailored guidance may lead to poor communication practices, as seen in Sharri's experience with her first-grade educator. While this will be explored later, it is important to note that, owing to the bland and unhelpful communication, Sharri found herself engaged in minimal discussion with the educator.

Conversely, Maccie, Jeffrey, Rudy, and Chis each deemed the support provided as significantly beneficial when asked to share a recent literacy conversation or how educator support impacts interactions with their child. Specifically, Jeffrey recalled contentment communication about his daughter's PALS scores:

> "...just getting that feedback from the teacher and seeing [how] benchmarking is done and kind of how the scores are… learning different activities and exercises that they will be working on to work on that is super helpful to us as well so that we know when we are working with her or helping with homework…we can know how to direct that [in a] way that she needs to retain…" (Interview, November 7, 2023)

Through his response, Jeffrey demonstrated his understanding of the assessment, his daughter's performance, and what that meant in terms of her overall literacy development. In this same exchange, Jeffrey reported that the educator also shared how she is supporting his daughter's individual goals in class and suggested specific tools to use at home. These directives were quite similar to Maccie's experience as she shared specific literacy practices such as "...focusing on ending sound identification" that supported their home literacy engagement in a meaningful way (Interview, December 13, 2023).

Additionally, through document analysis, I found divergent data indicating that certain caregivers received more specific literacy feedback. Kindergarten newsletters from Classrooms A and B offer examples of literacy support for caregivers, including activities like name-writing

practice and high-frequency word recognition. While Classroom A's newsletter shared detailed weekly learning goals in literacy, math, and social studies, not all HEA primary grade educators send home such newsletters. The Reading Plan of Progress template outlines specific activities for both school and home support, with educators choosing from narrative options like pointing out signs and labels or modeling reading behaviors. The Kindergarten Progress Report includes a "Grows" section where educators suggest activities for home support, although not all caregivers receive this report as it is optional. Not all Kindergarten educators distribute progress reports between mandated report cards. Lastly, Classroom B's Take-Home Reading Bag note introduces decodable books but lacks clarity on their role in literacy development, missing an opportunity to enhance caregiver understanding.

Summary Finding 3

Participants describe the literacy communication methods they encountered at HEA. Most caregivers favored digital communication formats for their convenience and ability to meet their individual needs. They also appreciated school-wide and grade-level workshops for fostering a sense of welcomeness at HEA. However, certain key communication examples gathered for document analysis were not mentioned in participant interviews. Drawing on the study's conceptual framework, specifically ADC, all caregivers reported receiving communication practices that supported trust dynamics for effective communication that aligned with the soft skills component. Document analysis confirmed this, highlighting language choices and document structure reflecting HEA educators' use of soft skills. Diverse opinions emerged among caregivers regarding who should initiate communication and its frequency. Additionally, while most caregivers received general advice for literacy support at home, a few received more detailed assistance with select documents offering specific support to certain caregivers.

Finding 4: Attention to the interactions between caregivers and educators positively impacts relationships.

Research Question 2 led to an examination of communication practices that either hinder or support caregiver and educator partnerships at HEA. Finding 4 focuses on communication practices that facilitate partnerships. Through interview data and document analysis, I explored the communication dynamics between caregivers and educators. The data revealed that an educator's intentional communication efforts not only promoted the caregivers' understanding of student literacy development but also fostered a stronger partnership between these vital stakeholders in a child's life. Specifically, HEA caregivers experienced these intentional communication practices through individualized approaches to communication, parent-teacher conferences, and interactions that preserved humanity.

Theme 4.1 Individualized Approaches to Communication

A crucial component of this study's conceptual framework is family-centered communication practices, which emphasize individualization. When educators employ individualized communication approaches, it signifies that caregivers are pivotal agents for student development. Analysis of selected documents revealed individualization in literacy communication processes at HEA. Caregivers expressed how these practices fostered a sense of welcomeness and met their needs in supporting their child's literacy, thereby strengthening their relationship with educators.

HEA organized a Family Reading and Math night at the local Food Lion, demonstrating elements of individualization that prioritized the needs, desires, and experiences of HEA caregivers. Choosing a non-threatening environment like the local grocery store was mindful of the diversity of families and their experiences. Additionally, consideration was given to

caregivers' responsibilities beyond academics, allowing them to integrate the event into their weekly shopping while engaging in hands-on learning. Furthermore, in promoting the workshop, HEA relinquished control by encouraging them to "stop by anytime between 5:00 pm and 7:00 pm.” This flexible open-house style indirectly communicated to caregivers how the HEA community values families.

HEA appeared to be mindful of caregiver schedules by offering events at various times. For example, the library hosted a Books and Heroes of Reading Breakfast, and the Kindergarten team organized a grade-level workshop for caregivers called "Learning with Your Little." Both events demonstrated individualization. For example, the library event, held before school, accommodated the diverse needs of HEA caregivers by allowing those on their way to work to engage for short periods. As HEA is a community school, transportation was simplified for attendees who walk or carpool, eliminating the need for separate transportation. The Kindergarten workshop similarly catered to individual needs by being held after school for just an hour, with children encouraged to attend, making it accessible for caregivers without babysitters who wished to participate.

Individualization in the Kindergarten Workshop fostered a sense of welcomeness and strengthened the caregiver-educator relationship. Educators provided caregivers with information on common literacy misconceptions and explained their importance for overall literacy development. Appendix N illustrates one document shared with caregivers for discussing common literacy misconceptions. This approach normalized early literacy challenges and offered support to address them while emphasizing their significance for the child's literacy development. Cleo expressed appreciation for the workshop, noting that it made parents feel welcomed and included in their child's education. Rudy echoed this sentiment, highlighting the

usefulness of the workshop in supporting his sense of welcomeness and inclusion, particularly through activities like pronunciation guidance and hands-on crafts that engaged children in learning. This also suggests that hands-on learning activities were impactful since they were tailored to their individual needs, allowing them to feel actively involved in their child's learning development. Consequently, an individualized approach facilitated communication between caregivers and educators.

Theme 4.2 Parent-Teacher Conferences

The participants frequently experienced a disconnect between informal and formal communication (e.g., report cards, progress reports), which led to frustration. However, this frustration was effectively resolved through parent-teacher conferences. Both phone and in-person conferences were positively received by participants and significantly influenced their perceptions of the educator and the overall relationship between caregivers and educators. This complements the themes in Findings 1 and 2, where I shared how trust was established through multiple opportunities for communication face-to-face, as it allowed the caregiver to learn more about educator intentions and their dedication to their child's success.

Crystal recounted an experience where there was a disconnect between informal and formal feedback for her daughter prior to conferencing with the educator,

> "She had a score, and it didn't make sense because the teacher was praising her all year long. So, the grade didn't reflect that. I was confused. When I noted it on the report card, the teacher called us, which was good. We got clarification and were able to work together. That was helpful." (Interview, November 7, 2023)

Despite initial disappointment with her daughter's report card, the educator restored trust and provided support through clarifying phone communication. Similarly, Rudy and Shante faced

communication misalignment after receiving their child's report card. However, their child's educator explained that the lower reporting indicated areas for growth and that their children met benchmark expectations. Jeffrey had a different experience, recalling a first-grade conference where the educator provided detailed information about the PALS assessment, benchmarks, and suggested exercises. This allowed him and his wife to better understand their daughter's literacy level and learn about new resources to further support her.

Theme 4.3 Presence of Humanity in Interactions

Chapter 2 delves into the definition and significance of a key component of the study's conceptual framework, ADC, soft skills in interactions. Soft skills encompass the interpersonal and social skills that can greatly influence interactions. While some documents provided tangible evidence of HEA's communication efforts using soft skills, the analysis primarily relied on interview data. Most participants shared experiences highlighting the positive impact of soft skills on family-centeredness.

Rudy expressed his appreciation for the weekly newsletters from Class B, describing them as thorough and reflecting the educator's dedication to the kids and families. Upon examination of a newsletter copy, it was noted that the language used throughout set a warm, respectful, and inviting tone. The educator began with a friendly greeting to families, made a personal reference to them, and positively framed a challenging week with the students. The use of "your little ones" instead of generic terms like students or children further emphasized the personal connection (Newsletter B). Additionally, the previously noted newsletter demonstrated educators' use of soft skills by acknowledging the efforts made at home and consistently demonstrating empathy and respect, especially when addressing challenging situations and requesting caregiver support (Newsletter B).

Relational trust was evident in Jeffrey's everyday interactions, where he highlighted the welcoming atmosphere at HEA. He expressed complete appreciation for the simple gestures, such as hugs from teachers or friendly greetings in the hallway, which made him feel welcomed into the HEA community. He was particularly appreciative of "...teachers who - not even our children's teachers - make the point to like, speak to us and say hello" (Interview, November 7, 2023). Jeffrey highlighted that the educators' genuine care and respect for him and his family were evident not only within the school but also outside of it. He mentioned, "...they all [HEA educators] communicate when we see them like at Target…so it's the same that's how they are, you know, it's not something they're just doing" (Interview, November 7, 2023). This demonstrates that the personalized greetings and interactions outside of school further confirm to him that HEA educators genuinely care for him and his family, as their behavior remains consistent regardless of the setting.

Summary Finding 4

This finding answers question two by examining current communication practices that support caregiver and educator partnerships at HEA. Participants emphasized the importance of intentional focus from educators in facilitating communication dynamics. This focus was evident in individualized literacy events at both school-wide and grade levels. Interview responses underscored participants' appreciation for tailored events, fostering a sense of inclusion. Parent-teacher conferences exemplified intentional focus, with nearly all participants noting the effective alignment of informal and formal communication, resolving experienced disconnect. Educators' utilization of soft skills in literacy communication contributed to a more family-centered environment, yielding positive communication and partnership outcomes.

Finding 5: Limited practical application of asset-based beliefs and collaborative decision-making in communication practices had detrimental effects on communication outcomes.

The final finding addresses Research Question 2 by identifying communication practices that hinder effective partnerships at HEA. Despite the presence of supportive practices, as highlighted in Finding 4, the practical application of family-centered communication remains problematic, mirroring challenges encountered by researchers and practitioners mentioned in Chapter 1. Primary grade HEA educators have exhibited limited collaborative decision-making with caregivers and have not fully embraced asset-based beliefs toward them, hindering partnership formation. In this final finding, I will delve into these issues by examining how communication is understood and implemented, the perception of dishonesty in communication, and the weight of student success.

Theme 5.1 What is Communication

Every interview began with a discussion of the participants' definitions of communication. Appendix O illustrates participants' overall perception of communication as an exchange of ideas. However, upon analyzing communication documents and interview transcripts, I observed limited actions demonstrating asset-based beliefs towards caregivers with collaboration efforts mostly at a surface level. Newsletters were predominantly unilateral communication, providing an overview of the week's learning without soliciting caregiver input or collaboration. Similarly, formal communication documents, lacked opportunities for caregiver input or questions, often containing teacher jargon that hindered understanding. This barrier impeded effective communication and collaboration, preventing caregivers from fully supporting their child's learning. Crystal's experience with the PALS test summary exemplifies this communication gap,

> “...very confusing.... But I don't know that I knew the right questions to ask, you know, so it's like, okay, if she's not on benchmark, okay, we've clearly got something to work on… the way they presented, it doesn't really mean much to me…” (Interview, November 7, 2023).

Crystal's statement "...it doesn't really mean much to me…" does not signal apathy for her child's development, but rather demonstrates the impact of ineffective educator communication where parents are not given the tools needed to engage in their child’s learning.

Finding 3 noted a variety of communication modes, but the quality of this communication was variable. Crystal's experience during her daughter's first-grade conference starkly contrasts with Jeffrey's and Rudy's. Crystal received her daughter's PALS scores without sufficient explanation, leading to a lack of collaboration and understanding. As a result, there was a hierarchy of support established. Crystal expressed her opinion that HEA "squashed the input of parents" and that educators felt they should be the primary source of expertise regarding academic success (Interview, November 7, 2023). This hierarchy within the education system became evident when Crystal recounted her frustrating experience advocating for her daughter. Observing her daughter's struggles with virtual learning, Crystal requested more hands-on materials and worksheets instead of digital slides to better support her child's learning. However, her requests went unheard by the classroom educator and instead was escalated to the principal. Reflecting on the experience, Crystal expressed, “… I didn't feel heard, and it took me like looping back around multiple times before they helped… You can't say the kid’s not learning if you're not you know, if you're not listening to the parents, and the parent understands how the child learns” (Interview, November 7, 2023). This situation illustrates the gap between Crystal's advocacy efforts and the school's response, highlighting how cultural differences and differing

expectations can cause misunderstandings. Crystal's dedication to her child's academic achievement was overlooked due to the school's lack of understanding of her cultural perspective, which was unfortunately seen as problematic.

In contrast, Jeffrey and Rudy had positive experiences where they received detailed explanations of their child's PALS performance, facilitating understanding of current performance and how to support their child at home. Rudy expressed confidence after his summary stating, "...we got the full picture of everything…We walked through his literacy, we walked through his benchmark and we walked through kind of the exercises he's been doing at school…" (Interview, December 19, 2023). Thus, it's evident that caregivers' desires for equitable exchanges were not always met through educator communication methods, leading to potential disconnects.

Theme 5.2 Perceived Dishonesty in Communication

Establishing and rebuilding trust presents challenges as educators need to carefully evaluate their beliefs about which families merit extra and intentional efforts in home-school communication (Bergman & Mapp, 2021). ADC addresses this by emphasizing family-centeredness in communication methods, prioritizing respectful and reciprocal interactions. While HEA's use of individualization and soft skills in communication had positive effects on some caregiver-educator relationships, unilateral communication methods and varying quality persisted (Theme 5.1). Empathy was evident in HEA communication (Theme 3.2), but I observed limited evidence of asset-based beliefs. This is significant as valuing Funds of Knowledge (FoK) affects the relational trust crucial for collaborative processes (Moll et al., 1992; Paulick et al., 2022). ADC stresses an interplay between its five components, and the study's data analysis suggested that soft skills alone may not suffice without asset-based beliefs,

acknowledging each caregiver as a change agent worthy of comprehensive and clear communication. Consequently, trust suffers when caregivers cannot rely on information truthfulness. This is evidenced in the following section with examples of vague feedback, ineffective report cards, and superficial communication.

Crystal described her experience with literacy communication as lacking guidance, noting that feedback on homework often consisted of simple checkmarks without much additional insight. This kind of marking doesn't facilitate meaningful interactions between caregivers and children or promote collaboration with educators. Additionally, the PRP and Kindergarten Progress Report contained interpretive meanings for supporting students. Specifically, the Glows section of the Kindergarten Progress Report, listed accomplishments like "Making Good Progress" and not listing specific achievements, which could be ambiguous for caregivers unable to attend conferences and leave them unsure of how to support their child or what questions to ask.

The report card, despite being the primary literary communication tool for elementary schools, was not universally understood or deemed useful by participants. Maccie was the only participant who spoke positively about its usefulness, finding it easy to interpret the metrics for her daughter's literacy development. More often, the report card was a source of frustration. For example, Chris expressed confusion about the report card, questioning whether his son's poor performance was due to daily work or tests. He continued sharing his desire for more detailed knowledge so he can better support his son as he noted, “You can see as far as the grades of course. I [want to] go deeper… What part of it is he failing? What is it he is not getting?” (Interview, October 30, 2023). Chris's experience highlights that the report card alone does not provide the necessary clarity for caregivers to effectively support their child's education.

Positive informal communication that did not match formal reports created a trust gap between educators and caregivers, hindering their partnership. Sharri's experience with her twins' first-grade educator was unsatisfactory and left her feeling disrespected. She recounted her frustration, citing the time she checked in with her daughter's educator and received an unduly encouraging response. Similarly, Crystal felt her daughter's teacher-focused too much on praise rather than providing useful feedback to address issues at home:

> "I can see how she's doing the homework here at home. And I know how she is. But then they just are like, it's all sprinkles… I don't need the rainbows…you don't have to shout their praises. Give it to me so I can help fix the problem here at home, you know?" (Interview, November 7, 2023)

Both instances illustrate the need for clearer, more actionable communication between educators and caregivers. When I asked her to explain what she meant by sprinkles and the rainbows, she clarified stating:

> "... they're just overly optimistic…it's okay if they're not where they're supposed to be, I don't need you to sugarcoat things for me. So just honestly, tell me where she's at. If she's a joy to have in your class, that's great. But if she needs to work on something say so, you know, you can sandwich it…just give me the truth somewhere in there" (Interview, November 7, 2023).

Crystal's experience also mirrors Sharri's description of superficial communication, as both types of communication erode trust and respect. Caregivers, regardless of their educational background, are experts on their children and understand their child's needs. Therefore, when educators provide information that is clearly inaccurate or vague, caregivers may lose trust in

future communications or may limit their engagement. Sharri felt silenced and frustrated, expressing:

> "When I asked her questions like how are they doing? [Educator stated] "Oh, they're doing fine" ...but how are they doing? How's learning going? Are they paying attention? Are they struggling any areas? …I don't expect an immediate answer. But I do expect an answer. And that's just a generic one. I need something specifically catered to my child… just frustrating to the point I don't even think I should be asking anymore…I'm just gonna get this same token answer" (Interview, October 30, 2023).

This cycle of superficial communication can discourage caregivers from further engagement, as their genuine concerns are consistently disregarded.

Theme 5.3 Weight of Student Success

As a final observation, when asked about their aspirations for their children and if their child's educator could assist in achieving them, most participants felt solely responsible for their child's success. Despite generally positive feelings towards educators, this question highlighted a lack of full trust between HEA educators and caregivers. For instance, Sharri acknowledged educators' efforts but felt it was ultimately her duty as a mother to ensure her children's confidence, saying "I feel like they are doing a fantastic job as the circumstances that they have…[but] it's also up to me to do what I'm supposed to do for my babies" (Interview, October 30, 2023). I interpret the mention of the "circumstances" educators have as suggesting that she may believe educators are overwhelmed. For example, she noted "they have lots of kids in their classroom. I know that could be overwhelming…" (Interview, October 30, 2023). She continued by saying they may be unable to fully focus on individual students, so she felt responsible for taking on this task herself. Chris, driven by past educational trauma, expressed strong family support for his son's dreams but hesitated when asked about educator support, indicating a

greater reliance on family. Others echoed the belief that educators should help children achieve their best but only two participants described specific actions aligning with this.

Summary Finding 5

Despite generally positive perceptions of HEA educators, this finding highlights a mere superficial level of collaboration between educators and caregivers, with both parties failing to fully leverage their assets. Through document analysis and interviews, I discovered a disconnect between caregivers' expectations and definitions of communication and their actual experiences, which often manifested as unilateral communication. Perceptions of communication were hindered by dishonesty due to a superficial quality of communication and inconsistencies between informal and formal communication regarding student progress, which may be exacerbated due to incomprehensible report cards. Furthermore, interview data illuminated that the majority of caregivers harbored only a surface level of trust in educators regarding their child's success.

Chapter Summary

In this chapter, I integrated interview data from nine participants and selected literacy communication documents to answer the study's research questions:

1. What are Black caregivers' perceptions and practices of school-to-home communication with HEA primary grade educators regarding student literacy development?
2. Based on perceptions and practices, in what ways do current communication practices facilitate or hinder effective partnerships between HEA primary grade educators and caregivers?

Finding 1 sheds light on the factors crucial for HEA caregivers to establish trust with educators, which significantly influences the quality of communication. Furthermore, Finding 2 explores

how caregivers' perceptions of educator dedication also affect communication quality. Finding 3 delves into the extensive amount of communication experienced by caregivers, briefly touching on its quality. The final two findings address Research Question 2. Finding 4 underscores how individualized communication and the presence of soft skills facilitate effective partnerships between caregivers and educators at HEA. Conversely, Finding 5 reveals how the absence of collaboration, fueled by the lack of acknowledgment of caregiver assets, creates barriers to effective partnership practices.

My research findings showed that caregivers from various backgrounds, as illustrated in Table 3.4, had comparable communication experiences with their child's educator. A pivotal determinant influencing these experiences was the adoption of respectful, family-centered communication practices. In the fifth and final chapter, I connect my findings, interpretations, and assertions to contextual recommendations for HEA educators and caregivers and discuss potential limitations.

Chapter 5: Recommendations

> "There is no program and no policy that can substitute for a parent who is involved in their child's education from day one. There is no substitute for a parent who will make sure their children are in school on time and help them with their homework after dinner and attend those parent-teacher conferences. And I have no doubt that we will still be talking about these problems in the next century if we do not have parents who are willing to turn off the TV once in a while and put away the video games and read to their child." (Obama, 2008)

This excerpt from President Barack Obama's speech "What's Possible for Our Children" underscores caregivers' paramount importance in children's lives. Effective communication practices are essential to harness caregivers' assets and foster desired caregiver-educator partnerships. This study was designed to assist the Hendrix Elite Academy (HEA) in addressing identified literacy achievement challenges, notably prevalent among the Black student demographic, by leveraging the impact of caregivers on academic achievement (Chaney, 2014; Clarke & Comber, 2020). My capstone focused on communication experiences from the viewpoint of HEA's Black caregivers to provide feedback to HEA and inform future communication practices. While my capstone primarily focused on the perspective of Black caregivers, I believe that implementing the following recommendations diligently can yield positive outcomes for all caregivers at HEA. Moreover, these actions can directly assist in repairing trust and fostering a partnership with Black caregivers at HEA.

Applying the conceptual framework Anti-Deficit Communication (ADC; see Chapter 1), I synthesized both interview and document analysis data to derive insights aimed at the study's research questions:

1. What are Black caregivers' perceptions and practices of school-to-home communication with HEA primary grade educators regarding student literacy development?
2. Based on perceptions and practices, in what ways do current communication practices facilitate or hinder effective partnerships between HEA primary grade educators and caregivers?

In this chapter, I use the study's findings, relevant literature, and caregiver perspectives to give recommendations to the HEA. The chapter closes with limitations and a brief conclusion. The following recommendations are intended to support the educators, both in administrative and classroom roles, of the HEA in their communication efforts:

- Recommendation 1: Fortify relational trust through restorative practices and address the capacity of primary grade HEA educators to effectively carry out their responsibilities.
    - Modification 1.1 Focus on unlearning by learning as part of the acknowledgement phase.
    - Modification 1.2 Implement intentional family-centered communication actions with caregivers, emphasizing an elevated view of caregivers, in the restitution phase.
- Recommendation 2: Create an HEA Family Engagement Lab where caregivers actively collaborate as co-designers to enhance effective communication.
    - Action Step 2.1 Organize Summer planning session with caregivers and educators.
    - Action Step 2.2 Schedule HEA Family Engagement Lab meetings.
    - Action Step 2.3 Collaboratively produce a family-centered report card using Family Engagement Lab meeting practices.

- Recommendation 3: Revise annual parent-teacher conferences at HEA by adopting the Academic Parent-Teacher Teams model.
    - Action Step 3.1 Provide professional development on effective test explanation and student literacy needs communication.
    - Action Step 3.2 Practice caregiver-educator communication and develop home skill activities in grade-level teams.
    - Action Step 3.3 Ensure inclusion of caregiver voice.
- Recommendation 4: Support ongoing efforts for effective communication between educators and caregivers.
    - Action Step 4.1 Expand planning time for family-centered communication opportunities.
    - Action Step 4.2 Provide ongoing learning opportunities for educators and caregivers.
    - Action Step 4.3 Create measurable metrics for HEA communication modifications.

Recommendation 1: Fortify relational trust through restorative practices and address the capacity of primary grade HEA educators to effectively carry out their responsibilities.

Mapp and Bergman (2021) cautioned that before initiating any family engagement changes in any organization, it is critical to address issues of trust. This involves thoroughly inspecting existing practices and areas of tension between caregivers and educators. When implicit biases and deficit mindsets go unrecognized, every social interaction can become tainted with misunderstandings that hinder the fundamental establishment of relational trust (Bryk & Schneider, 2003). Consequently, with this recommendation, I seek to make family-centered

modifications to existing practices at HEA as well as redress any hidden tensions that may be a barrier to trust. These modifications directly target various aspects of HEA's operations, including the summer meet-and-greet, preservice week activities, digital communication methods, and formal literacy communication modes. As indicated in Finding 1 in Chapter 4, caregivers in this study revealed that trust was established through the rigor applied to their child's education, the child's comfort with educators, and the quality of communication. However, some caregivers expressed concerns about a lack of voice in matters concerning their child and inadequate communication, which impaired trust.

This recommendation is based on ideas made by the leaders within the Flamboyan Foundation, Drs. White and Valadez, as they shared key steps that aligned with Mapp's and Henderson's Dual Capacity Framework to build relational trust (Flamboyan Foundation, 2020). The following modifications focus on restorative practice: 1) acknowledgment - focus on unlearning by learning and 2) restitution - implement communication actions with caregivers that are more intentional, emphasizing an elevated view of caregivers.

Modification 1.1 Acknowledgment - Focus on Unlearning by Learning

Family Centered Practice informs ADC, the guiding framework for this capstone, yet researchers and practitioners over the years have been plagued with the practical application of family-centeredness (Dunst, 2002; P. King et al., 2003). Mapp and Bergman (2021) offered a unique but powerful perspective for initiating family-centered initiatives through direct contact with families. They stated that "... the most effective professional learning involves educators interacting with families directly in ways that flip the existing power dynamics…" (Mapp & Bergman, 2021, p. 38). It follows that HEA educators will gain immensely from *unlearning* faulty communication methods while *learning* about caregivers through interactions, culminating

in practical ADC application. The interview data revealed overall positive feelings held toward the teachers, but elements of distrust were evident. So, it is important to: 1) unpack existing barriers and 2) learn the unique assets existing at home to experience a new type of interaction (Mapp & Bergman, 2021).

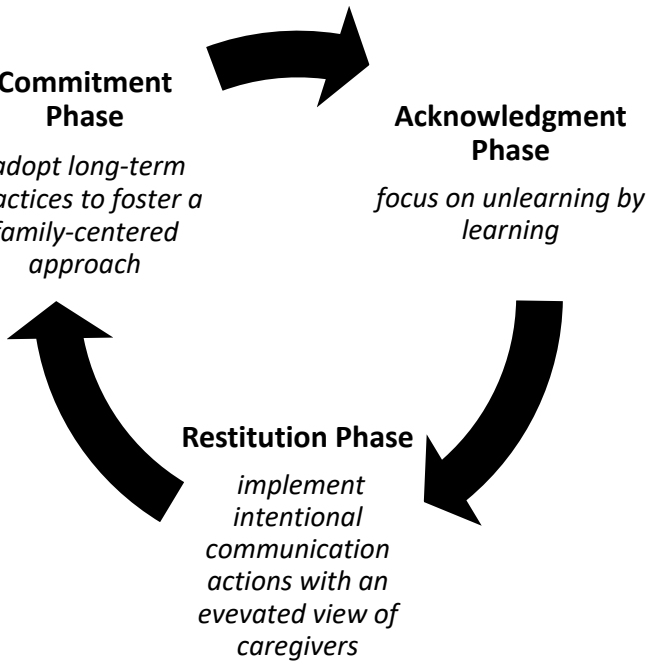
Acknowledgement, the first phase in a restorative practice, seeks to acknowledge and offer an apology for the harmful interactions that have severed the home-school bond, those current or in the past (Flamboyan Foundation, 2020; Kim et al., 2020). Listening tours, as detailed by Dr. Valadez, allow caregivers to share engagement experiences, both positive and negative, as well as unique things about their family (Flamboyan Foundation, 2020). I recommend that HEA revise their current practice of the summer meet- and-greet to incorporate intentional modifications aimed at fostering a stronger sense of HEA caregivers as integral members of their child's academic community. To ground this event in family-centered practices, I suggest the following:

- Welcome caregivers with an introduction providing a baseline understanding that: 1) caregivers are the greatest strengths in their child's lives, 2) caregivers have a rightful place in academic conversations at HEA, 3) family-centered activities are the responsibility of HEA's entire staff, 3) and building and maintaining trust is a priority at HEA.
- Each educator should have intentional and sustained conversations with new caregivers asking questions such as: What are you most proud of about your child? What are your hopes and dreams for their experience at HEA? What experiences have you had with schools in the past? What do you want to contribute across the school year, and what do you want to learn about?

The unlearning process within restorative practices is not linear; instead, it involves iterative development of communication practices and the cultivation of a more caregiver-centered belief system for HEA educators. Figure 5.1 illustrates the iterative process and emphasizes recommended steps for HEA. While family-centered communication exists at HEA, it often occurs in isolated instances, as revealed in document analysis and interviews. To support this acknowledgment phase and ensure a more universal stance to family-centered communication, I recommend integrating modifications into HEA's pre-service week. Dr. Lee should allocate a time for critical reflection among staff, allowing staff to share past successes and challenges in communication and develop solutions collaboratively. This recommendation will be further detailed in Recommendation 4, which focuses on ongoing professional development.

Figure 5.1

Iterative Process of Restorative Practices



Modification 1.2 Restitution - Implement intentional family-centered communication actions with caregivers, emphasizing an elevated view of caregivers.

Restitution uses the knowledge gained from caregiver interactions during the acknowledgment phase to power actions that will address harmful actions of the past. This process requires an opportunity for educators to critically reflect as a collective, challenging their own biases, assumptions, and privileges to shift towards honoring differences and valuing caregiver assets (Park & Paulick, 2021). Appendix F provides reflection prompts for examining assumptions about caregivers.

Through critical reflection, HEA primary grade educators are better prepared to adopt an asset-based perspective when acknowledging caregivers. Genuine collaboration emerges when individuals feel appreciated, valued, and respected (A. Henderson et al., 2007). While HEA caregivers in this study mentioned feelings of appreciation and respect, further examination revealed collaborative and asset-based beliefs often remained superficial rather than contributing to relational trust. To strengthen current practices contributing to relational trust at HEA, I recommend specific modifications to digital communication:

- Utilize ClassTag or Class Dojo for weekly, student-specific positive communication, targeting a group of three to five students each week with brief messages addressing specific literacy skills and acknowledging home contributions (e.g., "This week, Micah improved in writing vowel sounds and confidently sounded out unknown words. Thank you for your support at home!").
- Incorporate individualization into Dr. Lee's Sunday message and Class Newsletters by highlighting literacy accomplishments and experiences. School-wide messages can celebrate literacy achievements and goals for grade levels, classes, or individual students

(e.g., "Ms. Lawrence's class surpassed their goal of learning 20 high-frequency words, mastering 30 words this month!").

Caregivers may opt to engage with weekly newsletters and messages to observe their child's progress and accomplishments. Class newsletters can leverage caregiver input and collaboration by including sections for questions and feedback.

The commitment phase, the final phase of restorative practices, positions educators to adopt long-term practices that foster a family-centered approach. HEA educators will address deficit beliefs regarding caregivers by implementing two key shifts outlined in the following recommendations: the Family Engagement Lab and repurposed parent-teacher conferences, aimed at fostering collaborative experiences based on an elevated view of caregivers.

Recommendation 2: Create an HEA Family Engagement Lab where caregivers actively collaborate as co-designers to enhance effective communication.

"In order to get to new solutions, you have to get to know different people, different scenarios, and different places" (IDEO, 2015, p.22). In Chapter 1, HEA's literacy challenges were outlined. To help address these challenges, educators need to employ a different approach by engaging caregivers actively in the planning process. Caregivers are the key stakeholders in their child's education (Carasso, 2022; Li et al., 2023; McWayne et al., 2019; Tatel-Suatengco & Florida, 2020; Wasik & Sparling, 2012). Therefore, their perspectives, expectations, and experiences have a significant impact on the caregiver-educator relationship and, ultimately, student outcomes (L. Henderson et al., 2020; Mapp & Kuttner, 2013; McWayne et al., 2019).

However, Finding 5 revealed limited collaboration and utilization of caregiver assets, and data sources noted inconsistencies in effective communication about home literacy support. Communication at HEA often lacked genuine collaboration opportunities and sometimes

perpetuated a deficit perspective. To address this limitation, implementing small yet innovative and impactful measures can propel HEA towards acknowledging caregivers as equal partners, who are actively involved in shaping student success. Therefore, I recommend establishing a Family Engagement Lab (FEL) at HEA to address the lack of adult learning opportunities, promote collaborative decision-making, and foster asset-based beliefs about caregivers. The ultimate goal of the FEL is to reconstruct the primary grade's report card by: 1) organizing summer planning sessions with caregivers and educators and 2) collaboratively producing a family-centered report card to use – potentially in the 2024-2025 school year.

Action Step 2.1 Organize summer planning session with caregivers and educators.

In the nation's capital, the Office of Family and Public Engagement developed the FEL in 2016 to enhance student achievement through close collaboration among parents, teachers, and administrators to address challenges in the school community (Baxter, 2018). FEL aims to strengthen partnerships by emphasizing community leadership and collaborative decision-making. It recognizes that those directly affected by challenges are best suited to address them. A robust team for participation in the FEL usually comprises a principal, three to five teachers, and three to five parent leaders. The following steps outline how HEA can utilize FEL components to address persistent issues identified in their primary grade report card.

FEL is an ideal tool to tackle the lack of collaboration and acknowledgment of caregiver assets at HEA. HEA stakeholders will lead the changes, drawing on their intimate knowledge of the issues and necessary solutions. FEL plays a supportive role by providing assistance to participants as they grasp the concept of collaboration and its application in resolving school-specific issues. I suggest the following participants for the HEA FEL: 1) Dr. Lee as HEA's

principal, 2) an educator representative from each primary grade, and 3) one or two caregivers from each primary grade.

Action Step 2.2 Schedule HEA Family Engagement Lab meetings

I propose that HEA launches its first FEL in the summer of 2024, spanning six weeks from June to July. The objective of these meetings is to develop a family-centered report card supplement to complement the district-mandated report card. The FEL aims to ensure both usability for report card users and ease for those delivering it. During the initial meeting, members will identify shared goals for student success and assess the group's assets. They will also deliberate on obstacles hindering caregiver-educator collaboration, setting the tone for the subsequent five weeks of work.

Action Step 2.3 Collaboratively produce a family-centered report card using Family Engagement Lab meeting practices.

Meetings can be divided into three sections: icebreakers, discovery, and action planning. Refer to Table 5.1 for a detailed outline of each section. Icebreakers serve not only to introduce stakeholders to each other but also to establish the framework for collaboration. I have selected four icebreaker activities (i.e., Hopes and Dreams, Defend the Egg, 1-2-3/Clap-Snap-Jump, and Yes And). Appendix G provides an overview of these activities, their significance, and the scheduled session.

Table 5.1

Family Engagement Lab Meeting Structure

Section	Lab Activities	Explanation
Ice Breakers	• Hopes and Dreams, • Defend the Egg,	• Icebreaker activities are incorporated to facilitate team members in collaborating, problem-

	• 1-2-3/Clap-Snap-Jump • Yes, And	solving, and engaging in creative teamwork. They aid in embracing mistakes, establishing common ground among team members, and fostering trust.
Discovery	• Asset Mapping • How Might We • Stakeholder Interviews	• Approximately 10 minutes; Team defines assets then use chart paper to write identified assets within the HEA community. • Team identifies persistent concern with the report card (Caregivers do not find it helpful in understanding their child's literacy development and how to best support at home). For approximately 10 minutes in small groups, team members will consider how might HEA's report card give information that is clearer? Write down all the ideas, discuss, and choose two ideas to mention to the whole group. • This is one of the most important aspects of the lab, as it allows for lab participants to understand the needs and concerns of the school community. Each participant will go out into the HEA community to conduct caregiver interviews. Asking two questions: 1) Is the report card useful in understanding your child's literacy development? 2) What changes would be helpful to improve student literacy understanding?
Action Planning	• Co-Create	• Co-Creation sessions effectively gather feedback on report card changes and involve HEA caregivers in the process. The goal is to assemble interviewed HEA caregivers and have them design collaboratively with the Lab team, empowering them to join the team rather than just voicing their opinions.

Note. Adapted from Baxter, 2018.

During the discovery, the FEL team will engage in activities to gather resources within and beyond the team to address identified issues equitably. I suggest HEA's FEL prioritize a family-centered report card as the first FEL focus area (see Action Step 2.2). The team will brainstorm ways to enhance the clarify of the report card through How Might We, an activity

promoting creative thinking (Baxter, 2018). Asset mapping addresses needs observed in Chapter 4, identifies assets within the school community to facilitate stakeholder connections, addresses collaboration obstacles, and tackles challenges at HEA. Stakeholder input within the HEA community is pivotal for understanding desires and concerns of the caregivers.

As part of action planning, the team will develop a plan to improve the report card. I recommend using CoCreate to access HEA stakeholder assets, particularly those of caregivers. CoCreate is a tool for collaborative decision making that empowers caregivers to ensure their essential contributions (Baxter, 2018). Together, the FEL team will design the adjusted K-2 report card supplement, utilizing themes from this capstone (refer to Discovery section in Table 5.1) to provide input and critique.

Recommendation 3 Revise annual parent-teacher conferences at HEA by adopting the Academic Parent–Teacher Teams model.

In Chapter 2, I emphasized the significance of recognizing and embracing Black cultural models, which can profoundly enhance caregiver-educator communication. Black caregivers prioritize community that is built on deep engagement and partnerships in supporting their children's emotional and academic growth, underscoring the importance for HEA educators to adopt a caregiver-educator partnership that is centered on the values, needs, and assets of Black caregivers. (Rosenbaum & King, 2009; Dunst, 2002; Huguley et al., 2021). Finding 5 revealed that the undervaluing of caregiver expertise hindered communication effectiveness, largely due to misunderstandings of caregiver advocacy efforts and a lack of awareness of caregivers' assets. While HEA caregivers identified parent-teacher conferences as a facilitator of effective communication (see Finding 4), further examination revealed some limitations. Specifically, caregivers expressed a commitment to their child's success and a desire for direct, specific ideas

about how they can support their child at home. The traditional parent-teacher conference is limited in facilitating the essential steps necessary for caregivers to transition from involvement to engagement, where genuine partnership is established (see Figure 5.2).

Figure 5.2

Involvement to Engagement

Involvement ⬇ **– Traditional Methods –** *There is a structure of that supports the imbalance of power between teachers and caregivers; interactions are grounded in efforts to "fix" families.*		**Engagement** ⬇ **– Reformed Methods –** *Caregivers identified and valued as change agents within the school context; interactions are reciprocal, and collaboration is promoted.*
educators set the agenda/focus and caregivers follow what is provided to support this set agenda/focus	**Caregiver Role**	all caregivers (including those from marginalized communities) are valued as experts and partner in educational agendas
material resources and discrete aims within a culture of denial or implicit blame	**Goals**	systemic change in how teachers and caregivers interact; address all levels of communication ensuring interactions are based in respect and trust
unilateral communication and presumed lack of caregiver expertise; work to build individual caregiver capacity	**Strategies**	build capacity and relationships for BOTH the educator and caregiver promoting two-way collaboration

Note. Adapted from Ishimaru 2019;2020.

Academic Parent–Teacher Teams (APTT) repurposes traditional parent-teacher conferences by honoring information from caregivers (Mapp & Kuttner, 2013). With APTT, caregivers collaborate with educators to share techniques, practice activities, and celebrate successes. This shift in a parent-teacher conference values the funds of knowledge families bring

and fosters partnership efficacy and confidence (Mapp & Kuttner, 2013; Moll et al., 1992). APTT provides clear, individualized student information, sets attainment goals for each child, demonstrates how parents can support their child, and offers appropriate teaching materials in a way that coaches caregivers to become more engaged and informed team members (Paredes, 2011). These 75-minute meetings are designed for the whole class rather than individuals and are typically held three times a year (fall, winter, and spring), as outlined in Chapter 2. The structure of the meeting is as follows (Cheung, 2023):

1. Begin with an academic celebratory moment.
2. Provide a grade-level data analysis of academic performance.
3. Discuss reinforcement opportunities for caregivers to practice targeted learning skills at home.
4. Set goals for the caregivers, educators, and students based on discussed data.

In addition, for more individualized communication, there are yearly 30-minute sessions for individual and/or small groups where tailored assistance is provided. During these meetings, the development of each child is discussed, facilitating a deeper exchange of knowledge between the home and school (Cheung, 2023).

APTT leverages caregiver assets and addresses collaboration challenges highlighted in Finding 5, while also aligning with conclusions from Findings 2 and 3, caregivers' desire for educator dedication and tailored feedback. By transitioning from traditional parent-teacher conferences, APTT can enhance caregivers' perceptions of educators' commitment to their child's development. The action steps of this approach are: 1) provide professional development on effective test explanation and student literacy need communication, 2) practice caregiver-educator communication and develop home skill activities in grade-level teams, and 3) ensure

inclusion of the caregiver voice. Action Steps 3.1 and 3.2 address necessary professional develop for successful implementation while Action Step 3.3 discusses my recommended adjustments to the APTT model to better support the inclusion of the caregiver's voice and individualization.

Action Step 3.1 Provide professional development on effective test explanation and student literacy needs communication.

In the second step of the APTT model, educators provide grade-level data analysis of academic performance. This step focuses on the language used by HEA primary grade educators to communicate student PALS performance. Professional learning opportunities are recommended for HEA primary grade educators to effectively communicate with their entire class. I suggest that Dr. Lee, the building's administrative leader, serve as the designated facilitator for this learning opportunity for primary grade educators. The facilitator will guide primary grade educators through the four communication necessities outlined in the Flamboyan Foundation's Do's and Don'ts of Communication (see detailed description in Appendix H):

1. Transparent and placed in a context: provide caregivers perspective by discussing school benchmark averages, expectations for this time of the year, how tested components relate to student's overall literacy development.
2. Clear, plain language: remove teacher jargon and provide visual examples of assessment parts (e.g., show possible spelling errors from PALS to explain development).
3. Actionable next steps: tailor suggestions for home practice linked to a specific skill that students need to improve.
4. Check for caregiver understanding: encourage caregivers to send comments or questions on the information shared in the APTT whole class meeting and follow up by phone and/or during the individual portion of the APTT meeting.

Action Step 3.2 Practice caregiver-educator communication and develop home skill activities in grade-level teams.

The third step of the APTT meeting involves educators offering class-wide suggestions for targeted home practice. Therefore, I recommend professional learning for primary grade educators before engaging in this process with caregivers. I recommend grade-level teams work together to outline how they will present information such as aggregated data and curriculum guides. I also recommend HEA invest in materials for each primary grade classroom to facilitate these meetings. For example, if a grade-level team shares a home-support activity that requires a set of decodable books, then HEA organizes these materials to share with families. During this interactive modeling of APTT, educators simulate caregiver roles and participate in practice sessions in peer groups. During professional development, the facilitator demonstrates best practice for building equitable and enjoyable spaces with families during APTT (Honan, 2019). To respect educators' time and input, a portion of the session is dedicated to them identifying and creating an activity for their first APTT to align with their grade level and/or classroom's focus. The session will conclude with reflections and individual evaluations, which are essential for shaping future learning opportunities and are a critical aspect of APTT (Bates & Morgan, 2018; Biech, 2017).

Action Step 3.3 Ensure inclusion of the caregiver voice.

APTT acts as a tool to boost the efficiency of HEA parent-teacher conferences found in Finding 4 by addressing the barriers regarding collaboration found in Finding 5 and supporting perceptions of educator dedication found in Finding 2. However, I believe it is necessary to modify the final component of the APTT model where educators and caregivers collaboratively set student literacy goals. The modification addresses Finding 1 where caregiver interviews

pointed to an expectation of rigor and high expectations, a hope for their child's comfort and happiness at HEA, and assurances of frequent, individualized communication using accessible modes. Moreover, the modification acknowledges caregiver desire for mutual support regarding accountability and conflict management. I also include structural suggestions to ensure family-centeredness by attending to location and time. Table 5.2 illustrates an overview the revised APTT model that HEA should use.

Table 5.2

Overview of APTT Individualized Meeting Components

Components	**Purpose**
Meet Twice a Year (November and March)	• Facilitate continuous communication of student literacy goals.
Partnering for Success (PFS) • Rigor • Collaboration • Simulation • Accountability	• Explain student performance in comparison to PALS benchmarks and class activities to reach goals. • Both educators and caregivers sign the PFS plan, which outlines the necessary skills, the allocated time required to achieve goals, and the literacy goals identified for the student. • Opportunity for educators to model expectations of literacy activities for caregivers. • Develop and review common measurable goals for the children.
Proactive Conflict Measures	• Clearly establish expectations of communication frequency between educator and caregiver and conflict management
Meeting Flexibility	• Educator organizes meeting with the caregiver in a setting that is non-threatening, comfortable, and inviting.
Quarterly Feedback	• Identify any gaps between the engagement and communication efforts caregivers are currently receiving and what support they should receive to maintain the benefits of APTT.

Partnering for Success Plan

Finding 5 revealed that despite caregivers holding a positive view of educators, they primarily felt responsible for their child's academic and personal goals. APTT offers a structured framework designed not only to enhance caregiver capacity for supporting student success but also to foster equitable caregiver engagement to position caregivers and educators as partners (Foster-DeMers, 2012). To address this, I recommend HEA primary grade educators implement the Partnering for Success plan (PFS) to guide the individual caregiver-educator meetings (See Appendix I). The PFS plan is adapted from Foster-DeMers' Individual At-Home Plan (IAHP), which was discussed in Chapter 2 (Foster-DeMers,2012).

Individual Meeting Frequency. To alleviate frustrations stemming from ineffective feedback, I suggest increasing the frequency of individual 30-minute meetings twice a year, potentially scheduled in November and March. This will enable APTTs an opportunity to set expectations at the start of the year and then reflect on those expectations as they prepare for year-end assessments. Moreover, these meetings have the potential to foster a more ongoing exchange of information between caregivers and educators.

Rigor, Collaboration, Simulation, and Accountability. It is crucial for HEA primary grade educators to communicate rigorous expectations for all children. Using the template in Appendix I, educators can discuss how caregivers' children are performing relative to grade-level expectations. This discussion lays the groundwork for educators and caregivers to collaboratively develop and review common measurable goals to address the study's findings that caregivers desire mutual accountability and an equitable voice in communication practices. Home support practices are outlined and practiced through simulations to support goals. Educators and caregivers then sign the PFS plan and work together to maintain the plan

throughout the school year. Additionally, I recommend caregivers receive a minimum of four to five written communications regarding student progress to keep them informed and provide acknowledgment and encouragement.

Proactive Conflict Measures

Furthermore, HEA educators can use individual meetings to establish norms and the understanding that advocacy does not mean adversary. Thus, I recommend sharing good advocacy practices dos and don'ts in the November meeting (A. Henderson et al., 2007, Appendix J). Communication frequency and conflict management were expressed as areas of tension impacting caregiver communication in this study, so I encourage HEA educators set caregiver-educator expectations while discussing student expectations with the following prompts:

- Communication will be returned in _____ (indicate agreed time) by educator or caregiver.
- If there are challenges with the feedback received or directions provided, the caregiver and educator will agree to have a phone conference to discuss misalignment.

Meeting Flexibility and Caregiver Feedback

The final modification further acknowledges the caregiver as critical partner. First, educators should meet with caregivers in a setting that is non-threatening, comfortable, and inviting. When caregivers are offered a safe and secure environment, they are more willing to share vital information regarding their children (Molden, 2016; Nagy, 2011). Specifically, they are more willing to share how their child learns best and other related information (Molden, 2015; Nagy 2011).

Second, I recommend conducting needs assessments and requesting feedback two to four times a year from caregivers to ensure sustainability. This action aims to incorporate caregiver voices, identify family assets for classroom use, and bridge any gaps in engagement and communication efforts. The ongoing needs assessment fosters continuous communication and respects caregivers' input. Feedback from educators, also completed two to four times a year, should include sections for caregivers to express their needs to encourage communication and emphasize support for student literacy development.

Recommendation 4: Support ongoing efforts for effective communication between educators and caregivers.

Researchers assert that achieving long-lasting changes in home-school communication effectiveness requires all stakeholders to adapt and develop alongside implemented changes (A. Henderson et al., 2007; Mapp & Bergman, 2021; Mapp & Kuttner, 2013). The caregivers in the study emphasized the significance of caregiver engagement and their contribution in their child's literacy achievement. However, they also expressed confusion about what actions to take, leading to limited engagement. Dr. Karen Mapp emphasized the need for dual efforts in family engagement initiatives for them to be effective (Harvard Graduate School of Education, 2014). Simply urging educators to communicate effectively with caregivers and encouraging caregivers to support learning goals without providing the necessary tools is ineffective. Therefore, this recommendation targets both educators and caregivers, providing rich learning experiences as a strong strategy to enhance student learning outcomes and sustain previous recommendations (Chaney, 2014; Clarke & Comber, 2020; Mapp & Kuttner, 2013). I recommend HEA: 1) expand planning time for family-centered communication opportunities, 2) provide ongoing learning

opportunities for educators and caregivers, and 3) create measurable metrics for HEA communication modifications.

Action Step 4.1 Expand planning time for family-centered communication opportunities.

Caregivers expressed a need for detailed communication regarding their child's literacy development and learning support. Allotting time during educator contract hours for educator-caregiver communication would address this need without overburdening educators. This work is time-intensive; therefore, it follows that the success of the work will be limited if the necessary time is not provided. Dr. Lee acknowledges this need and has implemented a practice called "The Gift of Time" where she provides educators with coverage during the school day once every quarter as well as access to grade-level planning rooms. Building on this existing practice at HEA, I propose expanding this initiative to monthly.

Action Step 4.2 Provide ongoing learning opportunities for educators and caregivers.

To effectively embrace new practices, educators and caregivers need to have opportunities to practice new engagement strategies alongside feedback, support, encouragement, and coaching from peers (Bergman & Mapp, 2021). Therefore, HEA educators and caregivers should be provided with continued learning opportunities to support communication and engagement goals. HEA has an academic team that conducts learning opportunities within the school, so I recommend members of this team also facilitate the learning opportunities discussed in the following section.

HEA Educators. When asked how parent-teacher communication could be improved, Maccie provided a unique and insightful response that informed this recommendation:

> "...a lot of teachers don't know how to communicate effectively. And that doesn't mean that they're bad people. But if you've never been taught that, you only know how to

> communicate how you communicate… [educators may say] "I'm contacting these parents. I'm doing this doing that…but that doesn't mean that it's good or effective communication…" (Interview, December 13, 2023).

Adding to Maccie's observation, I discovered discrepancies between caregiver definitions of communication and actual behaviors observed in documents. Caregiver interviews underscored how these discrepancies hindered effective communication. Educators aim to collaborate with caregivers but often lack the language and strategies for sustainable, authentic partnerships (L. Henderson et al., 2020). This tension is amplified in environments with cultural differences between home and school (LaRocque, 2013; L. Henderson et al., 2020; Khalifa, 2018). Therefore, I recommend HEA implement regular grade-level reflection time during weekly planning periods. As part of this reflection, educators will have the opportunity to identify and shift biases in their work of establishing trust with caregivers and reshape inequitable policies and practices (Flamboyan Foundation, 2020; Trent et al., 2013). Each grade-level team can customize their schedule using self-reflective practice prompts provided in Appendix K.

Caregivers. Findings from this study demonstrated a clear desire of caregivers to support their child's learning at home. However, some caregivers detailed that these sentiments are not always embraced or known to other caregivers. Jonas shared, "... [it is] a team effort, as a parent I gotta stay on him just like the teachers do, it's not just up for the teachers to teach, it's up to home to teach him as well" (Interview, December 11, 2023). However, Shante voiced the other side with, "…. some parents…just expect the teacher to do everything but it takes a village to really help these kids…[but] sometimes they are tired and don't feel like doing anything…" (Interview, December 7, 2023). Because of this, I recommend dual support with effective

communication practices at HEA by providing caregivers with regular opportunities to support their engagement with the school and their child's teacher in particular.

Appendix L provides a proposed schedule, including an outline of the first meeting. This outlines the initial meeting, which could be used during the summer meet-and-greet focused on restorative practices, as suggested in Recommendation 1. I suggest in the initial meeting opens with Dr. Mapp's video on effective involvement in the child's education (Scholastic, 2015). Following the video, caregivers should be given time to reflect on their involvement in their child's learning. Next, the facilitators, HEA's academic team of educators, will guide caregivers through the provided Flamboyan Foundation's handout *The Five Roles Families Play to Accelerate Student Learning* (see Appendix M). To promote participation and foster trust, the facilitator may divide attendees into smaller groups, depending on the number of caregivers. I recommend for this discussion to not only be informative but open for discussion and debate. This open discussion can include, but not limited to, the following questions:

- How do we communicate our high expectations for our child if we are not clear on the grade level norms?
- What does it mean to you when it is suggested to frequently monitor learning?
- How is learning supported in your home already?
- Can anyone share a time when you advocated for your child?

While analyzing the study's data, I noted how often I coded caregiver responses as "persistence for student success" and reflected on this persistence as a significant asset. This speaks to caregivers' desire to be involved, which should impact the potential success of these caregiver learning opportunities.

Action Step 4.3 Create measurable metrics for HEA communication modifications.

Martin (2016) emphasized the importance of a unified vision in schools while maintaining autonomy. Expanding on this idea to involve caregivers, HEA should endeavor to foster a collaborative culture and enhance parent-teacher interactions. According to Mapp and Bergman (2021), leaders seeking to improve family engagement should establish policies and tools that clearly articulate specific and measurable expectations for initiatives. Therefore, incorporating reflective activities can help HEA's academic team facilitators (see Action Step 4.2) promote changes by recognizing the home environment as a valuable resource and fostering a shared vision for learning between home and school (Hargreaves, 2000). I recommend HEA regularly (e.g., at least twice a year) survey educators and caregivers about communication practices, particularly focused on any school changes or initiatives. Survey questions should include open-ended questions as well as opportunity for caregivers to share their ideas which increased engagement. The survey feedback will support HEA's efforts for effective communication and increased caregiver engagement as well as inform necessary adjustments, which aligns with the goals of Modification 1.2 and Action Step 3.3. Utilizing an existing HEA practice, Dr. Lee can convey survey results and next steps in her Sunday email/voicemail. Actions like these can foster feelings of inclusion and contribute to a collaborative community.

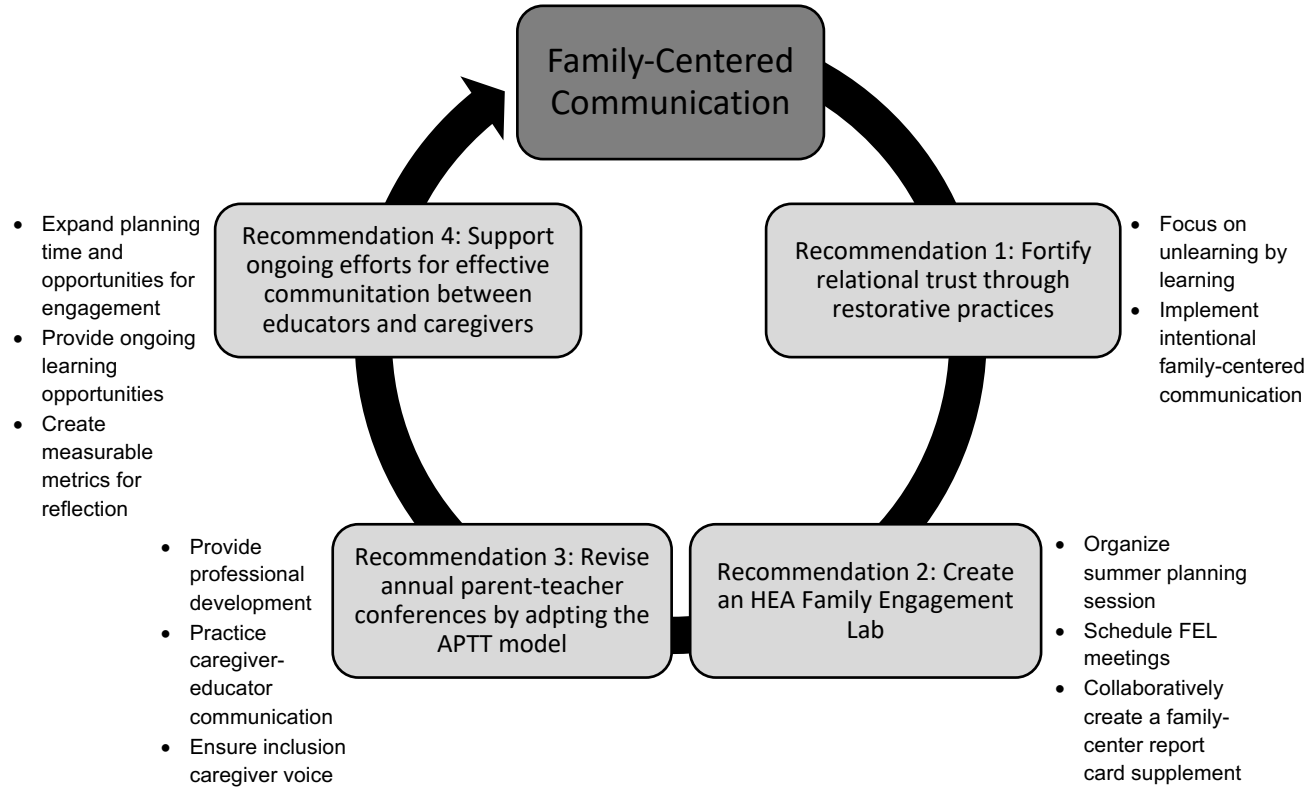
Limitations

With the mentioned recommendations in mind, it is wise to consider the following four limitations. First, the obvious limitation of this research is the inclusion of only one elementary school in a single district. This leads to the second limitation, the low participation of caregivers. Despite multiple attempts (e.g., attending school events, flyers, phone calls), only nine caregivers consented to be interviewed for the research. This limited my access to varied perspectives of caregivers at HEA. The timing of data collection at the beginning of the school year, as well as

my outsider position, may have contributed to the low participation rate. The absence of the educator's perspective and experiences is a third limitation of this study. The district mandated the implementation of a new literacy curriculum, which resulted in no educator interest in participating and led to a design shift to include only the caregiver's perspectives. These participation limitations speak to a fourth and final limitation. Not all classrooms across HEA's primary grades were represented. Specifically, caregivers represented all kindergarten classrooms, one of the five first-grade classrooms, and three of the five second-grade classrooms.

Figure 5.3

Summary of Recommendations



Summary and Final Remarks

In this chapter, I presented recommendations through action steps and modifications for the stakeholders at HEA. These recommendations stem from the study's findings and pertinent literature, utilizing data extracted from analyzed communication documents and insights gleaned from interviews with HEA caregivers. Recommendation 1 focuses on fostering trust between educators and caregivers through a family-centered approach. Recommendations 2 and 3 address unilateral communication, advocating for collaborative strategies that acknowledge caregivers' assets and provide individualized literacy feedback. Recommendation 4 supports communication efforts by allocating time for implementing changes, facilitating ongoing learning opportunities, and establishing measurable systems for effectiveness. Figure 5.3 illustrates how these recommendations are part of an ongoing cycle of intentional work and reflection. Communication is a multifaceted process that plays a fundamental role in a child's academic success, warranting the attention of all stakeholders. Advocates for dismantling systemic barriers affecting both our schools and society at large should prioritize the integrations of family-centeredness into all facets of communication. This approach guides every interaction and enhances the effectiveness of leveraging our schools' greatest resource: the caregivers of our students.

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Appendix A

Parent Invitation

Task Takes Approximately 8 minutes to read and complete.

You are invited to partner with a doctoral student in hopes of building home-school communication and student literacy growth!

A little about the person behind the research…

My name is Portia Lawrence, a proud graduate of Chesterfield County Public Schools. Currently, I am a doctoral student at the University of Virginia. My desire is to learn more about ways to support strong relationships between students' families and their teachers to promote early literacy development.

Reasons for the research….

For students to have the best potential for success, two-way communication is needed between the school and home environments. The students' families have a wealth of resources as well as the students' school community. Therefore, when families and school staff effectively work together the student benefits are infinite!

Why are you contacted…

Hendrix Elite Academy has allowed me to partner with the first-grade team to explore ways to strengthen home and school relationships through early literacy activities. In short, we will begin our project in _____ that will consist of me learning from first-grade teachers and parents on how literacy goals and expectations are communicated.

What will be needed from you…

If you decide to participate, I will meet with selected families to explore specific family needs and goals for relationship building and improving literacy communication.

Parent/Guardian Name:

Student Name:

Best Way to Contact:

- Email:
- Phone:
- Note:

Appendix B

Demographic Questionnaires

Educator

Anonymous and can be done at the end of our interview (or before) Those over Zoom can take 1 minute to complete. No question is mandatory.

Ethnicity

Grades Taught

Years of Teaching Total:

Years teaching the current grade:

No. of students in class:

Degrees:

Licensure/Endorsement:

Caregiver

Anonymous and can be done at the end of our interview (or before) Those over Zoom can take 1 minute to complete. No question is mandatory

Ethnicity

Members living in the home

Siblings

Household income

Highest level of education

Appendix C

Caregiver Protocol

Introduction: Thank you for agreeing to join me today, it really means a lot. Our questions are designed to improve parent-teacher relationships at Ettrick. Most times researchers rarely dig into parent perspectives when trying to improve school relationships, so here I am using this group of parents to guide my recommendations for Ettrick. Everything you say is valuable because it is your experience.

Warm-Up Questions Now I'm going to ask a few questions to collect information to help with organizing the data. You can say skip anything you don't feel comfortable answering by saying, skip this one. Demographic questions read…

-Literacy, in this interview, is all things that involve the teaching and learning of reading and writing. We will also talk about your experiences with the K–2 literacy communication you were provided. Is it ok if we record? I will use this only to recall information and will delete once finished.

We have 4 sections of questions, let's jump in…

A. Asset-Based Beliefs/Definition of Communication/Current Practices

1. What does the term communication mean to you?
2. How frequently did you discuss your child's literacy development or skills with their kindergarten through second grade teacher? Who usually initiated?
3. In your opinion, what role should parents play in supporting their child's literacy development outside of school?
4. Can you share what aspects of your child's education that you value most?

B. Welcomeness/Initiation of Communication – soft skills/trust & respect

1. Can you describe a time when you felt welcomed by your child's teacher? What were the key factors that contributed to that feeling of welcomeness?

   Prompt: if the participant is unsure, reword to comfortable or feeling like your ideas were valued.

   Good communication is supported when respect for all parties involved is present. And when looking closely at respect, it's understood that we respect those when there is some level of trust present. So, I would like for you to use the scale 0-5, 0 meaning don't trust at all and 5 complete trust, to tell me to what extent do you trust your child's teacher? I'll follow up with specifics but just want you to rate the level of trust you have for your child's teacher. And what would you say your level of trust was for the 1st grade… K teacher?

   Why did you rate it a _____? What is needed for it to be a 5, and what steps can you and your child's teacher do to build trust?

2. Can you tell me about a meeting/encounter you set with a teacher to discuss ways of helping your kid with reading or writing?

   How was the experience? Did you have any difficulties or was it easy to communicate with the teacher?

C. Collaborative Decision Making

1. How comfortable did you feel discussing your child's literacy skills with their teacher? (start with current, then speak to past experiences)
2. Can you describe how you typically use the report card to understand your child's literacy development?

What information do you find most useful? Are there any aspects that were confusing?

3. When thinking about the literacy activities you do with your child at home, how has communication with your child's teacher influenced how challenging or positive the interactions were?

D. Presence of adult learning/soft skills/individualized- Evaluation of communication and barriers/suggestions

1. Is there anything that prevents (acts as a challenge) you from supporting your child's literacy activities at home?
2. What challenges have you faced when communicating with your child's teacher about their literacy development?
3. There is so much research that says strong Parent-teacher communication positively supports student learning, so what do you think could be done to improve parent-teacher communication?
4. What do you wish teachers knew about your family?
5. Now generally speaking, what are your dreams for your child's future?

   Do you believe your child's teacher can support you in achieving this dream? Why or why not.

Appendix D

Document Analysis Protocol

Content Analysis

- Representative to RQ and Conceptual Framework

<table>
<tr><th colspan="2">Content Analysis</th></tr>
<tr><td>Name or Type of Document</td><td></td></tr>
<tr><td>Document No</td><td></td></tr>
<tr><td>Purpose of Document</td><td></td></tr>
<tr><td>Date Received</td><td></td></tr>
<tr><td>Date Created</td><td></td></tr>
<tr><td>Brief Summary of Contents</td><td></td></tr>
<tr><td>Relationship to RQ</td><td>Based on perceptions and practices, in what ways do current communication practices facilitate or hinder effective partnerships between HEA primary educators and caregivers?
<table>
<tr><th>Facilitator</th><th>Barrier</th></tr>
<tr><td>Caregiver Voice Acknowledged</td><td>Caregiver voice squashed</td></tr>
<tr><td>Parent Friendly Language</td><td>Teacher Jargon</td></tr>
<tr><td>“Teacher as Flashlight”</td><td>“I don’t need sprinkles and rain</td></tr>
<tr><td>Competent Knowledge of Student</td><td>“Bland Communication”</td></tr>
</table></td></tr>
</table>

Aspects of Conceptual Framework	● Asset-based beliefs: ● Individualized: ● Collaborative Decision Making: ● Adult learning modes: ● Soft Skills:
	Identifying Notes:
Significance or Purpose of Document	
Is there Anything Contradictory About this Document	
Salient Questions/Issues to Consider	
Additional Reflections	

Appendix E

Initial Codebook

	a priori codes		
Category	**Codes**	**Definition**	**Example**
Family-Centeredness: Trust and respect	Empowerment	Code explores instances of caregivers and/or educators' recognition of the other's expertise and perspectives.	My thing is. I don't know everything, so with homework or something I don't have no problem asking the teacher about it If I'm stuck on something. So I don't see where it would be a problem.
	Cultural Competence	Participant reveals instances where educator has shown respect and value towards diverse cultures	They treat every family the same. I mean, I love that there is some diversity there. I was in the office yesterday and I was just kind of sticking around and you know, you'll see they treat a White family the same way they treat Black family they treat the Latino family the same..
Non-Use of ADC	Unilateral	Code indicates communication that is initiated from an educator and does not seek input or feedback from a caregiver	[Discussing parent-teacher conference where PALS data was shared] Very confusing…I understand the numbers …but I don't know that I knew the right questions to ask
	Deficit Beliefs	Caregiver challenges are the focal point when misalignment of communication is occurring.	None observed.
	Emergent codes		
Family-Centeredness:	Competent knowledge of student	The participant shares situations in which the	…[gives a] perspective that's specific to him and not what kindergartens are doing right now but more so what is [my

Trust and respect		educator demonstrated their understanding of each student's unique needs in the development of literacy.	son] doing right now? And then she's explained the curriculum so you're not outside but you are now an insider because you know what they're doing, but then also gives you that full view of what's needed…
	"I'm gon lay it in the middle"	Code seeks to reveal what specific interactions are needed to build trust with their child's educator.	…[my] kids are in a safe environment. Kids are in a nurturing environment … I feel like she…goes above with our students and definitely we have that that trust and there's no anxiety about kind of the level of instruction he's getting level of safety…
Non-Use of ADC	Caregiver voice squashed	Code indicates communication that is initiated from an educator and does not seek input or feedback from a caregiver.	…. lack of transparency. And also, I think that I think that the school system, in a lot of ways is kind of set in their ways. And they could listen to the parent voice more…
	Unwelcomed	Code provides insight into the caregiver's experiences and feelings within the classroom community	[When met son's educator for the first time at Back to School Night] Unfortunately about her, she's real, she's very nice. I'm talking about his teacher now. I think when we actually met she was tired…

Note. Full codebook available upon request.

Appendix F

Reflection Stems to Challenge Negative Beliefs About Families

- Whose voice is missing? Whose voice needs to be heard?
- What would the family/student say about that? What would ___ say if they heard that/about that?
- Who is this actually true for and how do you know? Can you identify someone for whom this is not true?
- How true would this be through ___'s eyes?
- We have heard your story about [a family, situation, circumstance, etc.]. What do you think their [i.e., the family] story is about [a family, situation, circumstance, etc.]?
- What does this mean for students' opportunities at your school?
- How can you think about supporting this student/family differently?
- Let's say you decide not to address this mindset where it exists? What are the implications of that decision?

The table below is a tool to spark a conversation about how our assumptions can influence our actions. Use it to examine ways in which educators can question themselves or others when biased or negative beliefs about families emerge. Using the table below, HEA primary educators can complete it individually as a personal reflection or facilitated in a group setting.

Example Negative Beliefs about Families	***What assumptions are being made about what it takes or what it looks/ sounds like to support a child's learning?***	***How could this belief potentially impact an educator's actions?***	***What would you say to yourself/ask yourself (or someone else) if you were challenging this belief?***
"Families aren't invested at HEA."	Investment is when families attend school events, participate in the PTO, and volunteer. If parents aren't doing these things, then they are not invested.	If we operate from the belief that families aren't invested, we may limit communication and information sharing with families. We might stop trying to engage.	• What are some of the invisible investments families might be making in their child's schooling? • Who is this true for and how do you know? • What would families say about that belief that they are not invested? Would they agree? • What reasons might families have for not "showing up" in ways that we, as educators, hope they will?

“Families don’t have the capacity to support learning at home.”			
“Families don’t care.”			
“Families don’t respect our expertise as educators and instead approach conflict with disrespect.”			

*Information provided above adapted from family engagement resources that the Flamboyan Foundation provided (Flamboyan Foundation, 2020)

https://flamboyanfoundation.org/resources/

Appendix G

Family Engagement Lab: Icebreaker Activities Overview

Icebreaker Activity	Explanation	
Hopes and Dreams	*Purpose:* Participants learn about the structure of the lab, and begin to define their hopes and dreams for the school. Through a series of prompts, and gallery walks, participants discuss and set goals for the school year and beyond. This is a good opportunity for teams to find common ground in the notion that we all want what's best for our children.	*Activity:* ● Give each member approximately five minutes to write down what their hopes and dreams are for their child on their post-it notes. Each idea should have its own post-it note ● Repeat activity but for hopes and dreams for the school. ● Groups go on a gallery walk ● Facilitator asks: What did you notice about the post? Were there any similarities? As participants are engaged in dialogue, the facilitator draws the connection that we all want what's best for our children.
Defend the Egg	*Purpose:* Defend the Egg is a teambuilding activity that involves collaboration, problem solving, and creative teamwork. Groups build a structure out of ordinary materials and try to protect a raw egg from breaking when dropped from a high elevation. The mission is to protect the egg from cracking using teamwork, creativity, and a good design. Participants will drop each structure from at least ten feet. Each participant will be given items prior to entering the room. Everyone comes to the table with something to contribute.	*Activity:* ● Give each participant one household item (tissue box, straws, tape, etc.) as they enter the room. Do not tell them why they are receiving the item. ● Inform teams that they will work together to develop a structure that will protect an egg when it is dropped from 10 feet in the air. ● Work for 15 minutes ● Once the participants have completed the task, bring together in an open space to perform the egg drop. Stand on a stool or small chair and drop the structure from approximately 10 feet in the air. Allow participants the opportunity to see if the structure worked. ● Bring the group back to the table to discuss the activity. Consider asking "What was the most difficult aspect of this activity?" or "Did it feel like everyone had a voice?" ● The facilitator will then note that "just like in real life, everyone in this activity literally came to the table with something to contribute." Remind our participants that in order for this to be successful, we have to realize that we all have different perspectives and ideas, and each person can contribute to this group in different

		ways.
1-2-3/Clap-Snap-Jump	*Purpose:* This activity aims to get participants comfortable with being wrong. It supports the brainstorming activities coming in next portion of the meeting by enabling teams to fear less, and be comfortable with making mistakes. The main takeaway is for lab participants to have no negative reinforcement with providing the wrong answer.	*Activity:* ● Tell participants to stand in pairs. Each pair will count after each other 1,2,3 (the first person says "1", the second person says "2" and the first one says "3" then the second one says "1". Inform participants to keep going until you say stop. Inform participants if they mess up, then they have to cheer and clap ● As participants continue, change the pace by telling them to speed ● When the pairs get used to counting, tell them to change the number "one" to a clap. Continue for about 30 seconds and then change the number "2" to a snap. Continue for approximately 30 seconds and change the number "3" changes to jump. Remind participants to cheer and clap when they do things out of order. ● Ask participants how did they feel about this activity? Who thought it was easier in the beginning? Who thought it was more difficult at the end? Why? How did you feel about being wrong.
Yes, And	*Purpose:* This activity also supports with brainstorming portion of the lab. The word "no" stops ideas from being developed and can cause distrust amongst teams. "Yes And..." removes that barrier by eliminating the word "no" from all brainstorming activities. The goal of "Yes And..." is to build off of an idea by contributing suggestions to add on the original idea.	*Activity:* ● Ask participants to stand in groups of three. ● Ask for a volunteer within the groups to name a household object. ● Once the volunteer has named a household object, inform participants that they will be tasked with inventing a new (insert selected household object here). They must explain its features. The only catch is they will have to build off of their partner's ideas, using the phrase "Yes And..." ● Inform participants that the word no stops ideas from being created and to consider using "Yes And..." when brainstorming to come up with more innovative ideas. ● Participant is provided with 3 minutes to complete the activity, then share their invention to the group.

Note. Adapted from Baxter, 2018

Appendix H

Flamboyan Foundation: Dos and Don'ts of Communication

	Do	Don't
Manageable for teachers and families *Communication should be manageable for both educators and caregivers and targeted to student specific needs.*	● Pick something that you are already assessing or doing. ● Pick information that you think is most important for your families to know. ● Keep your analysis and learning support recommendations short and sweet.	● Collect new information simply to send it home. ● Share information on every single academic subject and standard. ● Send a long, written explanation of the child's data and five suggested activities per week for parents to support learning.
Regular *Positions caregivers to partner with educators and support student achievement because there are no surprises regarding students' performance.*	● Share information on a consistent basis; it doesn't have to be every week. ● Pick how often you will be sharing information and stick to it so parents know when to expect it.	● Share information only at parent teacher conferences or through report cards. ● Over-commit and spend more time than you have sending home information to families.
Explicitly explained to families *When sharing data, assessment or report card, provide information about what the data mean, how student demonstrated strength and areas of growth and how to interpret student data.*	● Use an event where you have many families in your classroom, such as back to school night, to share your data- sharing system with families. ● Follow-up with families who did not attend your training on your system to make sure they understand it. ● Ensure your students understand what's going home to their families so they can explain it to them as well.	● Assume families will understand the data or information you are sending home without an explanation. ● Forget about families who aren't responsive to or interested in the system at first. ● Start sending information to families without explaining it to students.

Positive *Having <u>five</u> positive interactions for every negative interaction builds relationships. Sharing strengths extends the academic, so think of ways to share the socio-emotional strengths*	• Start any communication about academics with a student strength • Cast skills students are struggling with in an optimistic light—"challenges, areas for growth, etc."	• Only list things the student needs help with. • Make student performance sound dismal and impossible to improve.
Transparent and placed in context *Caregivers need to understand all information that is shared so that they can monitor their child's performance and support learning at home.*	• Provide perspective—what is the class average? The state averages? • How does the information relate to progress toward a student's goal?	• Share information in a vacuum (i.e. • Daiquann is a Level "F" in reading. Parents won't usually know what an F means for their student's grade level.)
Usage of clear, plain language *Educator jargon oftentimes feels natural and easily understood but when read outside of the context as an educator some information is not translated well. Instead use language that allows caregivers to engage with information shared.*	• Tell parents what standards or skills mean in everyday language. • Provide visual examples—copies of books, math problems, scenarios, etc that illustrate what scores or levels mean (i.e. Daiquann reads "F" level books. This is what an "F" level book looks like. It has 3-5 sentences and a picture that clearly illustrates the sentences. Many of the words have the same sounds or letter patterns.)	• Write standards verbatim. • Share only numbers or levels with families without visual aids or explanations.
Actionable *Share suggestions or resources that are tailored to the students' needs so that caregivers can support learning at home and guide their child's education.*	• Give parents one or two concrete suggestions on how they can accelerate learning at home. • Tailor each suggestion to a specific skill a student needs to work on to improve the score (i.e. understand the difference between addition and	• Provide no action steps for parents to take to help their kid's data improve. • Give generic suggestions like "read with your child."

	subtraction, read fluently without stopping to break up words, etc.)	
Check for and sustain family understanding *After communication with caregivers, follow-up with them and provide space for any comments or questions and their suggestions for how you, as the educator, can better support their child's learning. This promotes the bilateral communication*	• Ask parents to write comments or questions on the information and send them back to you so you can confirm they've read it. • Follow up by phone or in person with families who are not providing written confirmation they receive and/or understand the material. • If using an online grade book, track how often parents log on and reach out to those who don't by phone, email, or personal contact.	• Ask parents for a signature only. • Send information home and have no way to follow-up or check who received it.

*Information provided above adapted from family engagement resources that the Flamboyan Foundation provided (Flamboyan Foundation, 2020)

https://flamboyanfoundation.org/resource/communicating-with-families-about-academics/

Appendix I

Partnering for Success Plan

<table>
<tr><td colspan="2">_____’s Partnering for Success Plan</td></tr>
<tr><td>Student PALS Data*</td><td>
<table>
<tr><th>Fall Benchmark</th><th>Student Performance</th><th>Goals **</th></tr>
<tr><td>Rhyme</td><td></td><td></td></tr>
<tr><td>Beginning Sound Identification</td><td></td><td></td></tr>
<tr><td>Lower-case letter identification</td><td></td><td></td></tr>
<tr><td>Letter sounds identification</td><td></td><td></td></tr>
</table>
</td></tr>
<tr><td>Literacy Skills for Focus

Highlighted skills are areas that your child will benefit from focusing on to support their literacy development.</td><td>Letter-sound connection in word writing

Letter identification : letter names letter sounds

Rhyme work

Beginning sound identification

Pre-reading skills: pointing to words identifying words in context

identifying words in isolation
<table>
<tr><td>Literacy Skills observed in the classroom

Ex: Commonly read words (high frequency words)</td><td><u>Educator will write in any areas that were not assessed on the PALS assessment, but they believe will significantly support student literacy development</u></td></tr>
</table>
</td></tr>
<tr><td>At home activities</td><td>
<table>
<tr><td>Focus Skill</td><td>Activity frequency and time need for practice</td><td>Activity * Educators are encouraged to create (use existing) games and/or provide activities that are in use in the classroom. Below is simply an overview of the activities chosen.</td></tr>
</table>
</td></tr>
</table>

Caregiver Expertise			
	How does your child learn best?		
	(For 2nd meeting) What aspects of the PFS plan are working?		
	Share any challenges you have faced.		
	What resources are needed?		
	Any other questions/comments/concerns related to the plan?		
Educator commitment	Provide a minimum of 4 -5 written notes (either by way of ClassTag messages, text, email or paper) over the year regarding student progress and acknowledge and encourage caregivers for their commitment.		

Once signed, it is acknowledging one's commitment to partner with each other to ensure student's success in literacy for the 2024-2025 school year.

Caregiver's Name and Date:

_____

Educator's Name and Date:

_____

*PALS summary chart provided will also accompany the Partnering for Success Plan.

** Goals are codeveloped with caregiver and educator. Initial meeting caregivers may not be confident in the goals that they desire so support their feedback by prompting them to discuss how do they wish to see their child develop in literacy and also explaining what each skill entails. Must include date in which goals are anticipated to have been achieved.

Appendix J

Caregiver Advocacy Best Practices

What's good advocacy?	What's over the line?
● Requesting a certain teacher, with the particular needs of their child in mind.	● Applying political pressure to get "the best teachers" for their own child.
● Questioning a student's placement in a program, such as a remedial program.	● Pushing for an award, honor, or position that their child has not earned.
● Requesting that a student be moved to a higher-level group, program, or class, with extra support to succeed.	● Demanding that a student's grade or test score be changed without a well-documented reason.
● Talking to the principal or administrator about problems with a teacher, policy or program.	● Yelling at or threatening teachers and/or school staff with physical harm
● Suggesting that curriculum or instruction be modified to meet a special need.	● Doing their child's homework or writing their college essays.
● Questioning discipline policy or methods and requesting a hearing with an impartial advocate.	● Refusing to accept a teacher's word or criticizing classroom discipline in front of their child.
● Requesting that their child be excused from reading a book or doing a project that is offensive to the family's culture or religion.	● Demanding that certain books be removed from the school library.

(A. Henderson et al., 2007, p. 155)

Appendix K

Flamboyan Foundation Educator Self Reflection Prompts – Professional Learning

	Fostering Asset-Based Beliefs about Families	Listening to Caregivers	High-Quality and Equitable Practices
Goal	***The school community recognizes the assets and strengths of all students and caregivers and interrupts bias and deficit beliefs.***	***School improvement and innovations are informed by a divers sampling of caregiver input, especially from those who have been historically excluded form decision making.***	***All caregivers experience a meaningful partnership based on trust and consistent communication, regardless of their child's grade or classroom.***
Reflection Prompts	● How do we routinely discuss and embrace the strengths of our students, caregivers and school community? ● How has HEA created a safe space for all staff to engage in conversations about beliefs and biases? ● How has the school leaders challenged low expectations, deficit-beliefs, and blaming families for academic challenges? ● What proactive measures are in place to build staff capacity to interrupt deficit-based beliefs and biases about families? ● How do staff interactions with families reflect their asset-based beliefs?	● What questions do we ask caregivers to inform school improvements and innovations? ● What supports are needed to develop staff to become empathetic listeners? ● Whose input gets heard and receives the most traction? Why? ● How is HEA differentiating our outreach to families to ensure that families who have historically been excluded from decision-making are heard? ● How are our communication back to families how their input and feedback are utilized?	● How do our family engagement practices give families what they need to communicate high expectations, monitor and support learning, and guide and advocate for their child? ● How can we invest and build staff capacity for quality family engagement practices? ● How does the staff use qualitative and quantitative data to reflect on the quality and impact of our family engagement practices? ● How will our approach to family engagement evolve based on our school's current needs and assets? ● How does our approach to family engagement reflect families' preferences and feedback?
Visit : https://flamboyanfoundation.org/resource/the-school-leader-tool/ for sample leadership actions to support prompts mentioned above.			

Appendix L

Proposed Initial Meeting and Caregiver Meeting Schedule

Initial Meeting

6:00 pm - 6:45 pm

- 5:50pm - 6: 00pm Families can enjoy light refreshments
- Open Meeting with Dr. Mapp's video on effective involvement their child's education.
    - https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P8yX6-M4RIQ
- Facilitator will pass out handout *The Five Roles Families Play to Accelerate Student Learning* (see Appendix M).
    - As a group they will review points on the handout
- Open for discussion the following points but allow flexibility through providing opportunity for caregivers to ask questions an provide input.
    - Separate into smaller groups if attendance permits
    - Questions:
        - How do we communicate our high expectations for our child if we are not clear on the grade level norms?
        - What does it mean to you when it is suggested to frequently monitor learning?
        - How is learning supported in your home already?
        - Can anyone share a time when you advocated for your child?
- Closing
    - Feedback and Reflection
    - Share proposed meeting schedule

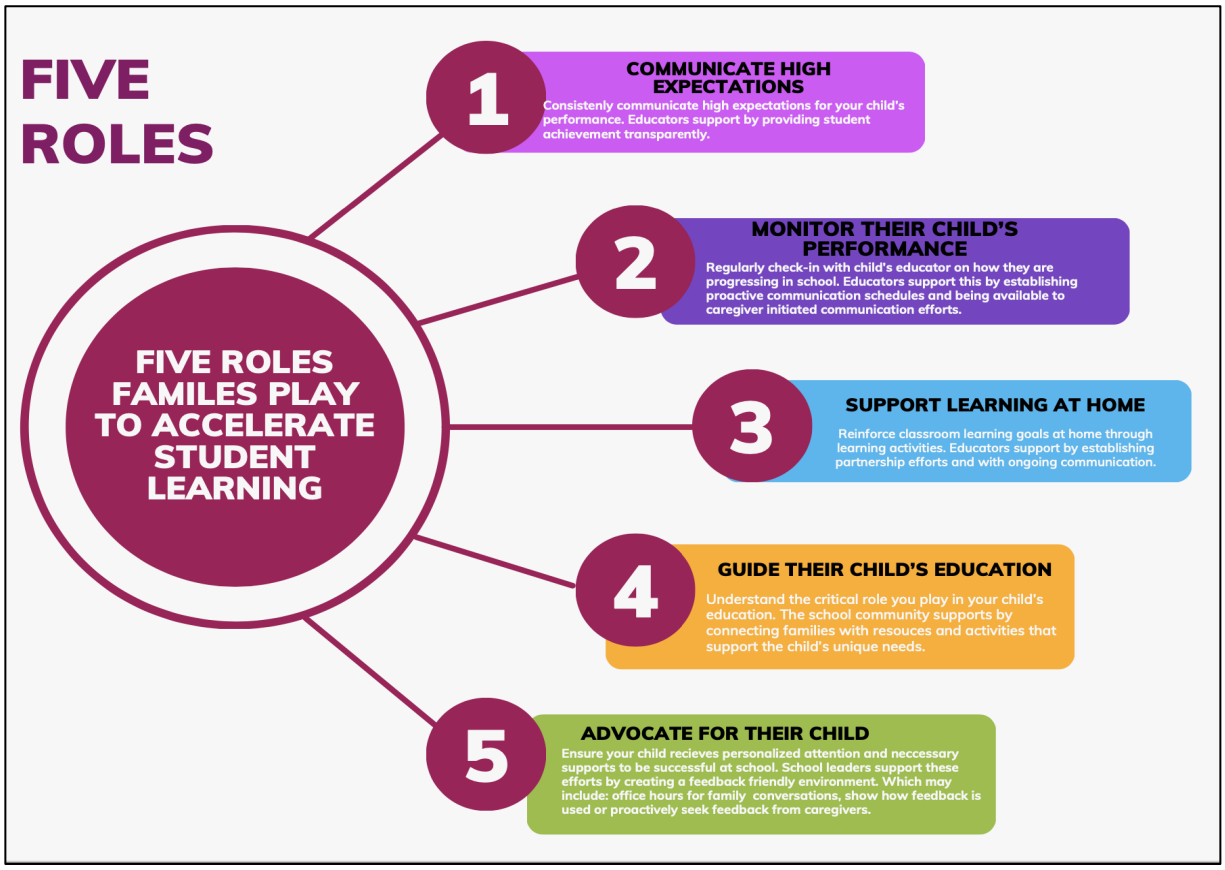
Proposed Meeting Schedule

- August: Initial meeting
- January: Using report card and assessment data to guide at home activities and facilitate communication with your child's educator
- April: Preparing for summer - Resources

*Important to note, topics are subject to change depending on caregiver desire and information collected from HEA caregiver feedback surveys.

Appendix M

Flamboyan Foundation: Five Roles Families Play



Adapted from Flamboyan Foundation, 2023
https://flamboyanfoundation.org/resource/the-five-roles-in-action/

Appendix N

Misconceptions of Literacy: HEA''s Kindergarten Family Workshop Caregiver Communication Example

HOW DO I HELP MY CHILD WITH...
LEARNING SOUNDS

WHY DOES IT MATTER?

Knowing letter sounds is crucial for reading and spelling success. Without knowing letter sounds automatically, children will struggle in all areas of reading.

WHY IS IT TAKING SO LONG?

You may find yourself feeling frustrated because it is taking so long to learn sounds: trust me, I know it can feel defeating. But did you know that it takes hundreds of exposures to a letter before the sound sticks? Some children may pick up on it quickly, but it is not out of the ordinary for it to take many, many expsoures before your child remembers their sounds.

WHAT ACTIVITIES CAN I DO?

Tips for learning letter sounds:

1. Teach the name and the sound at the same time--they do not have to know all of their letter names before they learn their sounds. For example, teach children that the name is t and the sound it represents is /t/.
2. Practice multiple times in the day, but in short chunks. You can keep letters on the refrigerator and point out a few letters multiple times a day. (Think 1 minute!)
3. Play games! There are so many prepackaged games out there, but you can also easily make your own. I take blank notecards and write letters on them. I put them facedown and ask my daughter to find matching pairs.
4. Teach proper letter formation from the start. Use lined paper that has a dotted midline. The smaller the lines, the harder it is to form the letters.

B DOES NOT SAY BUH!

When we discuss letter sounds, it can be natural to say things like b says "buh" and t says "tuh." The truth is, though, that saying "uh" with a sound is actually adding an addiitonal sound. Try to "clip" your sounds--pay attention that when you are speaking, you're not adding the "uh" sound to the end!

Appendix O

What does the word communication mean to you?

Participant Name	Participant's Response
Sharri	"...knowing everything about her children as students and being provided with the tools to successfully/efficiently support them at home." When there are challenges, academic and behavioral, she is prompt to address them so believes that the information has to be given to her
Chris	Provided mostly a description of actions, such as phone calls and face-to-face conversations.
Jeffrey	"...consists of verbal and nonverbal actions but with the primary focus on engaging with the intended audience." So there is an emphasis on the bilateral aspects of communication that are held important and deemed as effective communication for this participant
Crystal	"...based on the ability to openly speak and share information with each other." Value placed on each other's "voices" being heard. *repeated throughout the interview
Jonas	"...emphasis on the elements concerning a necessity for an exchange to happen. He deems communication as effective when he is provided with necessary "next steps".
Cleo	Emphasized importance of having multiple opportunities to exchange information and thus is viewed as ongoing and not marked by singular isolated events.
Maccie	Has a firm value for safety as a key aspect of communication. Meaning, that those participating in the act can fluidly express thoughts and feelings without the repercussion of negative judgments or consequences.
Shante	Important to have a climate in which she can openly express herself without fear of negative consequences, both parties are usually available to receive communication, and returned communication efforts are made promptly.
Rudy	Responsiveness is core aspect in communication where both parties can share freely.

Note. Data displays represents participant excerpts from interview transcript as well as statements pulled from member check summary sheet shared with caregivers.