

Research on Home-School Collaborative Strategies for Parent-Child Shared Reading in Lower-Grade Primary School Chinese Language from the Perspective of Overlapping Spheres of Influence

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Abstract

The lower grades of primary school are a critical period for initiating reading interest, cultivating good reading habits, and developing core Chinese language competencies. As an important vehicle for extracurricular reading, parent-child shared reading requires schools and families to form effective and unified educational synergy. At present, parent-child shared reading in lower-primary Chinese language commonly faces practical problems such as the mutual separation of home and school educational spheres and imperfect collaborative support mechanisms. Grounded in the Theory of Overlapping Spheres of Influence and based on China's relevant policy requirements for home-school co-education, this paper analyzes the existing problems and underlying causes of home-school collaboration in lower-grade parent-child shared reading. By bridging the two major educational spheres of family and school, it constructs a two-way integrated reading education system and proposes actionable home-school collaborative implementation strategies, so as to continuously enhance the educational effectiveness of parent-child shared reading in lower-primary Chinese language.

Keywords

Overlapping Spheres of Influence; Lower-Primary Chinese Language; Parent-Child Shared Reading; Home-School Collaboration.

1. Introduction

Sound policy guidance has long been in place for improving the collaborative education mechanism among families, schools, and society in China's basic education. The Opinions on Improving the Collaborative Education Mechanism among Schools, Families, and Society points out that schools should fully play their leading role in collaborative education, strengthen guidance for family education, and promote alignment of educational goals and consistency of actions between home and school[1]. Meanwhile, the Compulsory Education Chinese Language Curriculum Standards (2022 Edition), in its teaching requirements for the first academic stage, encourages lower-grade students to read extensively from accessible materials, attaches importance to initiating whole-book reading, and advocates using parent-child shared reading to expand extracurricular reading spaces, so as to achieve an organic connection between in-class reading instruction and family reading practice[2].

The theory of Overlapping Spheres of Influence, proposed by American scholar Epstein, holds that families and schools, as two independent spheres of influence, can produce overlapping effects that maximize children's development when they establish stable interactions and form shared educational goals. This theory provides a clear theoretical perspective for addressing the reading-related issues in home-school collaboration. Against this backdrop, exploring home-school collaborative pathways for parent-child shared reading in lower-primary Chinese language has considerable practical value.

2. Overview of the Theory of Overlapping Spheres of Influence

The Theory of Overlapping Spheres of Influence was proposed in the late twentieth century by Professor Epstein of Johns Hopkins University in the United States. Today it is widely treated as one of the foundational frameworks for home-school collaborative education. The theory departs from the older assumption that family, school, and community each work in a separate sphere of their own. Instead, Epstein argues, the three form an organic whole: they influence one another and communicate in both directions, and together they make up the core educational environment in which a student grows. Each of the three keeps its own independent boundaries, but the areas where their influence overlaps are extensive [3].

The theory is usually explained through two models — the external structure and the internal structure — which together clarify the logic and operating mechanisms of home-school-community collaboration. The external model puts student development at the center. It treats family, school, and community as three distinct educational agents, each with its own value, and it accepts that each agent can benefit students on its own. At the same time, it insists that the three working together produce a stronger overall educational effect. The internal model goes a step further: it looks at how the three agents are woven together, analyzes the internal mechanisms of collaborative education, and argues that multi-agent cooperation has a clear advantage over education run by a single agent.

The theory also holds that the educational influence of the three agents is additive and cumulative. As students grow and move through different developmental stages, the forces contributed by family, school, and community keep accumulating and deepening, and their effects show up in students' physical and mental development, character formation, and beyond. The core of the theory comes down to a simple requirement: the three parties should set unified educational goals, share responsibility, collaborate on a regular basis, and pool their resources, so that students are supported in a comprehensive way and develop in a healthy, well-rounded manner.

Over the years the theory has been applied fairly widely in the design of educational systems. In mental health education, for instance, it provides a core framework for building collaborative mechanisms: the three parties are expected to integrate their resources and play to their respective strengths so that a full protection system for students' mental health can be put in place. In career education, the "trinity" model built on this theory has made up for some of the shortcomings of single-agent education and has given systematic, regular career guidance a stronger foundation.

3. Practical Dilemmas and Underlying Causes of Home-School Collaboration in Parent-Child Shared Reading for Lower-Primary Chinese Language

3.1. Practical Dilemmas of Home-School Collaboration

Seen through the lens of this theory, reading education at school and reading at home are still largely two separate worlds. Schools hand out extracurricular reading assignments, but families rarely follow up on whether or how they are completed. Parents tend to choose books for shared reading according to their own preferences, and the goals behind their choices have little connection with what the lower-grade Chinese curriculum asks of children. With no real space where the two sides can meet and interact, collaborative education remains out of reach [4].

Some Chinese language teachers have already recognized how important parent-child shared reading is, but their way of guiding parents is still fairly rough. Guidance rarely goes beyond general encouragement to read; there is no tiered shared reading plan that takes into account

the cognitive features of lower-grade children. Systematic training is in short supply, and teachers seldom show parents what good reading guidance looks like in practice. On the parents' side, two misunderstandings are especially common. One is the belief that shared reading simply means reading a book aloud to the child; dialogue, imaginative expression, language accumulation, and thinking all get left out. The other is a utilitarian attitude: parents chase the number of characters their child recognizes, which runs directly against the lower-grade principle that interest comes first. There is also a practical constraint — many parents are busy with work, reading time is fragmented, and a long-term, stable reading habit never really develops.

At present, home-school shared reading rarely forms a complete loop. There is no clear feedback on the reading process, and parents seldom report the difficulties they meet to teachers. Nor is there an assessment plan suited to lower-grade children, so the effect of shared reading is hard to evaluate objectively. With no incentive mechanism in place either, the enthusiasm of both home and school tends to fade over time.

3.2. Internal Causes of the Formation of These Dilemmas

Some parents hold the narrow view that reading education is entirely the school teacher's job, while some teachers take it for granted that extracurricular reading is completely the family's responsibility. The two sides thus have no shared understanding of what parent-child shared reading is worth or of who should do what.

Schools tend to emphasize interest cultivation, language perception, and literacy initiation, whereas some parents focus on character recognition and test-taking skills. When reading goals pull in different directions, home-school collaboration can hardly move forward [5].

Most primary schools have not set up regular programs for guiding family education. Chinese language teachers are already loaded with heavy teaching work and have no dedicated time to develop resources for guiding shared reading. Schools also lack unified, leveled reading lists for the lower grades and ready-made task scaffolds, so the guidance offered to families is scattered, improvised, and hard to sustain.

The vast majority of parents have never received systematic training in guiding children's reading. They are unfamiliar with the reading requirements in the first stage of the Chinese language curriculum standards and are unsure which shared reading strategies fit lower-grade children. When they sit down with a picture book or a fairy tale, they do not know how to build Chinese language competence through questioning, role-playing, or retelling.

Schools have not yet built supporting channels for communicating about shared reading. WeChat group messages mostly go one way, with little two-way exchange. What is presented is mainly outcomes — reading newsletters and post-reading reflections — while the reading process itself is never assessed. And with no long-term incentive mechanisms such as "Scholarly Family" or "Reading Star," families' enthusiasm cannot be sustained.

4. Optimization Strategies for Home-School Collaboration for Parent-Child Shared Reading from the Perspective of the Theory of Overlapping Spheres of Influence

4.1. Fusing Home and School Spheres and Building a Shared Consensus on Reading Education

Drawing on the Theory of Overlapping Spheres of Influence, schools can start by building an overlapping space where the two spheres actually meet. Reading Open Days and parent-child reading salons are a straightforward way to do this: invite parents into the classroom, let them see reading instruction with their own eyes, and the physical barrier between home and school

begins to break down. Online, schools can set up reading exchange platforms where parents share their shared reading records and discuss the problems and difficulties they run into. Home and school should also clarify their common goals, keeping in mind the developmental characteristics of lower-grade children and following the principles of "interest first, habits as priority, and literacy as progressive development," so that family extracurricular reading and school in-class reading support each other rather than going their separate ways.

4.2. Building a Tiered System and Strengthening School Reading Guidance

Chinese language teachers should follow the educational requirements of the first academic stage in the Compulsory Education Chinese Language Curriculum Standards and, on the basis of the different cognitive levels and reading abilities of lower-grade students, systematically build tiered book lists for parent-child shared reading, so that reading resources are supplied in a proper gradient. They can also design lightweight support scaffolds for specific books, put together guided question lists, and develop teaching resources that parents can actually use, which gives family shared reading a reliable foundation. It is worth changing the carriers and forms of family reading guidance as well: offering short micro-courses on family reading on a regular basis, recording short videos of shared reading, and — with growth stages divided by semester — delivering sustained, differentiated guidance that adjusts shared reading strategies as children develop. In this way parents gradually master sound shared reading methods and their capacity to guide reading at home grows.

4.3. Empowering Family Reading and Enhancing Parents' Shared Reading Capacity

Schools should help parents build a scientific understanding of parent-child shared reading and correct the bias that values character recognition and memorization over the cultivation of reading interest. Families can be encouraged to keep a fixed reading time, create a warm and quiet reading atmosphere, and turn reading into an everyday habit. Parents also need to move away from the one-way model of reading to a child and toward two-way interaction while they read together; this kind of exchange is precisely what trains children's language organization and oral expression, which matches the oral communication objectives of the first-stage Chinese language curriculum. Schools, for their part, can set up platforms where parents support and learn from one another, share good shared reading practices, and refine their methods of reading guidance through discussion and reflection.

4.4. Establishing a Sound Long-Term Mechanism and Building a Home-School Collaborative Closed-Loop System

Communication between home and school needs to be two-way and regular. Teachers can collect the doubts and practical difficulties parents encounter in shared reading on a regular basis and respond with targeted Q&A guidance. For assessment, the single written homework model is no longer enough: schools should build a formative assessment system for lower-grade children that uses multidimensional methods such as in-class story sharing, sustained reading check-ins, and themed storytelling sessions, and the focus should be on how children participate and what they experience while reading. A comprehensive incentive and guarantee mechanism also needs to be in place — award activities like "Scholarly Family" and "Reading Star," for example, give exemplary families a leading role and keep the whole system alive. Together these pieces form the complete closed loop shown in Figure 1.

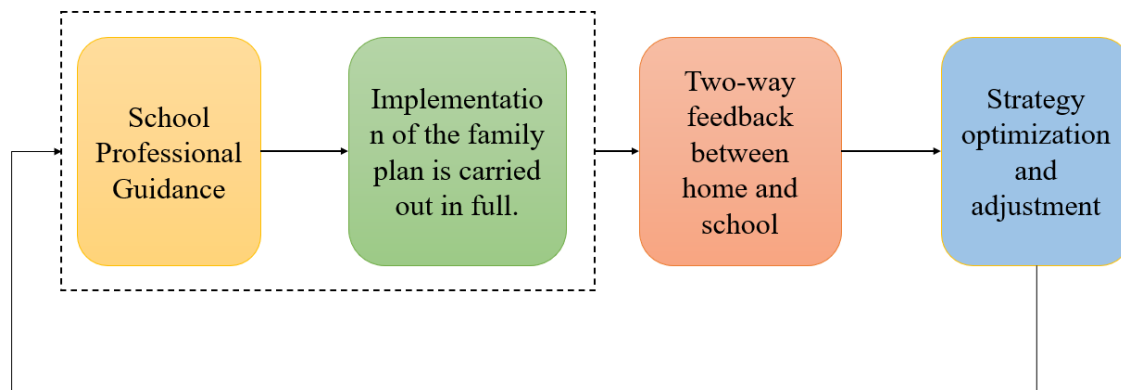


Figure 1. A Closed-Loop Model of Home-School Collaboration for Parent-Child Shared Reading in Lower-Primary Chinese Language from the Perspective of Overlapping Spheres of Influence

5. Conclusion

Parent-child shared reading in lower-primary Chinese language is an important pathway for implementing the extracurricular reading requirements of the new curriculum standards and cultivating students' core Chinese language competencies. The Theory of Overlapping Spheres of Influence points out that reading education cannot be effectively accomplished by a single agent—whether school or family alone. In the face of current problems such as insufficient overlap between home and school spheres, inadequate shared reading guidance, and imperfect collaborative mechanisms, schools should proactively play a leading role and continuously provide reading guidance for family education, while parents should also actively assume their educational responsibilities for family reading. A bridge should be built between the two major educational spheres of home and school, and a collaborative model featuring unified goals and sound mechanisms should be established, so that the two major educational agents—school and family—can overlap and support each other, helping lower-grade children develop a lasting love for reading and form reading habits that benefit them throughout their lives.

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