PARENTS' UNDERSTANDINGS OF YOUNG CHILDREN'S SYMBOLIC
REPRESENTATION

by

Nedra L. Cossa
A Dissertation
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of
Doctor of Philosophy
Education

Committee:

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A Dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy at George Mason University

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Dedication

This is dedicated to my incredible husband, Nick, who made countless sacrifices for me to pursue my dream. His, love, endless patience, and constant support carried me through this entire process.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my family for their never-ending support throughout this process. They encouraged me to never give up on my dreams. Dad, thank you for always telling me how proud you were of me. Mom, thank you for being such an incredible role model. I would like to recognize my Nana and Pappaw, Robert and Harriett Thackston, both of whom passed away before completing my degree. They were two of my biggest supporters and I learned an immeasurable amount from them.

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Abstract

PARENTS' UNDERSTANDINGS OF YOUNG CHILDREN'S SYMBOLIC REPRESENTATION

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Children's lives reflect the social and cultural practices of their families and communities, heavily influencing their development and learning (NAEYC, 2002; Lankshear & Lawler, 1993; Luria, 1998; Steiner & Mahn, 1996). Children's early interactions with literacy are different and unique because of the diverse social and cultural practices of their family and community (Bradford & Wyse, 2012; Shook, Marrion, & Ollila, 1989; Steiner & Mahn, 1996). This qualitative study examined 12 parents' understandings of various forms of young children's symbolic representation. Data were collected from each participant through focus group discussions, an in-depth home interview, children's work samples, and one observation of a parent-child joint activity. Each parent had a child enrolled in a four-year-old classroom in a preschool located on the campus of a public university in the mid Atlantic region of the United States. Focus group discussions, in-depth interviews about children's work samples, and observations were analyzed using constant comparative methods throughout the data

collection process (Corbin & Strauss, 1990).

Results indicate that parents searched for meaning in their children's symbolic representations. In interactions about symbolic representation, they prompted their children's drawing and writing productions, providing various levels of support and structure. These supports ranged from general, broad forms of encouragement to more guided, specific prompts. As they searched for meaning in their children's products, they engaged in conversations sought to better understand the meaning of children's creations, promote children's sharing of content and conceptual knowledge, and further their understanding of conventional aspects of alphabetic print. Most parents expressed higher levels of importance of conventional forms of symbolic representation, specifically alphabetic writing and drawing. When both drawing and writing were present, parents concentrated their focus on the written letters and supported this emphasis through their expressed understanding that it was an important skill needed for kindergarten.

Chapter One

Children learn about written language through interactions with their social and cultural worlds (Baghban, 1984; Bissex, 1980; Heath, 1983; Martens, 1996; Ring, 2006; Schickedanz, 1990). Parents are an integral part of young children's social and cultural worlds where experiences with drawing, writing, and symbolic representation occur. Their values, beliefs, and perspectives impact how young children understand, interpret, and interact with symbolic representation (Dunsmuir & Blatchford, 2004; Einarsdottir, Dockett, & Perry, 2009). To understand the sociocultural environments influencing young children's literacy development, it is necessary to explore the understandings of influential adults in children's lives.

Dyson (2001) states, "Learning an expressive system like written language, is not divorced from one's identity and history, but of necessity, embedded within it" (p. 139). Children's day-to-day lives reflect values, beliefs, perspectives, and practices of families and communities, and heavily influence young children's development and learning (Lankshear & Lawler, 1993; Luria, 1998; NAEYC, 2002; Steiner & Mahn, 1996). Children's experimentation and interactions with literacy prior to beginning preschool are different and unique, based on diverse family experiences (Bradford & Wyse, 2012; Shook, Marrion, & Ollila, 1989; Steiner & Mahn, 1996). Given the important role families play in young children's understanding of writing, the purpose of this study was

to explore children's home literacy environment from parents' perspectives. Researchers and practitioners can use this information to build on children's background and prior cultural writing experiences when they begin formal schooling.

Symbolic Representation

Children enter school with a foundation that is "shaped by the nature of the interaction between caretaker and child, by literacy uses valued by a particular culture . . . and by the child's own activity in literacy events" (Steinberg & Mahn, 1996, p. 203). To understand children's literacy development, educators must consider each child's experiences, culture, traditions, beliefs, and values and how these factors guide a child's literacy development. The term symbolic representation is referenced throughout this paper. At the beginning of this study, the term 'symbolic representation' referred to forms of meaning making young children use to express themselves. Children construct meaning through different forms of media use and are aware that they are constructing meaning when doing so (Baghban, 1984; Bissex, 1980; Martens, 1996; Schickedanz, 1990). These media include, but are not limited to, handwriting, text construction, drawing, painting, transcription (by an adult), and use of the computer. This initial definition was drawn from a myriad of early childhood literacy and language studies that have sought to define young children's expression (Clay, 1975; Harste, Woodward, & Burke, 1986; Rowe, 2008; Yamagata, 2007).

The definition of 'symbolic representation' continued to evolve and change throughout the study. Because the study examined parent-child interactions as a vehicle to explore parents' understandings of varying forms of symbolic representation, their

insight was an integral component to consider when defining this term. I remained open to participants' insights, thoughts, and understandings, revisiting the definition throughout data collection and analysis. While the initial definition included various forms of symbolic representation, parents centered their focus on scribbles, drawings and paintings, and conventional alphabetic writing. I revised the definition to reflect parents' emphasis of these three areas. The term 'symbolic representation' references children's expression through scribbling, drawing and painting, and alphabetic letter formation (see Figure 1).
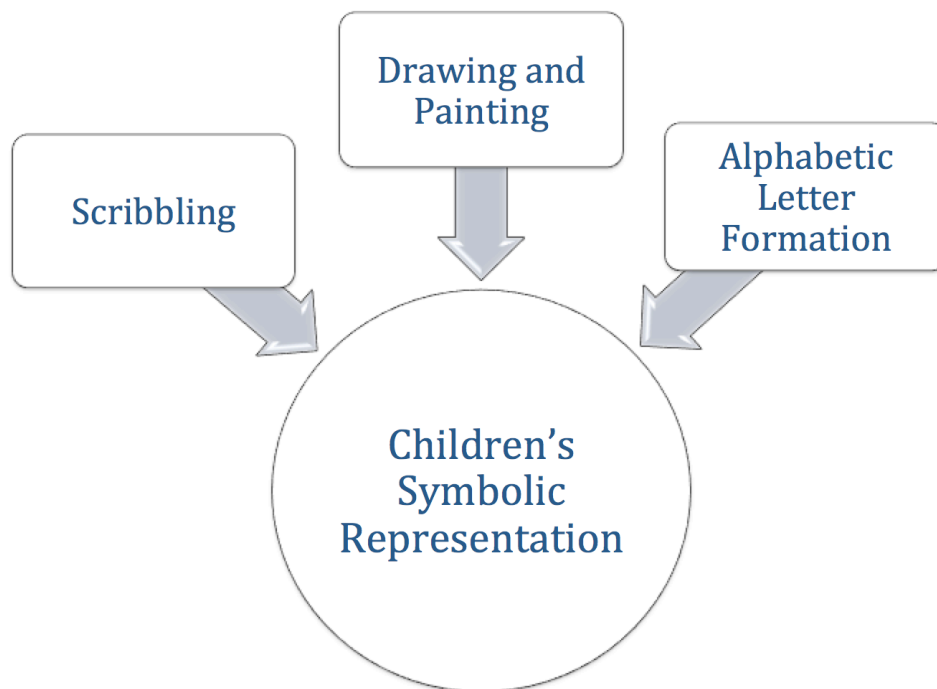
Figure 1. Visual of symbolic representation

The Role Parents Play

Literacy is socially mediated process (Vygotsky, 1978) that begins before children enter school (Baghban, 1984; Bissex, 1980; Clay, 1975; Luria, 1998; Martens, 1996; Schickedanz, 1990). Luria (1998) elaborates, "Even before reaching school age . . . the child has already developed a number of primitive techniques of his own" (p. 15). As their child's first teacher, parents' perceptions of literacy influence their child's developing understanding. Before starting school, children develop perceptions consistent with those of their parents (Heath, 1983), highlighting the importance of significant adults in young children's lives.

In this study, I sought to examine how parents understand young children's varying forms of symbolic representation. I analyzed both reported and observed parent-child interactions to identify ways parents understand symbolic representation. Parents' understandings of young children's symbolic representation through interactions and their everyday routines, provides insight into children's home literacy environments. Parents' contributions to their child's understanding of symbolic representation are reflected in the different constructs children bring to the formal classroom (Clay, 1993). The customs, norms, and expectations of children's sociocultural environments and children's communities impact their understandings of symbolic representation. Even toddlers must conform to "the norms established for their social boundaries" (Heath, 1983, p. 343). While both parents and teachers find importance in writing, they place value on different aspects of children's meaning making (Brashears, 2008), underscoring the importance of researching parents' understandings.

Theoretical Framework

Young children's interactions within their sociocultural environments are the result of ecological and cultural aspects of their families and community within which they grow, develop, and learn, influencing their orientation and understanding of symbolic representation towards learning (Harkness et al., 2010; Heath, 1983; Rogoff, 1990; Teale, 1986; Vygotsky, 1978). To gain further insight concerning the sociocultural understandings of parents, I employed Super and Harkness' (1986) developmental niche theory when analyzing data collected throughout the duration of the study. The developmental niche is a convergence of perspectives from social anthropology and psychology comprised of three interactive systems (see Figure 1): (1) the physical and social settings of a child's life, including daily routines carried out in particular places with particular people; (2) customs and practices of care that influence the kinds of competencies that children acquire; and (3) the psychology of the caretakers, particularly parental ethnotheories that shape the choices parents make in relation to the settings children inhabit and the competencies they acquire, as well as influencing parent-child interactions directly (Harkness et al., 2011). Through these two subsystems, physical and social settings and customs and cultures this dissertation considers parental ethnotheories as it relates to literacy, examining *how* parents interact with children in relation to symbolic representation.
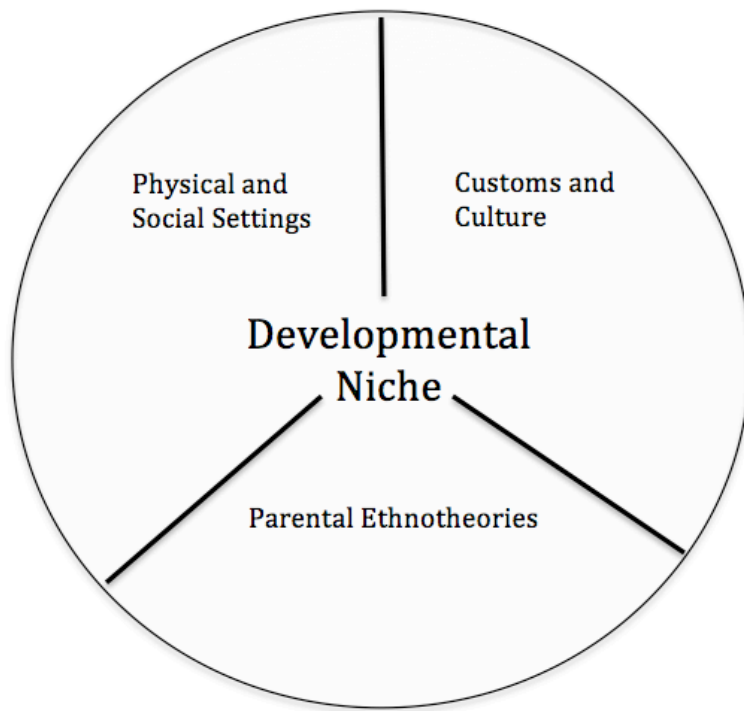
Figure 2. The Developmental Niche

In this study, parental ethnotheories was approached through a sociocultural perspective. The interaction among families and children during cognitive literacy tasks is an essential part of children's learning and socialization within their cultural community and larger society (Vygotsky, 1978). Families' perceptions and beliefs impact their children through the direct or indirect interactions with their children. Parental involvement in early childhood literacy is crucial for children's cognitive and social growth. Parental ethnotheories have a "powerful influence on the…development of children" (Super & Harkness, 1996, p. 2). Knowing the ways that families perceive reading and writing within a sociocultural context may help researchers better understand the literacy norms of children. Examining parental ethnotheories allowed exploration into

the interactions parents and children have during instances of symbolic representation in a particular sociocultural context.

Research Question

Children's use of symbolic representation and perception of self as a writer relies heavily on parents' understandings and values of various forms of writing (Bradford & Wyse, 2010). The goal of this qualitative study was to contribute to the existing research focusing on parents' understandings of children's drawing and emergent writing by extending the line of inquiry to include additional forms of children's meaning making. Data included two focus group discussions with parents at their child's preschool, one-on-one semi-structured home interviews, and a home observation of a parent-child joint activity. Through these methods, I sought to answer:

- How do parents' interactions with their children in relation to symbolic representation inform us of their understandings of various forms of young children's symbolic representation?

Significance

Expanding the theoretical and practical circles of young children's writing by reaching out to families and including the voices of parents will provide further insight about the values they place on symbolic representation, which is a critical piece teachers need in order to gain insight into children's literacy understandings (Langer, 1991). Through a parental ethnotheories framework, teachers and researchers alike can deepen their understanding of literacy within students' social and cultural environments. With a better understanding of these sociocultural influences, educators can strive to cultivate

strong home-school connections to further support children's development and learning.

There is a gap in literature examining the relationship between adults' perception of symbolic representation and how their perspective influences young children's experiences with different forms of representation. Currently, research exists directly connected to adults' understanding and interaction with young children through traditional, adult-like forms of writing (i.e., alphabetic letter formation, name writing, spelling and drawing). However, as Dyson (1986) points out, "to understand the beginnings of literacy, researchers cannot be interested only in text" (p. 407), further substantiating the need for continued research in more unconventional forms of creations. While there are studies that focus explicitly on parents' understandings and interactions with drawing (Ring, 2006; Ring, 2009) or situated in a larger literacy context (Baghban, 1984; Bissex, 1980; Martens, 1996; Schickedanz, 1990), little exists on other forms of symbolic representation. Other forms, such as abstractions (i.e., scribbles), painting, and typing are important to acknowledge because children's spontaneous texts are created through multiple forms of media (Dyson, 1986, p. 380).

To further understand children's meaning making we must employ a more expansive view of symbolic representation. Because young children are expressing themselves in other ways besides just writing and drawing, research is needed to gain insight into parents' understandings of children's symbolic representation through various media forms. Therefore, I employed a more expansive view of symbolic representation that included less conventional aspects of children's meaning making. While literacy research "tends to look outward at children's lives from inside the world of

official school practices" (Dyson, 2005, p. 5), I sought an emic perspective to learn from

parents by looking inward into children's lives and studying parents' understandings

about symbolic representation.

Chapter Two

In this chapter, I review existing research on parents' understanding of different forms of young children's symbolic representation. The literature review contextualizes the current study, provides a summary and draws connections to existing research, and helps identify gaps and areas for future exploration. I begin this chapter by providing a brief introduction and explanation of search criteria, followed by a review of relevant literature. Initially, the studies in this review were organized in a way which explored (a) parents' understandings of symbolic representation, (b) symbolic representation and the home environment, and (c) parent-child writing interactions and activities. After completing data analysis I revisited the literature review and restructured it to better align with results, reported in Chapter 4. First, I report on studies examining the sociocultural influences contributing to young children's understanding of symbolic representation, next, I discuss parent impact on young children's sociocultural worlds, and conclude with studies about parent and child interactions with symbolic representation. These studies report on activities where parent-child dyads jointly construct drawing and writing. Finally, this chapter concludes with a discussion of limitations of existing research, providing further support for the current study.

Search Criteria

Studies exist that focus on home literacy environments of children in preschool and kindergarten (Baghban, 1984; Bissex, 1980; Burgess, 2011; Korat & Haglili, 2007; Martens, 1996; Schickedanz, 1990), but often provide minimal examination of young children's emergent writing. A gap exists concerning focused research on parents' understanding of their young children's symbolic representation. The studies detailed in this chapter are limited to drawing and more conventional aspects of writing. A more expansive, encompassing view of young children's symbolic representation will provide further insight regarding the home *writing* environment. To provide support for this study, I searched a broad range of literature that examined various forms of symbolic representation, including writing, drawing, painting, and typing on the computer.

The search criteria for this literature review included books, book chapters, peer-reviewed journals, and dissertations related to parents, families, young children, writing, drawing, graphic representation, mothers, literacy, perceptions, beliefs, and understanding about symbolic representation. When conducting my search, I utilized major education and literature databases, including PsychInfo, ProQuest, JSTOR, and Education Research Complete. I used over 100 terms when conducting my literature search. I found the most relevant literature with the following 10 search terms: (a) beliefs, (b) drawing, (c) families, (d) parents, (e) perceptions, (f) preschool, (g) understandings, (h) values, (i) writing, and (j) young children. ProQuest provides electronic versions of journal articles, out of print texts, and other copyrighted materials that are unavailable from other databases. Education Research Complete is a comprehensive database

examining a broad array of studies centrally focused on education research, and include abstracts, journals, and full texts of numerous books.

Due to the relatively few resources available, year of publication was not a restricting parameter. The initial search spanned back 10 years. When this search yielded limited results, I expanded the review to include studies conducted as far back as 1980. This search provided several articles, mostly from the early to mid-1990s. Also, when writing, I used information from previous research proposals, literature reviews I have conducted through my coursework, and through a writing research group at George Mason University. The research explored during the writing research group discussions served as a resource for finding several case studies, written by parents, about young children's writing development. Also, I conducted a search identifying literature that cited studies already in my literature review. After completing data analysis I conducted another search, which yielded several additional studies, which were published in the last two years.

While a substantial amount of time was dedicated to searching for relevant studies and research in online journal databases, the majority of relevant research was found within the reference sections of journals, publications, and books. Initially, the search was limited to studies focusing on preschool-aged children; however, due to the limited amount of studies, I expanded my literature search to include kindergarten-aged students. Examining applicable studies of kindergarten-aged children further supported the importance of the study. This review does not contain an exhaustive report of kindergarten studies because this was not the targeted population in the current study.

Kindergarten research was only included if it either provided research that is otherwise missing from the literature, and only included studies where children were in preschool and entered kindergarten during data collection. Exploring children's transition from preschool to formalized school also allowed for examination of cultural shifts in children's writing and drawing. I utilized these studies to emphasize the important influence of different sociocultural environments, the people in those environments, and perceptions and concepts that children bring from home into the classroom (Soundy, 2012).

Next, this chapter explores relevant research in relation to the current study. The studies are organized in three major sections: (1) sociocultural influences, (2) parent impact, and (3) parent-child interactions. The first section, sociocultural influences, presents relevant research examining the important role of children's parents and their home environment. After presenting research about these sociocultural influences, the next section examines studies focusing on how parents' ethnotheories impact their children's social and cultural worlds. The final section of this chapter explores parent-child interactions during joint activities.

Sociocultural Influences

In this section, I report on research examining young children's social and cultural environments, specifically focusing on parents and the home environment. These studies report on the important role of parents and the home environment in children's sociocultural worlds. This section explores studies examining families within the same social or cultural community as well as the sociocultural environments of individual

families. These studies speak to the influential nature of parents and primary caregivers, as they are an integral part of young children's everyday lives (Dunsmuir & Blatchford, 2004; Einarsdottir, Dockett, & Perry, 2009) supporting the need of the current study.

Sociocultural environments of families within a community. This section explores existing research studies, which juxtapose parents' understandings of young children's symbolic representation within the context of a larger community. This includes studies that explore families within a same social or cultural community. These studies highlight the influential nature of children's environments on their understandings of emergent writing.

Heath (1983) conducted an ethnographic study from 1969-1978 investigating the influence of different environments on children's language development. This study speaks to the important influence families and communities play in developing children's understandings and perceptions of written language. This seminal study drew from three communities: a white working class community (Roadville), a black working class community (Trackton), and a middle class community (Townspeople). Heath addressed numerous components of literacy (i.e., oral language, reading, and writing) in her study. Because my study focuses on writing I focus on her findings in this area.

Heath's research examining the home environment in the three aforementioned communities revealed different values and understandings of drawing and writing. Heath highlights the communities' differences through both individual descriptions of parents' interactions with writing as well as through the communities as a whole. The Townspeople reported writing for a variety of reasons: (a) to remember information, (b)

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to communicate with other people in the community, (c) to reinforce oral messages, (d) to record numbers and data, and (e) to inform members of the community (e.g., the church bulletin). In comparison, families from Roadville viewed written language as conversation written down. They wrote when oral communication was not a viable option (e.g., writing letters and thank you cards), as a memory aid, and to keep track of finances. Providing another perspective, Trackton families valued written language as a means to manipulate and negotiate the written word. They promoted writing opportunities for both playful and serious expression with their children. Heath's (1983) study demonstrates the varying ethnotheories of symbolic representation in these three different communities, relating to their everyday lives. Parents from all three communities viewed writing and its purposes in different and unique ways as demonstrated in their everyday routines. Regardless of which community young children came from, they brought their families' perspectives about written language into the classroom, reinforcing the impact of the home environment and the need for continued exploration of parental ethnotheories of young children's symbolic representation.

When Trackton and Roadville children entered formal schooling, there was a notable disconnect between writing purposes at home and at school. Children's transition from home to formal schooling provides insight into how parents' direct and indirect interactions with symbolic representation impact children's understandings. The school environment focused on formal written language, such as writing paragraphs and focusing on prompts. This focus varied greatly from more practical writing practices in the two communities. These two communities used a more real-world approach to written

language. Their understandings of the importance of writing focused on their jobs and everyday routines in their environment. The Townspeople children had a different experience. They found their purposes for writing at home aligned with the school's expectations. In all three instances, parents passed on their writing ethnotheories to their children.

Further illustrating the important role that parents play, Bradford and Wyse (2010) studied young children's perceptions of themselves as writers and parents' perceptions of their children as writers. Researchers conducted semi-structured interviews with participating parents to determine whether or not they considered their preschool-aged children writers. This study provides insight into parents' ethnotheories of young children's symbolic representation by examining what parents considered 'writing'. At the beginning of the study, children's age ranged from three years, four months, to four years, one month. Researchers used a puppet to elicit children's perceptions about themselves as writers. All but one child identified himself or herself as a writer, either by offering to demonstrate what writing looked like or saying directly that they were indeed writers. Parents' responses from semi-structured interviews indicate a link with their children's perceptions of themselves as writers. When parents viewed their child as a writer, so did the child. If the parent did not view their child as a writer, neither did the child. Parents who perceived their children as writers focused on the meaning associated with their child's work samples. The one parent in the study who did not view his child as a writer, supported this claim by explaining the child was not producing conventional, alphabetic forms of written language. The results of this study underscore parents'

important role in young children's understandings of themselves as creators of symbolic representation.

Further exploring parents' understandings of symbolic representation, Levin and Bus (2003) examined 48 Israeli and 48 Dutch mothers' sensitivity to different forms of symbolic representation. In the first part of the two-part study, researchers asked children from ages two years, four months to five years, five months to draw and write the following: (a) grass, (b) sun, (c) mother, (d) baby, (e) flower, (f) three flowers, (g) bird, and (h) father. After children completed the drawing and writing tasks, mothers were given participating children's work samples of the eight aforementioned objects and asked to determine if the samples were drawings or alphabetic writing. There were a total of 192 products for each object. Mothers identified which products they thought were drawing and which were writing. When samples were viewed in isolation, mothers were able to accurately identify children's drawings as early as age three, while they were not able to accurately identify children's writings until age four. When given a drawing and writing product from the same child, mothers were able to accurately identify the child's intended form of symbolic representation. Furthermore, mothers were more likely to successfully identify the meaning conveyed in a child's drawing than in their writing.

Teale (1992) also explored parents' understandings of symbolic representation. Employing naturalistic inquiry, Teale examined families with low-incomes and the roles family members played in young children's literacy development. Children in the study ranged in age from two years, six months to three years, six months. There were 12 boys and 12 girls. Eight children were Anglo, eight were Black, and eight were Mexican

American. Field notes were the primary form of data collection and supplemented with audio recordings, transcripts, and interviews. Researchers assumed the role of participant observer, concentrating on the child and their interactions with literacy. There were between five and 47 home visits and the duration over which they occurred ranged from three to 18 months. All observed home environments had some writing materials available for children's use.

Children from this community experienced "literacy as primarily a social process during their preschool years" (Teale, 1992, p. 193). Writing occurred as social activities involving family members in the home. Teale (1992) categorized six different activities in which writing instances occurred during the observations: (a) daily living routine, (b) entertainment, (c) school-related activities, (d) interpersonal communication, (e) participation in information networks, and (f) literacy for the sake of teaching or learning literacy. Frequency of literacy events was calculated after coding. Daily living routines involving literacy events, occurring as part of everyday rites and rituals, comprised 25.5% of all literacy instances. Entertainment activities comprised 23.8% of all observed reading and writing instances and included examples where the purpose was for either a direct or indirect form of enjoyment. School-related activities involved reading and writing directly related to school and comprised 11.2% of all literacy events. Interpersonal communication events identified literacy as a communicative tool. Writing letters were frequently identified as interpersonal communication, which constituted 3.5% of all observed writing and reading instances. Writing events occurring for the sole purpose of acquiring further knowledge were identified as information networks and

comprised 9.1% of all events. During 19.8% of all instances, writing was conducted in isolation for the specific task of writing. The central focus of these activities was to learn how to write. The aforementioned categories demonstrate the social nature of writing in the home.

The majority of observed writing instances occurred as part of social activities in the home environment, not in isolation. Most observed instances of writing that took place were for purposes that helped fulfill essential organizational functions within the participants' individual lives, within their family or community, or the larger society. Children were not always observed actively engaged in writing, sometimes experiencing more indirect interactions.

Further examining the parents' impact on young children's development of symbolic representation, Ring (2006) utilized a sociocultural lens to study daily routines of mothers in the home. Specifically, Ring examined seven mothers' organization of home space, their preschool child's time, and the child's access to materials. Ring conducted in-home observations, semi-structured interviews, and collected scrapbooks of children's work. Results demonstrated that people, setting, and materials in an environment influence children's drawing. Mothers' ethnotheories about writing either limited or supported opportunities for their children to "combine materials and make connections in their thinking" (p. 81).

This study is part of a larger three-year longitudinal study conducted from 2001-2004 on young children's drawing in home, preschool, and school environments. Children ranged from three- to five-years of age. Discussed results report on data

collected in the first year of data collection because of its applicability to the current study. Scrapbooks of children's meaning making, semi-structured interviews, and observations were collected and analyzed. Scrapbooks contained children's various forms of meaning making (e.g., drawing and writing). A disposable camera and scrapbook were provided for mothers to collect and store their child's work. The semi-structured interview focused on home routines, including the organization of space, child's access to materials, and preference for materials. After the semi-structured interviews, Children were observed in the home environment for approximately 40 minutes. Once children's work was collected, the researcher conducted a second interview, which utilized children's samples to initiate discussion. Researchers interacted with both mother and child during observations. Field notes were written immediately after the observations.

Children's drawings were a focal point of the data analysis, and therefore analyzed first. Next, transcribed narratives that supplemented the drawings were analyzed, followed by transcribed parent interviews. The final categories that emerged from data analysis were: (a) observed/recorded child behaviors, (b) distinctive features of the environment, (c) values and beliefs of significant others, (d) adult styles of interaction, (e) adult views of children's behaviors, and (f) children's views of their behaviors.

Results of this study point to the substantial role mothers' established routines and rituals play in developing their child's focus on meaning making. Mothers in the study who allowed freedom of expression and had a low level of parental control allowed their child to draw and express him or herself independently and confidently. Mothers in the

study with higher levels of control, with explicit guidelines for their child resulted in children who tended to act helpless and reject drawing as a form of meaning making. These results emphasize the influential role mothers' ethnotheories played in how young children interacted with symbolic representation.

Further exploring mothers' interactions with their children, researchers noted discernable differences between how mothers interacted with their daughters and sons. Mothers' ethnotheories about supporting their children's drawings differed in relation to boys and girls. They reported their daughters were able to play independently and did not require much structure or guidance. Young girls' socio-dramatic play was often modeled after their mothers' daily activities. Young girls' drawings were reinforced by their socio dramatic play, and they advanced through various stages in the writing continuum. Dissimilarly, young boys in the study did not have as much interest in drawing. Drawing went unused or took a backseat to more tangible, three-dimensional materials (i.e., blocks or Legos). When boys drew, they often "explored internal narratives as dynamic extensions of their whole-body movement as their drawing tool 'hit' the page" (p.79). Mothers emphasized writing alphabetic letters with their sons instead of drawing and reinforced more conventional, adult-like writing with their sons (e.g., alphabetic letter formation and directionality). When boys drew, it was with the encouragement of fathers or significant males who modeled the activity if they were to develop drawing as a "symbol system" (p. 81).

Results from this study demonstrated that the people, setting, and materials in an environment influence children's drawing. Mothers interacted differently with their

daughters than sons, resulting in different foci and interests regarding symbolic representation based on gender.

Sociocultural environments of individual families. The previous section explored the sociocultural influence of families within a particular community or from similar demographics backgrounds. This section explores studies of individual families to provide a more focused exploration of the sociocultural environments of the home. The majority of these case studies involve researchers conducting longitudinal case studies, which document their children's emergent writing development over several years.

Schickedanz (1990), a professor of education and researcher in early literacy, took a focused approach when examining the influential role of home and school environments in a longitudinal case study of her child's writing development. Data were collected over five years, from the time her son, Adam, was two to age seven. This study reinforces the importance of understanding parental ethnotheories embedded in the sociocultural environment of the home. When Adam wrote at home, his products were often social in nature and modeled what he saw. He created grocery, Christmas, and birthday lists. He also copied words he saw in his everyday environment (e.g., signs, books, toys, and labels). Adam observed his mother writing, which was part of her job and everyday routines that served a real world focus. During instances when he observed his mother writing, he often requested materials, sat near her, and modeled what he observed. At home, Adam developed his drawing and writing at his own pace during times of his own choosing and frequently co-constructed with his parents. Adam was encouraged, but not forced to draw and write at home, often actively choosing when and

how he drew or wrote. Adam's mother gave him opportunities to experiment with symbolic representation, usually providing assistance only when it was requested. When she did provide assistance, she scaffolded it based on her understanding of his needs at that particular time in his writing development, often supporting Adam through positive feedback and encouragement.

Adam's writing at school often differed from his writing at home. In school, there were structured times when he was expected to write. This differed from writing at home, when he wrote at his leisure. At home, his mother provided scaffolded support when Adam asked for help, but also provided opportunities for him to independently explore and experiment with symbolic representation. When his teacher did not provide similar support, Adam became frustrated. While he focused on accuracy, he interpreted his teacher's encouragement to 'do his best' as an indicator that the teacher did not care if it was right. This differed from the support that the author provided Adam at home. Schickedanz acknowledged Adam's concern for accuracy; however, she also encouraged him to experiment independently. Adam's concerns were recognized and addressed at home, possibly furthering his frustration when he was not provided similar support at school. Receiving conflicting messages about writing, Adam became discouraged. This study aligns with Heath's (1983) work as both studies examine important adults in children's social and cultural worlds, and how their ethnotheories contribute to children's understanding of writing as a means of symbolic representation.

Examining the important influence of children's social and cultural environments, Baghban's (1984) study provides a rich, detailed description of her young daughter,

Giti's, literacy acquisition from birth to age three. Baghban, a college professor with research foci in early childhood and elementary literacy, reported on her daughter's reading, writing, and language development; however, only information concerning symbolic representation is addressed because of its relevance to the current study.

Baghban documented her daughters' evolving understanding and interactions with writing and drawing. At approximately 17 months, Giti produced scribble-like products. At 24 months, Giti added labels to her written products. By the time Giti was 26 months, she was able to successfully identify adults' writing and drawing; however, she was unable to discern between the two in her own work. Despite using the terms interchangeably, she knew that she either wanted letters or pictures when she was actively constructing symbolic representation. By 28 months, Giti incorporated her own experiences in her writing, modeling a waitress taking a food order and creating lists. At 30 months, adults in Giti's life were able to identify Giti's drawings versus her writing. While she continued to orally confuse the terms draw and write, there was a distinction between her written work and her drawings. By 32 months, Giti was able to successfully identify her drawing products from her written ones.

Giti's drawing and writing development was social in nature. She often became engaged in writing and drawing when she observed her parents or grandparents writing or drawing. Giti observed significant adults in her life writing for practical purposes (e.g., grocery lists, thank you notes, and telephone messages). Often, she independently sought writing materials to model or mimic the writing and drawing she observed. Her parents

and grandparents interacted with Giti, engaging conversations to learn about what she wrote or drew.

Giti's experiences demonstrate the importance of significant adults' interactions with young children. When Giti observed and interacted with her parents and grandparents, she often mimicked, modeled, or copied the writing and drawing to which she was exposed. Giti's responses to these child-parent, and grandparent, interactions highlight the important role adults' ethnotheories play in young children's developing understanding of symbolic representation.

Like Schickedanz (1990) and Baghban (1984), Bissex (1980), conducted a longitudinal case study of her child's emergent literacy development. A professor of English with research interests in early literacy development, she provides a detailed account about social and cultural experiences that impacted her son, Paul's, writing. At home, Paul was allowed to develop his understandings of writing by experimenting with various forms of written language. Paul explored various concepts, ideas, and strategies as his understandings about written language evolved. While he experimented with writing independently, he would also engage his mother in conversations when he struggled with various ideas and concepts about writing (e.g., spacing, spelling, and sound-letter correspondence). She supported him; however also encouraged him to think critically to make his own judgments as he investigated his understandings of written language. She contrasts his experiences with writing to those he encounters at school. The differing experiences of both environments reflect different ethnotheories about

writing and his attempts to negotiate them speak to the important role young children's social and cultural settings play in their literacy development.

Similar to Baghban (1984) and Bissex (1980), Martens (1996) conducted a case study of her daughter, Sarah's, literacy development from ages two through five. In the study, she describes the print-rich home environment where Sarah observed her family interacting with writing and other forms of symbolic representation as a part of their everyday lives and explained that "Sarah's experiences observing others write for authentic purposes . . . nurtured her understanding that symbols in space or on a surface represent meaning" (p. 24). Throughout the book, Baghban's emphasis on the importance of social and cultural factors in Sarah's writing development, demonstrates her ethnotheories about her daughter's writing development.

While similar to other case studies exploring young children's literacy development (Baghban, 1984; Bissex, 1980; Schickedanz, 1990), Martens, a college professor with research interests in early childhood literacy and children's literature, extended her research beyond previous case studies by reflecting on her own evolving ethnotheories of young children's writing development. Through Sarah's experiences, Martens identified her own preconceptions about emergent literacy development and situated them within the context of her daughter's reading and writing when she explained, "I was in awe of the sophistication of her thinking and the knowledge and insight she gained and used, all without being directly taught" (p. 6). In one example, she shared an instance where Sarah brought her a piece of paper with 'wavy lines' and asked her to read it. Martens reflected on this experience commenting, "I wouldn't have thought

a young child capable of knowing anything of real importance about writing or the writing process. Again, Sarah changed my beliefs" (p. 24). After comparing her own understandings with that of her daughter, Martens concludes that adults' understanding differs from how young children view themselves as readers and writers. The negotiation of the differing perspectives further illuminates ways parents understand various forms of meaning making.

Martens' study goes one step further as it explores both the influence of the home environment on Sarah's understandings, but also Sarah's impact on her own ethnotheories. Repositioning research to focus on how parents learn about symbolic representation through social interactions with their child provides insight into the influential nature of child on parents' understanding. Martens' account of her evolving understanding of young children's symbolic representation through her daughter further supports the need for continued exploration into how parents understand various forms of symbolic representation.

Ring (2009) provided an in-depth exploration of how one mother created a home environment for her son that promoted playful drawing. This case study was part of a larger, three-year longitudinal study (Ring, 2003) and supports the findings of Ring (2006), reinforcing the important influence parental ethnotheories play in young children's construction of symbolic representation. Utilizing a qualitative case study design, Ring examined how the social and cultural home environment contributed to the child's evolving understanding of drawing from age three to six. Ring conducted semi-structured parent interviews, home observations, and collected drawing samples the child,

Luke created at home, in preschool, and in kindergarten. Data from the school environment is not discussed, as it is not pertinent to the current study; instead, discussion is focused on data collected from Luke's home and preschool.

Identification of categories and themes were based on the participant's samples produced in the home environment and observations of the mother. Home observations revealed the supportive nature of Luke's mother, who provided him with the materials, space, and support, to explore symbolic representation at his leisure. Luke created products based on discussions with his mother and drawings his mother created and shared with him. She modeled playfulness by incorporating movement as they addressed previous narratives together. Luke's mother drew their movement and actions, providing a model for Luke, which was reflected in his own work. Luke took these experiences with his mother and incorporated them into his own work, also producing active drawings, which represented his own physical movement and sounds taking place around him, often talking aloud as he created. She influenced the construction of Luke's drawing by incorporating it as part of everyday routines and rituals of Luke's play. During these daily activities, Luke's mother allowed him to independently draw with little guidance or instruction. The feedback she gave was positive and encouraging.

In summary, this section explored how the social and cultural communities influence parents' ethnotheories. This section also examined the sociocultural environment of the home, which contains many influential factors that contribute to children's development of symbolic representation. These studies focused specifically how the young children's home experiences influence their emergent writing.

Parent Impact

In the previous section, I discussed literature that examined children's social and cultural environments, adults' ethnotheories about young children's writing, and the role these factors play in young children's understanding of symbolic representation. The aforementioned studies speak to the integral part of parents in young children's everyday social and cultural worlds. The studies addressed in this section further illuminate the important role of parents in young children's understandings by exploring *how* they influence children's understanding of symbolic representation and overall literacy development.

Dunsmuir and Blatchford (2004) employed a mixed methods approach when examining home factors influencing children's writing. Specifically, they studied the home environment and its impact on preschool children's writing development, connections between writing development and child characteristics, similarities and differences between home and school variables, and the influences they had on writing development. While the study reported on school factors contributing to children's writing, only results of the home environment are included because of the applicability to the current study.

A total of sixty children, 30 boys, and 30 girls participated in the study. They were from four different urban schools and ranged from four- to seven-years-old. The mean age at the beginning of the study was five years, four months. The nature of the study was to examine children's writing skills prior to entering school and after entering school at age seven. This longitudinal work is important because it provides insight into

home environmental factors that continue to contribute to children's writing development over time and once they enter the classroom. While this study focuses on children older than children in other studies within this chapter, it was included because research began prior to children beginning formal schooling.

Dunsmuir and Blatchford (2004) conducted semi-structured, in-home interviews with parents prior to children beginning formal school. Parents kept a weeklong account about the type and frequency of writing instances in the home. To determine children's writing ability during their first semester of formal schooling, they completed a series of skills assessments. The assessments measured language, knowledge about literacy, and writing and related skills. The language measures included: (a) The British Picture Vocabulary Scale (BPVS), (b) Wechsler Preschool and Primary Scale of Intelligence-Revised (WPPSI-R) vocabulary subtest, and (c) British Ability Scales (BAS) Verbal Fluency Subtest. Assessments of knowledge about literacy included Clay's (1979) Concepts About Print and Letter Identification Test, and the British Ability Scales (BAS) Copying Subtest.

Analysis revealed maternal education and family size contribute 14.5 % of the variation in writing attainment at school entry. Home writing experience variables accounted for 49% of the variance in writing attainment when children began school. Home writing activities and parental assessment were statistically significant. At age seven, children were again given the same measures to identify writing ability. The two variables that retained their significance were family size and home writing experiences. In conclusion, this study provides support concerning the influential nature of the home

writing environment. Not only do home factors contribute to children's writing ability upon entry into formal schooling, but they also impact children's writing after exposure and interaction with writing in the classroom.

Further exploring this line of inquiry, Skibbe, Bindman, Hindman, Aram, and Morrison (2013) utilized a sociocultural perspective when they conducted a one-year study exploring how parental writing support impacted children's language and literacy skills. There were a total of 77 parent-child dyads observed twice during consecutive summers. In both instances, the dyads were videotaped writing an invitation together in their homes. Children ranged in age from 3.61 years to 5.81 years at the beginning of the study. Seventy-one parents provided information about their child's ethnicity. Fifty-eight children were identified as white, four as Asian, three as African American, three as Middle Eastern, and three as biracial. Parents' amount of education ranged from 10-18 years, with the majority (78%) having earned a bachelor's degree or higher. Median home income was $118,000 annually, ranging from $16,000-$400,000.

In the springs prior to each home observation, children were administered the Woodcock-Johnson III to assess their decoding, phonological awareness, and vocabulary skills. Observations were analyzed by five trained research assistants and focused on the following areas of parental support: graphophonemic (letter-sound) support, print support, and demand for precision. Inter-rater agreement was satisfactory across all areas. Results of data analysis revealed that parents provided increasing levels of graphophonemic support during the second writing activity, however print support and demand for precision stayed relatively the same. To explore potential relationships

between parental support and children's language and literacy skills, researchers employed a multivariate regression analysis. Results revealed graphophonemic supports predicted children's decoding and phonological awareness skills. Print support predicted decoding skills but was not a predictor of phonological awareness skills. Demand for precision did not predict any literacy skills. None of the supports predicted vocabulary skills.

Bindman, Skibbe, Hindman, Aram, and Morrison (2014) provide further insight into how parents impact young children's writing development when they explored parent-child interactions during a videotaped joint writing activity. This study sought to learn about the "nature and variability of writing supports parents provided" (p. 618). There were 135 parent-child dyads comprised of 72 girls and 63 boys who had either completed their first or second year of preschool. At the beginning of the study, children ranged from 3.58-5.31 years of age. Of the 135 participants, 118 provided information regarding their child's ethnicity. Ninety parents identified their child as European American, 11 as multicultural, six as African American, and six as Asian American. All children were from the same public school district in the suburbs of Midwest state. There were a total of 126 mothers, and nine fathers participating in the study. While participating fathers' level of education was not reported, mothers' levels of education ranged from 10-18 years of formal education.

Children were administered the Woodcock-Johnson III to assess their decoding, phonological awareness, and vocabulary skills prior to the observation. During the home visit, children's fine motor skills were assessed using the Early Scoring Inventory-

Revised (ESI-R). In addition to the assessments and the videotaped parent-child writing activity, parents completed a 50-item, 5-point Likert scale regarding parenting beliefs in practices. Observations focused on three areas of parental support: graphophonemic (letter-sound) support, print support, and demand for precision. Four trained undergraduate research assistants analyzed observations and their reliability was checked throughout data analysis. Results indicate that parents' graphophonemic support was positively connected to children's decoding and fine motor skills, while print support and demand for precision were not linked to any of the measured child outcomes.

In summary, this section emphasized influential factors of children's home environment. The social and cultural experiences highlight the important contribution of the home environment on young children's writing development. Family size, home writing activities, parental assessment, and writing materials contribute to young children's understandings of and interactions with symbolic representation. Home writing experiences and family size continue to contribute longitudinally, after children entered formal schooling (Bindman et al., 2013; Dunsmuir & Blatchford, 2004; Skibbe et al., 2013). Now that the influential nature of parents on young children's early writing and literacy has been established, the next section will focus on the events the next section provides a detailed report of parent-child interactions with writing.

Parent and Child Interactions

The previous section explored literature examining the sociocultural environments and the impact that parents have on children's understanding of symbolic representation. Considering the influential nature of parents in children's sociocultural environment, this

section explores parent-child interactions during the co-construction of joint writing activities. The shared interactions also provide insight into parents' ethnotheories regarding young children's symbolic representation. Exploring research about shared interactions provides additional insight into factors influencing young children's symbolic representation. These studies focus specifically on parental support during shared interactions and activities with symbolic representation (Aram, 2010; Buell et al., 2011; Burns & Casbergue, 1992; Burns et al., 2012; Casbergue et al., 2013; DeBaryshe, Buell, & Binder, 2006; Robins & Treiman, 2009; Snow, 1983).

Aram (2010) studied mothers' and fathers' interactions with their children to examine the characteristics of parental guidance used when working with their child on a videotaped writing task. Fifty-one Hebrew-speaking children ranging in age from 4-years to 6-years-of-age participated in the study. There were 25 boys and 26 girls in the study, and they all came from two-parent middle SES Israeli families. This study examined (a) how both mothers and fathers guided their child's writing in Hebrew, (b) the relationship of mothers' and fathers' guided writing strategies to their child's literacy, and (c) if both parents had a similar way in which they guided their child's writing. While this study was conducted in Hebrew, it is included in the literature review because it explored parent and child interactions during a writing task.

For the activity, which took place in the home, children were given three sets of two cards. The cards were pairs of words that focused on gender, rhyme, and referent size. The gender cards were comprised of a male and female version of the word. Rhyme cards had a pair of rhyming words on each card that only differed in the first phoneme

and first letter. The referent-sized cards were comprised of two words on each card, a longer word and a shorter word. The longer word denoted a smaller object and the shorter word denoted a larger object (e.g., vase and saltshaker).

Analyses resulted in the emergence of four writing-specific measures that examined parents' teaching characteristics: (a) graphophonemic guidance, (b) printing guidance, (c) demand for precision, and (d) reference to orthography. Graphophonemic guidance explored parents' support of their child when segmenting words. Each letter was scored separately because parents often used different strategies when identifying different letters of the same word. A nine-point scale emerged that ranged from (0) where a parent provides no assistance in segmenting the word to (8) where the parent encourages their child to segment the entire word and then provides support for the child throughout the process. Inter-rater reliability was satisfactory.

Researchers assessed young children's literacy through activities related to word writing, letter naming, initial phoneme retrieval, and final phoneme retrieval. During the word-writing task, children were asked to write three pairs of words. The three pairs of words that children were asked to write independently were similar to the words they were asked to write with their parents. They were categorized into male-female words, rhyming words, and longer-sounding word denoting smaller referent words. Written words were scored on a 15-point scale adapted from Levin and Bus (2003). The scale ranged from pseudo-letters to formal writing. During the letter-naming task, children were asked to identify 12 random words from the Hebrew alphabet. The initial phoneme retrieval task required students to identify the initial phoneme in 15 monosyllabic words.

The final phoneme retrieval task required students to identify the final phoneme for the 15 monosyllabic words. In graphophonemic guidance, printing guidance, and demand for precision, mothers and fathers had both had significant correlations to children's literacy; however, descriptive statistics illustrated that mothers tended to provide more guidance to their children than fathers. T-tests indicated a higher correlation to mothers' guidance and children's literacy. While mothers' guidance had more impact, it is important to note that mother and father approached their child's writing tasks in similar ways, indicating families shared similar ethnotheories about young children's symbolic representation.

Further exploring parent-child interactions, Snow (1983) conducted a study exploring interactions she shared with her son, Nathaniel. Snow, a professor with research interests in linguistics and education, collected data over the course of one and a half years. Nathaniel was 18 months at the beginning of data collection and 36 months old at its conclusion. Snow identified three characteristics of the parent-child interactions present in the observations: (a) semantic contingency, (b) scaffolding, and (c) accountability procedures. In this study, semantic contingency explored four focal points: (1) expansions, which expand upon the topic or concept being discussed; (2) semantic extensions, which introduce a new topic or information; (3) clarifying questions, where parents probe further to understand what the child said; and (4) answering child questions. Snow specifically shares transcript excerpts where mother and son jointly interact with a playschool desk. The desk contained alphabetic letters and a magnetic board, which were central to their discussions. During the conversations, Nathaniel's mother focused on conventional aspects of alphabetic print; specifically letter naming,

letter sound correspondence, name writing, and spelling. Her emphasis on these areas indicates her ethnotheories about symbolic representation were more conventional in nature. While there were instances when she asked for elaboration, once she understood Nathaniel's intended word or message, she adapted her feedback to further his knowledge base.

Also exploring shared writing interactions, Burns and Casbergue (1992) observed how 26 primary caregivers and children worked together in a joint letter writing activity. Participating children ranged from age three to age five and recruited from a university preschool center. Twenty-two of the primary caregivers were mothers and four were fathers and were from middle and high socioeconomic status. Of the 26 children in the study, 10 were three-years-old, 10 were four-years-old, and six were five-years-old. Twelve were girls and 14 were boys.

Primary color markers and a legal-size writing tablet were placed in a preschool classroom for the activity. Prior to beginning the activity, a researcher asked participants to work together for 10 minutes to compose a letter. There were no researchers in the room during the activity; however, a video recorder was placed in the room to record the activity. Researchers used video recordings of the interaction, transcripts from the interaction, and the writing samples produced during the activity for coding. The coding was then used to develop the following themes: (a) parental control, (b) child communicative input, (c) literacy information exchanged, and (d) children's written input. Parental control was grouped into three categories: (a) directive instruction, (b) open-ended questions, and (c) commentary and phatic. Directive instruction was

considered the highest level of parental control and the lowest level of parental control was coded as commentary and phatic. Interrater reliability was satisfactory.

When examining child communicative input, three categories emerged: (a) response, when the child answered the primary caregiver's questions; (b) initiation, where children initiated both verbal and nonverbal forms of communication related to the writing activity; and (c) phatic/commentary, where the child provides a verbal or nonverbal signal that he/she understands the primary caregiver.

Five categories emerged from the 'literacy information exchanged' code: (a) off task/preparation, (b) mechanical conventions, (c) spelling, (d) content/letters, and (e) conceptual meaning of writing. Off task/preparation examined interactions that took place prior to the writing activity as well as interruptions of the activity. Mechanical conventions focused on the mechanics or conventions of writing. Spelling focused on letter sound correspondence. Content/letters focused on the meaning and message.

Results of this study indicate that when parents provide higher levels of control during the writing activity, products were more conventional in nature, with an emphasis on accurate spelling. Lower levels of parental control resulted in a more emergent like written product, with conversations focusing on meaning or content of the letter.

Focusing on families from low socioeconomic backgrounds, Burns et al. (2012) also studied parent-child interactions during a joint letter writing activity. This study contrasts with Burns and Casbergue (1992), which focused on families of middle and high socioeconomic backgrounds. There were 59 parent-child dyads in the study. Participants came from a public preschool located in an urban area of the southeastern

part of the United States. Children ranged in age from three- to five-years-old, with the majority being four-years-old. Low socioeconomic status was the primary consideration for inclusion into the study and researchers employed a strengths-based perspective of families when investigating discussions and interactions of parent and child during the letter writing activity.

For the observation, parents were taken to a classroom at the child's preschool that had writing supplies and materials sitting on a table. Parents were instructed to write a letter with their child to whomever they wished. After parents received instructions, the researcher left the room and the child was brought in. The interaction was videotaped. Parents and children had as long as 10 minutes to write the letter; however, the average time for dyads to construct a letter was eight minutes.

Recorded videos of the joint writing activity were the primary source of data analysis. Researchers created a coding system, which they employed to address their research questions: (a) the content of the pairs' discussions in terms of the writing or literacy focus; (b) how the pair interacted, thus the verbal and nonverbal exchanges between them; and (c) what the writing samples indicate of the child's input, in terms of both ideas and written work.

Three subcategories were used for analysis: (a) initiations and responses, (b) child verbal input, and (c) nonverbal exchanges. When averaging dyads, parents initiated discussions around the activity 66.7 times and primarily employed directive instruction. Children initiated discussion an average of 37.03 times during the writing activity. Both parties responded when the other initiated discussion. Nonverbal interactions between

parent-child dyad occurred simultaneously with oral discussions. The majority of nonverbal instances involved parents observing their child, the child observing the parents, and children writing. Parents spent less time writing and scaffolding correct letter formation.

Researchers also examined literacy talk during the joint writing activity. This analysis included the top 25% of dyads that had the longest duration of the following categories: (a) describing content letter they wrote to someone, (b) conventions of writing (including letter formation), (c) spelling, and (d) conceptual meaning of writing. After analyzing the dyads, parents' directives were consistently distributed throughout literacy categories. Parent responses were also consistent across categories, with the exclusion of dialogue related to writing content. Limited-choice questions, generated by parents, targeted writing conventions while open-ended questions targeted the meaning of the writing activity. Children's initiations of conversation were consistent across all literacy categories; however, their initiations concentrated on the content of their writing. The amount of verbal input from parents was consistently distributed across all literacy categories; however, children's verbal input was focused on the letter's content, conventions of writing, and conceptual meaning of writing (what it means to be a writer).

In addition to discussions and interactions, researchers analyzed finished letters for conventions, meaning, writing, and the child's contribution to the letter. The Emergent Writing (EW) scales were used to analyze children's written products. The EW has six categories: (1) drawing/scribbling only; (2) letters and non-phonemic letter strings; (3) words, which included any recognizable words; (4) word groups, which

consisted of any two word phrases; (5) sentences; and (6) more than one sentence, which also included punctuation. Categories three through six also included any form of phonemic spelling. Drawing and scribbling only comprised 14% of all written samples. Some letters or non-phonemic spelling made up 15%; 24% of student samples had some words. Word groups comprised 8%; 20% had at least one sentence and 17% had more than one sentence.

The parent-child discussions during the observed joint letter writing activity centered on dialogue concerning the content of the letter, the conventions or mechanics of writing, and the conceptual meaning of writing. The rich, dynamic parent-child discussions demonstrate, "strengths that families bring to the child's knowledge of writing before formal schooling" (p. 202). Burns et al. (2012) report that "families from low-income backgrounds support their child's writing in ways that produce emergent as well as more adult-assisted, conventional writing through shared writing activities" (p. 202).

Further exploring levels of parental control, Casbergue et al. (2013) analyzed 20 transcripts from parent child interactions during a videotaped joint writing activity. The purpose of this study was to examine to what extent do "parents versus children determine the content of a jointly written friendly letter, and how parents support their children's message creation" (p. 9). Twenty purposefully selected transcripts were identified based on high levels of literacy exchange between parents and child. Participants were from preschool classrooms from a large urban setting that served families of low socioeconomic status. The activity was analyzed to determine who, parent

or child, contributed to the writing activity and focused on how parents supported their child during the construction of a letter. Researchers sought to understand "to what extent do parents versus children determine the content of a jointly written friendly letter? How do parents support their children's message making?" (p. 9).

In two of the 20 cases examined, parents controlled the writing activity. These interactions focused on conventional aspects of writing, telling their child how to spell words and assisting with capitalization. There were four children who led the writing activity. In child led activities, the work samples centered on drawings, and discussions centered on the meaning and purpose of their drawings. There was less emphasis on conventional writing during child-controlled letter construction; however, the child remained focused on the recipient. Parents often wrote down their child's description of his or her picture in the child led activities. While instances of parent led and child led interactions were observed, the majority of dyads involved parent and child jointly controlling the letter writing activity. Parents provided varying degrees of support, scaffolding their based on the needs of their child.

This study provides insight into parents' ethnotheories about writing through the varying concepts they emphasized during a joint activity. Parent-controlled activities resulted in a more conventional focus. Child-controlled activities produced a more emergent form of writing, often including drawings and pictures. In the majority of observed instances, parent and child jointly controlled the letter writing activity. Parents scaffolded their supports to accommodate their child's needs.

Buell et al. (2011) also analyzed parents' support during a joint letter writing activity; however, during this study, researchers focused on dual language learners (DLL) and their families. Using a strength-based perspective, they observed eight dyads, consisting of one preschool child and his or her parent. The participants came from preschools serving children in poverty in a metropolitan area in the southern United States. Eight preschool-aged children, six girls and two boys, participated in the study and were from families living in poverty.

Parents were first brought to a familiar classroom at their child's preschool. Next, parents were given instructions about the activity they were to complete with their child, that is, to write a letter to whomever the child wished. Parents, children, or both together could write the letter. In the room, various writing materials were provided at table and a video recorder was set up to record the activity. Once parents received instructions, the child was brought into the room, the researcher left, and dyads were given 10 minutes to compose the letter.

Employing qualitative content analysis and grounded theory building, transcripts from the letter writing activity and the products produced during the activity were analyzed. Two coders reviewed the transcripts and reached agreement. Four categories emerged from this analysis: (a) recipient choice; (b) message clarification/focus; (c) child's thoughts or feelings about the recipient; and (d) thoughts, knowledge or feelings the recipient might have upon reading the letter. Recipient choice focused on how the dyad determined to whom they would write the letter. Message clarification examined ways parents encouraged their child during letter writing. Parents provided support and

encouragement to their child, often asking children questions pertaining to their message and reminding the child of the recipient. Child's thoughts or feelings about the recipient examined conversations where parents asked the child to think about the recipient, how the recipient may feel, and how he or she may feel upon receiving the letter. Children sometimes volunteered this information without prompting; however, parents usually provided support to help their child focus on this theme. The final theme that emerged centered on thoughts or feelings that recipients may have when they read the letter. This theme explored data that indicated that one or both members of the dyad considered how the reaction of the recipient would react when they received the letter.

Seven of the eight cases in this study included parent discussion related to letter content or the recipient of the letter. The most frequently observed theme was recipient choice. Interactions identified as recipient choice involved instances where dyads discussed and decided to whom they would write the letter. Parent-child discussions addressing the recipient's feelings about the letter were observed with the least amount of frequency. Analysis indicated that parents provided scaffolded support to their children during co-construction of a letter. The supports allowed children to examine and view the letter in a more complex manner. Parents' modeling and scaffolding during the writing activity demonstrate their ethnotheories of young children's symbolic representation.

DeBaryshe et al. (2006) observed instances where children independently constructed a letter and then jointly constructed one with their mothers. The purpose was to examine the contributions of mothers' scaffolding during a joint writing activity. This study is similar to Burns and Casbergue (1992); however, in addition to co constructing a

letter with their parents, children first constructed a letter independently. Twenty

children, aged five to six, and their mothers participated in the study. There were 10 boys

and 10 girls in the study during spring, the second half of the school year. Twenty-five

percent of mothers had a high school education, 30% had a college degree, and 45% had

a graduate degree. Seventeen children were attending kindergarten. Those that were not

attending kindergarten were in a Head Start preschool or homeschooled. The

participating children were older than those in the previous studies; however, it was

included because the study examined parent child interactions in the home, which were

also a component of the current study.

All data were collected in the families' homes. For the first part of the study,

mothers were in a separate room than their child. Each child was given the Test of Early

Reading Ability-2 (TERA-2) and the Clay (1979) Concepts of Print task. The TERA-2

examines reading skills. Internal consistency was satisfactory. The Clay print test was

shortened for this study. Four subtasks were used: (a) letter identification, (b) copying a

sentence, (c) sentence dictation, and (d) a five-minute word writing task. After children

completed both tests, they were asked to write a letter. Each child was provided with

blank paper and thick and thin markers to write their letter. This activity was recorded on

videotape, while the researcher left the room. Once the child completed the task, he or

she was asked to read the letter back to the researcher. Next, the mother was brought into

the room and asked to write a letter with their child. This letter construction activity was

also videotaped.

Letters were analyzed using a modified version of Sulzby's (1989) emergent writing scale. This scale was used to identify and rate conventionality of both letter-writing tasks. There were 18 levels in the modified version: (1) drawing, (2) scribble-wavy, (3) scribble-letter-like, (4) letter-like units, (5) letters-random, (6) letters-patterns, (7) letter-name elements, (8) copies environmental print, (9) name only, (10) labeled illustration, (11) syllabic invented spelling with picture, (12) syllabic invented spelling, (13) intermediate invented spelling with picture, (14) intermediate invented spelling, (15) full invented spelling with picture, (16) full invented spelling, (17) conventional spelling with picture, and (18) conventional spelling. In the above categories, drawing was identified as the sole product of a child's activity, while pictures were considered products in addition to invented spelling. Letters were scored on the number of words produced. Each word written scored one point, regardless of whether the word was written conventionally or in an emergent form. Children received word number scores for both the independent letter and the parent-child written letter. For further analysis, each letter was analyzed for mechanics. Letters were scored on (a) left-to-right and top-to-bottom directionality, (b) a salutation, (c) a closing, (d) punctuation use, and (e) word spacing. Both the independently and jointly constructed letters from each child were scored on these components and given one point for each of these. When analyzing the videotaped interactions, speech was identified as either code-focused or message-focused. Inter-rater reliability was satisfactory.

Emergent writing levels, total words in the letter, and mechanical conventions were examined in both the independent and joint letter-writing activities. In all cases,

there was a significant increase in the conventionality of children's writing during the joint letter-writing activity. The positive association with conventionality during the joint writing activity supports the hypotheses that parents contribute to the conventionality of children's writing.

For further analysis, children were separated into three groups based on test results of the TERA-2, Clay (1979) Concepts of Print task, and their independently constructed letter. There were six children identified in Level 1, eight children in Level 2, and six children in Level 3. Children in Level 1 were able to name some alphabetic letters and could write their names. Children in Level 2 could write some words independently and were able to identify some initial sounds of words during the Clay print task. Children in Level 3 read with some degree of fluency, and were able to write conventionally using invented spelling.

Researchers then used these three groups to explore the dyadic relationship during the parent-child letter-writing task. When children were identified as Level 1, mothers centralized conversations around drawing, spending most of their time drawing or coloring with their child. While children in Level 2 worked with their parents on creating the message, the child constructed the majority of letters. Mothers spelled words for children at this level, giving the child time to write each letter before providing him or her with another one. They did not focus on legibility; however, they modeled writing unfamiliar letters, cued children to space their words apart, and indicated when to begin writing on the next line. Mothers emphasized punctuation, but simply told their child to insert a comma, period, or question mark instead of providing prompts, explanations, or

cues. Children in Level 3 had more conventional spelling than Level 1 and Level 2 children. They had the longest messages, with drawings playing a supplementary role to alphabetic letters. Mothers of children grouped in this level did not spell each word for their child; instead, they only provided directions when their child asked for help or was visibly struggling with a word or sound. Mothers also emphasized punctuation; however their supports differed from those provided in Level 2, because they explained the purpose and rationale for why punctuation was needed. Mothers encouraged children to work unaided and independently and focused on the reason and coherence of the letter.

Participating mothers were aware of the individual needs of their child and scaffolded support accordingly. Children produced more conventional messages when working jointly with their mothers, with more emphasis on spelling, longer messages, punctuation, and greetings. Supports during the joint letter-writing task are indicative of parents' ethnotheories, as mothers in the study focused on conventional aspects young children's symbolic representation.

Further investigating the contributions of parents, Robins and Treiman (2009) examined how parents connected young children's writing and drawing. This study examined utterances during a joint parent-child discussion about writing and drawing. Transcripts from the CHILDES project (MacWhinney, 2000) were used for the purposes of analyzing parent-child utterances in relation to writing, spelling, and drawing. Six-hundred seven children between the ages of one year, six months to five years participated in the study. Children were from either the United States or the United Kingdom. Most participants were from families with middle- to upper-middle-class

backgrounds, with one-fifth from working class families. The four analyses focusing on talk around writing and drawing examined (1) if and how parents differentiate talk about writing and drawing, (2) the verbs used when discussing writing and drawing, (3) direct objects of verbs associated with writing and spelling in comparison to drawing, and (4) parental feedback about writing and drawing. While this study reported on six different analyses, the first two are excluded from this discussion because it only relates to spoken language. The final four analyses are focused on for the purpose of examining how parents discuss writing differently than drawing.

Parents' utterances using the words *draw*, *write*, and *spell* were identified in instances of writing and drawing. The words *write* and *spell* were grouped separately from *draw*. Four categories were developed for purposes of coding utterances containing either the words *write*, *spell*, or *draw* with and without a determiner. A determiner is a word that comes before a noun or noun phrase and helps to identify if the noun in question is general (e.g., a, any, or other) or specific (e.g., the, those, and your). Four codes emerged: (a) utterances of *write* or *spell* with a determiner, (b) utterances of *write* or *spell* without a determiner, (c) utterances of the word *draw* with a determiner, and (d) utterances of *draw* without a determiner. A second coder categorized a portion of the utterances and reliability was satisfactory. Parents appropriately used determiners 99% of the time, while children appropriately used determiners 44% of the time. This low percentage may be due to the low number of appropriate utterances of children between the ages of two and three (27%). It should be noted that parents of children between the ages of two and three distinguished between write and draw during discussions; however,

children made limited distinctions between the two, often using them interchangeably. This supports Levin and Bus' (2003) study, which concluded that young children often do not differentiate between the two terms. Across all age groups studied, children's error rate was higher when using the words write and spell in comparison to the word draw.

In another layer of exploration, children were grouped into the same three groups as in the prior analyses. Utterances that included some forms of the words *name*, *letter*, *word*, *sentence*, *picture*, and *draw* were coded; however, they were only coded if they referred to active construction of written language. Analysis revealed that children had trouble correctly using verbs, even when parents provided examples and used verbs relating to drawing in a more vague, open-ended manner than writing.

Similarly, Robins and Treiman (2009) examined whether parents distinguished between direct objects when using the words *draw*, *write*, and *spell* and if children distinguished between the same words in their talk. While parents correctly used the words *write* and *spell* in their speech, there were instances where parents incorrectly used *draw*. Children across all age ranges incorrectly used *draw*, *write*, and *spell* in their utterances. They were more likely to incorrectly use the term *draw* than the terms *write* and *spell*. Results indicated parents and children were imprecise in their use of the word *draw* and more direct and specific when using the words *write* and *spell*. Inter-rater reliability was satisfactory. Researchers also focused on feedback parents gave to their children in relation to writing and drawing. For this analysis, children were grouped in six-month increments from 18 months to five years. Utterances were grouped into *write* and *spell* or *draw* and examined parents' acceptance or rejection of the child's writing or

drawing ability. Utterances indicated that parents encouraged their children's construction of writing and drawing; however, they provided limited feedback in relation to their child's capacity to construct written language.

This study reveals that participating parents from middle-class backgrounds used oral language to facilitate their children's understanding of written language from an early age. Parents' language around writing and drawing was usually supportive and encouraging. They rarely criticize their child's writing; instead, providing them with positive feedback. These results indicate that parent's understood their role as supportive and encouraging in nature. While not stated explicitly, parents' ethnotheories were demonstrated in the observed interactions with their child. Children during the earliest stages of writing will attempt to recreate or model writing they've seen in their everyday environments. Parents provide a model with which to learn from and imitate during initial writing attempts. In conclusion, this study supports the importance of parents' involvement in children's writing.

In reviewing this section, these studies inform researchers about the important impact of parents' interactions with their young child during joint writing activities. How parents interacted with their child during the observed activity provide insight into their ethnotheories of young children's symbolic representation. These studies speak to the value of parent interactions with their child by examining the direct and indirect results of joint activities and interaction with multiple forms of symbolic representation. These studies highlight the influential role parents have in developing their child's understandings of symbolic representation; however, they primarily focus on writing and

drawing. It is important to note that while these studies focus on parents' understandings of more conventional aspects of written language (Aram, 2010; Dunsmuir & Blatchford, 2004; Heath, 1983; Levin & Bus, 2003; Schickedanz, 1990; Skibbe et al., 2013), other types of symbolic representation (e.g., painting or typing on a computer) are not addressed. The limited research on other forms of symbolic representation speaks to the need for the current study, providing a more complete picture of parents' understandings of symbolic representation.

Conclusion

This comprehensive literature review sought to identify research relevant to the current study. The review first explored studies examining the social and cultural influences of the home. Results from these studies reinforce social and cultural aspects of the home environment where writing occurs, providing insight into parents' ethnotheories, or understandings of young children's symbolic representation (Heath, 1983; Ring, 2006; Ring, 2009). Then I discussed research that identified *how* parents' ethnotheories in children's social and cultural worlds impact their understanding and development of symbolic representation (Bindman et al., 2014; Dunsmuir & Blatchford, 2004; Skibbe et al., 2013; Teale, 1992). Finally, I reported on parent-child dyads of shared interactions during joint activities (Buell et al., 2011; Burns et al., 2012; Casbergue et al., 2013; Ring, 2006; Ring, 2009).

Findings from these studies highlight the influential role parents play in developing their child's understanding of symbolic representation. Parent-controlled activities resulted in an emphasis on alphabetic letter formation, spelling, punctuation,

and directionality. In contrast, shared or child-controlled activities resulted in more emergent like writing (Buell et al., 2011; Burns et al., 2012; Casbergue et al., 2013).

The reported studies emphasize parents' ethnotheories regarding conventional writing and drawing, the home environment, and interactions with their child during writing activities. The majority of reported studies focused on parents' understandings of alphabetic writing; however, there is some mention of drawing. Existing studies lack research regarding parents' understandings of other forms of symbolic representation, (e.g., scribbles, painting, and typing on the computer) and reinforce the need for additional research that includes a more inclusive, expansive view of symbolic representation. The current study sought to gain further insight on parents' ethnotheories of young children's creations through a more encompassing view of symbolic representation. I present details concerning the methodology of the current study in Chapter 3.

Chapter Three

This qualitative study used multiple data collection methods to examine 12 parents' understandings of their young children's symbolic representation. Focus group discussions, in-depth interviews, and in home observations provided rich insight into parents' understandings of symbolic representation. Through these sources, this study aimed to answer the following question:

- How do parents' understand young children's symbolic representation?

Methodological Approach

Through an epistemological stance of subjectivism, I approached this study using a constructivist paradigm, focusing on "participants' views of the situation" (Creswell, 2003, p. 7). That is, I was concerned with how participants interpreted and made meaning of young children's symbolic representation. This study aligns with a constructivist paradigm, which acknowledges that reality is socially constructed and formed through "interaction with others and through historical and cultural norms that operate in individuals' lives" (Creswell, 2013, p. 25). Through this paradigm I sought to learn about participants' perspectives by means of observed and reported social interactions within cultural context of the home environment. Super and Harkness' development niche (1986) complemented the constructivist paradigm as it focuses on the influential nature of social and cultural experiences of families, specifically providing insight into

participants' conscious understanding of their individual lives through everyday life and social interactions (Schram, 2003). This study drew upon the following components of ethnography outlined by LeCompte and Schensul (1999b): (a) collecting data in a natural setting; (b) spending face-to-fact time with participants; (c) accurately reflecting participants' perceptions and perspectives; (d) utilizing inductive, interactive, and recursive strategies for both data collection and analysis; (e) employing multiple methods of data collection; and (f) using culture as the lens to interpret results. Data were collected through two focus group discussions, individual in-depth interviews, and parent-child interaction observations. Constant comparative analysis allowed for analysis of these data during data collection and throughout analysis (see Figure 2 for cascade of knowledge).
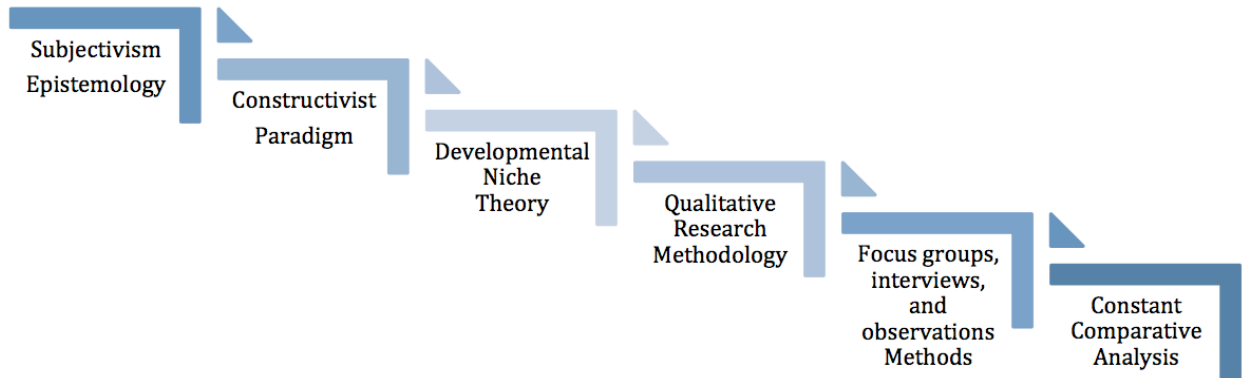
Figure 3. Cascade of knowledge. Adapted from *Qualitative Methods for Family Studies and Human Development,* by K. J. Daly, 2007, Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Participants

Participants (*n* = 12) had at least one child enrolled in one of the two four-year-old classrooms at R.S. Thackston Preschool (pseudonym) during data collection. There

were approximately 15 students enrolled in each classroom for four year olds, for a total of 30 families. Twelve families participated in the study.

Of the 12 participants, 10 were female and two were male. Eleven of the 12 participants were married, but two participants' spouses were employed outside the United States, therefore not living at home. Eight participants identified themselves as white, three identified as Asian American, and one participant identified herself as both Asian American and white. All participants in the study had earned a bachelor's degree or higher, with over half ($n = 8$) having earned a master's degree or higher. Eight participants spoke English only, while four participants were bilingual and grew up in another country. Nine participants had two or more children and a majority ($n = 8$) had at least one child who had previously attended kindergarten (see Appendix E).

Data Collection

Data were collected via focus group discussions, in-depth interviews, and observations of parent-child interactions. I used multiple data collection methods to help understand what Van Manen (1990) refers to as, "lived experiences" of participants (p. 9). Multiple methods provided various perspectives, and did not always yield the same results. This enriched the study as it pushed me to explore further and challenged me to reconceptualize data to make sense of the results. This section examines the field site, recruitment procedures, and a detailed description of each component of data collection.

Field site. The school is located on the campus of a public university in the mid-Atlantic region of the United States. R.S. Thackston preschool is an independent, play-based, early learning center, with an enrollment of approximately 120 children ranging

from two- to five-years-old. A total of 10 lead and assistant teachers were employed at R.S. Thackston during the time of data collection: specifically, there were two lead teachers and two assistant teachers who worked with four-year-old children. While the center functions independently from the university, seven of the 12 participants were connected with the nearby university, either as an employee or a spouse of an employee. Initial contact, introductions, and focus group discussions took place at R.S. Thackston Preschool, and interviews and observations took place in participants' homes.

Recruitment. I purposefully sought a play-based preschool because of the child-centered nature of the environment. A play-based preschool allows for children to explore their interests through centers and choice activities, providing opportunities to freely express themselves; whereas an academic-focused center would be more teacher centered and structured, with emphasis placed on "traditional" writing and activities such as handwriting, copying, and tracing letters and less on alternative forms of symbolic representation.

The sole requirement for entry into the study was that parents have a four-year-old child enrolled at R.S. Thackston Preschool. I had an established relationship with the director, staff, and faculty at R.S. Thackston because I had previously conducted a study at the school in which I interviewed parents and teachers regarding their understandings of representative communication. Prior to requesting parents' participation in this study, I spent several weeks at R.S. Thackston preschool during peak student drop off and pickup times. This allowed opportunities to informally meet, talk, and interact with parents. The goal of interacting with parents in this informal setting was to help familiarize potential

participants with me so they were more comfortable with the prospect of participating in a research study and the data collection process. During these early interactions at the preschool, teachers introduced me to parents, which provided an opportunity to explain the study, ask if they were interested in participating, and provide them with study documentation that included a letter explaining the study (see Appendix B) and an informed consent (see Appendix C).

While I initially planned for potential participants to review the documents away from the school, many agreed to participate immediately after speaking with me, and completed the forms while picking up or dropping off their children at preschool. Participants completed a demographics form prior to participating in the focus group discussions, which provided information about gender, identified ethnicity, level of education, and the total number of children (see Appendix E).

Collection methods. Each data collection method allowed me to learn about how parents understood interactions with their child and symbolic representation. Focus group discussions enable participants to interact with one another and allow data to be "socially constructed within the interaction of the group" lending itself to a constructivist perspective (Merriam, 2009, p. 93). Focus groups provided a comfortable setting where participants were able to share common experiences and understandings in a supportive environment. During in-depth interviews, I posed questions connected to participants' cultural realities and drawn from their personal experiences to provide insight into parents' understandings (Glesne, 2011). During observations I witnessed parent-child interactions within the social and cultural setting of the home environment.

I utilized multiple methods during data collection to provide depth that could not be achieved through a single form of data collection. I purposefully planned to conduct focus group interviews first, then follow with semi-structured interviews, and conclude with observations of the joint activity such that each aspect of data collection could inform the next (see Appendix F). I analyzed transcripts from focus group discussions and compared those to my a priori codes. The codes that emerged during initial analysis of focus group discussions informed how I approached in-depth interviews. These initial analyses of focus group discussions guided my revisions and additions to my codes and interview protocol. For example, one of my a priori codes was 'conventional aspects of print'. After coding focus group discussions, I revised it to 'precision and accuracy,' because it better represented the focus of parent discussions. Additionally, conducting focus group discussions prior to interviews sensitized me to areas of parents' perspectives on symbolic representation that I may not have considered otherwise. In particular, after analyzing focus group discussions, I reflected on parents' responses and made minor revisions to the interview protocol. For example, during focus group discussions, participants mentioned throwing away certain work samples. I incorporated this into my interview protocol when discussing the work sample that I requested parents have prepared for the discussion. While I initially planned on asking them why they selected that particular work sample, I then followed up by asking if this was a sample they would keep or throw away. Moreover, after conducting initial coding if the focus group data, revisions were made to the interview protocol. Specifically, the protocol made reference

to several of the poster samples displayed during focus group discussions (see Appendix G for semi-structured interview protocol).

Focus groups. Focus group interviews were conducted to better understand participants' familiarity and experiences (Morgan, 1997) with young children's symbolic representation. Focus groups naturally align with constructivism, because data collected in this method involves social interactions (Merriam, 2009). The interactions of participants in a focus group prompt, "great breadth and depth of information, and comparison of views within a group leads to greater insight" (Cary & Asbury, 2012, p. 18). Additionally the interactive, dynamic nature of focus groups provided direct evidence about comparable and contrasting opinions and experiences instead of making conclusions based off of transcripts from each interview (Morgan, 1997, p. 10). Focus group discussions provided insight into parental ethnotheories (Super & Harkness, 1994), as parents noted their familiarity and experiences with various forms of young children's symbolic representation (Morgan, 1997). Because participants all had four-year-old children enrolled at R.S. Thackston Preschool, they described their understandings of symbolic representation in a shared "social context" (Patton, 2002, p. 386), providing an opportunity to compare and contrast cultural understandings about symbolic representation within the preschool community.

I initially planned for two focus group discussions with six participants attending each discussion but due to participant availability and weather, there were four participants in the first focus group discussion and eight in the second discussion (see Appendix F for focus group protocol). To facilitate discussions, a concrete context to

which participants could refer was used vis-à-vis the introduction of six work samples created by a four-year-old. The samples were placed on one of two different posters. The various student samples included: (a) labeled drawing, (b) painting, (c)'scribbles' on paper, (d) a child's drawing without a label, (e) typed letters and numbers printed out from a computer, and (f) free-written letters. I selected these samples because they spanned a broad range of symbolic representation, including unconventional forms (i.e., drawing, painting, and scribbles) as well as more traditional forms of writing (i.e., typed letters and free written letters), with the hopes of gaining a deeper understanding of how parents understand different forms of symbolic representation.

The focus groups were co-facilitated with a fellow doctoral student. While I led both focus group discussions, the doctoral student provided support by clarifying or rephrasing questions and taking notes during discussions. At the conclusion of the first focus group discussion, I wrote down my initial thoughts and then transcribed the discussion within 24 hours and shortly thereafter, conducted line-by-line review of the transcripts. This review contributed to revisions, including clarifying prompts to improve participants' understanding of questions. For example, in the first focus group discussion, I referenced different samples and asked participants, "Can you describe a situation when you have seen children creating this type of symbolic representation?" When participants seemed to struggle with this question, I attempted to connect it to their own personal lives. I rephrased the question to ask, "Is this type of symbolic representation something that you would see your child create at home or school?" Rephrasing the question resulted in more in-depth responses. Based on the improved response, I revised this

question for the second focus group discussion. Coding focus group discussions allowed me to reflect on my a priori codes and make additional codes and helped inform my overall approach before beginning in-depth interviews.

In-depth interviews. Semi-structured interviews took place at participants' homes preceding the observation of the parent-children activity. I hoped to make participants more comfortable by conducting interviews in their home. Interviews also provided an opportunity for parents to identify and express norms and accepted practices within the cultural context of their homes. Participants' children were often in the same or adjoining room during interviews. In preparation for the interview, I requested parents have a work sample their child produced at home ready to discuss during the interview. The sample was used as a reference. While all participants had the requested sample available, many participants also had additional samples. The selected samples were photographed and uploaded to a secure computer. The samples helped supplement interviews and were reviewed along with other collected data for congruence or variation (Merriam, 2009; Yin, 2009).

While I used the interview protocol during semi-structured interviews, I did not limit the interview to those questions. Instead the protocol served as a general guide during the interview process. Through structured discovery (Roy, Tubbs, & Burton, 2004), I was able to use the same set of general questions from my interview protocol with the flexibility to explore new concepts and ideas that emerged throughout the interview process. This interview format supported, responding "to the situation at hand, to the emerging worldview of the respondent, and to new ideas on the topic" (Merriam,

2009, p. 90). Throughout the collection of in-depth interviews, I revised the interview protocol for clarity. Most notably was reiterating the definition of the term *symbolic representation*, and my goal to learn about how participants understood various forms of young children's visual meaning making, and that there was no "right" or "wrong" answer.

Interviews were recorded and pictures of children's work samples were taken on a password protected Apple iPad. Audio-recordings and digital photos of children's work samples were uploaded to a password protected laptop computer. After recordings and images were uploaded to the computer, they were deleted from the iPad. All images were also printed out and stored with accompanying transcripts and observations in a locked file cabinet in a locked office.

Field observations. Following interviews, I observed parent-child interactions during a joint activity. For the observation, I introduced a Melissa and Doug© Magnetic Chalk Dry Erase Board (see Appendix H for observation protocol) and observed the children and parents as they interacted with the toy. Melissa and Doug© Magnetic Chalk Dry Erase Board came with 36 magnetic alphabet letters, a blue dry erase marker, chalk in various colors, and an eraser. One side was a dry erase board, the other side was a magnetic chalkboard, and was approximately 15.6" x 11.7" in size. Observations focused on the interaction of parent participant with their child during the construction of symbolic representation with the Melissa and Doug© Magnetic Chalk Dry Erase Board. Observations provided insight into the implicit norms which participants are not always able to clearly identify and articulate as they immersed in their cultural environment.

While parents may not be able to explain these norms, they are present in their everyday interactions, underscoring the importance of observing the joint activity.

During the parent-child activity, I elected to record field notes by hand with the use of jottings (Lofland, Snow, Anderson, & Lofland, 2006) instead of a computer or tablet, as these can be considered obtrusive (Merriam, 2009). In addition to field notes, I took digital photos of produced samples created during the child-parent activity. During observations, I assumed the role of observer as participant (Merriam, 2009). While there were some instances where the child or parent spoke directly to me, those interactions were secondary to my role as an observer. Using components of Merriam's 2009 checklist on conducting field notes, I focused on the setting where the parent and child interacted, giving a detailed account of the physical environment, conversation between parent and child, and nonverbal cues that took place during the interaction. During observations, I kept jotted notes to record important aspects of the observation. Specifically, I made notation of the setting, materials, participants, body language, facial expressions, and potentially important participant statements (Lofland et al., 2006). Within 12 hours, I turned all descriptive field jottings into full descriptive field notes (Creswell, 2013; Merriam, 2009). Full field notes were written in explicit detail and focused on stating what was observed. To minimize influence of personal biases and prevent making inferences, I only stated concrete observations (Lofland et al., 2006; Merriam, 2009).

Data analysis. I stored transcripts from focus group discussions and interviews, full field notes, and children's work samples in a password protected personal laptop and also uploaded the digital files to Nvivo©. Hard copies were stored in a locked file cabinet located in a locked office. Digital and hard copies of data were stored in separate files according to participants' randomly assigned identification numbers and pseudonyms.

Before beginning data collection and analysis, I noted my a priori codes. My experiences interacting with preschool and kindergarten teachers during my time as an elementary school teacher, conducting focus group discussions and interviews of preschool and kindergarten teachers as a research assistant and doctoral student, and my interactions with family and friends with children in preschool contributed to codes I developed before data collection. Considering my interactions with preschool and kindergarten teachers, I noticed an emphasis on conventional aspects of alphabetic print. When working with preschool teachers, there was an additional emphasis on preparing students for kindergarten. Parents frequently emphasized similar areas. They occasionally mentioned drawings and other artwork, however primarily discussed their children's alphabetic letter formation, name writing, and spelling. During these discussions they would often mention the importance name writing and writing alphabetic letters for kindergarten. These experiences and interactions influenced how I approached the study with the following a priori codes: (a) conventional aspects of print, (b) unconventional aspects of symbolic representation, (c) kindergarten preparation, and (d) influence of the school environment on parents' understandings.

Focus group discussions, in-depth interviews about children's work samples, and observations were analyzed using constant comparative methods throughout the data collection process. Constant comparative analysis requires the researcher to "compare one segment of data with another to determine similarities and differences" (Merriam, 2009, p. 30). I collected and analyzed data concurrently to identify both shared and contrasting themes (Corbin & Strauss, 1990) across various data sources. For example, after conducting the second focus group discussion I compared it with the first focus group discussion to identify divergent and convergent concepts. Coding from the initial focus group discussion guided the analysis of the second, subsequent focus group interview. Ultimately, focus group coding sensitized me to how I conducted and analyzed in-depth interviews. This process required me to analyze new data, compare it to the existing data, and utilize insights and information gained from this process to guide the next iteration of data analysis (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

After transcribing the first focus group discussion, I began open coding. The focus group co-facilitator and I independently analyzed transcripts using a priori codes as well as codes that emerged related to the primary research questions as a guide. After we completed analysis, we met to negotiate emerging concepts and achieved inter-rater reliability (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). Next, the co-facilitator and I independently analyzed the second focus group discussion, using the emerging concepts from the first focus group as a guideline. Then we met again to discuss our analysis and engaged in conversations when we coded passages differently, and consensus was reached for any differing codes. Utilizing information from the line-by-line coding and the shared

discussions with my co-facilitator regarding the first two focus group interviews, we developed 11 tentative codes: (1) methods of expression, (2) parents' personal histories, (3) perception of self, (4) parents' understanding of symbolic representation, (5) child's understanding of symbolic representation, (6) themes, (7) gender juxtaposition, (8) precision and accuracy of symbolic representation, (9) social spaces, (10) physical spaces, and (11) artistic references.

Next, I conducted line-by-line coding of interviews and observations after each one was completed. After coding each interview and observation, I compared it to the tentative codes developed from the focus group interviews and incorporated it into the iteration of analysis. To help document my thought process, identify potential categories, and provide a reference for analysis procedures, I kept detailed code note memos (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). For example one of my initial codes, "Child's Understanding" was focused on the child's understanding and interest in symbolic representation. The definition evolved to specify that this code was not the child's knowledge, but the parents' interpretation of the child's understanding and interest. Eventually this code was absorbed as part of "Understanding Child's Creations" redirecting the focus to how parents engaged their children in conversations to learn about the child's intended message.

After conducting several interviews and observations, I became cognizant of some notable differences in the information emerging from focus group discussions, interviews, and observations. I decided to consult my co-facilitator. She coded three interviews and observations and we then met to discuss them in relation to the focus

group discussions. For example, in focus group discussions, participants discussed 'scribbles' when directed towards the two work samples containing loops and swirls; however, participants rarely brought up scribbles during interviews and observations. The co-facilitator then coded two of the interviews and observations and agreed that participants did not discuss scribbling as frequently. We discussed potential reasons why this concept was not emerging and agreed that the lack of notation regarding scribbles was equally important. Next we revisited the tentative codes identified from focus group discussions and developed them further to incorporate the interviews and observations. There were now a total of 13 codes: (1) children's understanding of symbolic representation, (2) themes, (3) gender juxtaposition, (4) precision and accuracy, (5) types of symbolic representation, (6) artistic references, (7) spelling, (8) materials, (9) storage and location, (10) parent/child interactions, (11) rationalizing and understanding, (12) personal connection, (13) and social environment. After developing these codes; the co-facilitator and I independently reviewed a third interview and observation, using the revised codes. Inter-rater reliability was satisfactory and I continued forward with data collection and analysis. In total, the co-facilitator coded two focus group discussions, three interviews, and three observations.

Throughout data analysis, these codes were revisited, revised, and applied to all collected data (see Appendix I for code book). After completing data collection and initial analysis, the next step was to create a chart for each participant based off of the latest iteration of codes. The chart identified the different forms of collected data that I used to identify codes that emerged and which sources data they appeared (see Table 1).

Table 1

Data Analysis Chart

Code	Focus Group	Observation	Sample 1	Additional Samples
Rationalizing/Making Meaning				
Personal Connections				
Peer Influence				
Home Environment				
Parent Interest				
Child Interest				
Child's Understanding				
Parents' Understanding				
Themes				
Gender				
Precision/Accuracy				
Types of Symbolic Representation				
Artistic Reference				
Anatomical Features				
Materials				
Alphabetic Principle				
Storage of Symbolic Representation				
Parent/Child Interactions				

After completing the chart for each participant, I reviewed the codes for their relevance to the study. For example, "materials" was an initial code that was removed during this round of coding because this was not relevant to the research question and only provided a numerical count of materials available in the home. I also combined codes that were similar, such as "Child's Interest" and "Child's Understanding". Since these two initial codes were interwoven and contained a lot of overlapping information, the two were combined into one code: "Child's Interest and Understanding". Definitions were also revised to help clarify meaning. For example, "Child's Interest and

Understanding", a combination of two codes, was redefined to incorporate both definitions, including parents' interpretation of how the child views and understands different forms of symbolic representation.

After revisiting the codes and definitions, I began axial coding. Corbin and Strauss (1990) define axial coding as, "the process of relating categories to their subcategories" (p. 123). I made connections between categories and subcategories, by finding evidence in the data. To make these connections, I reviewed each code across cases to further understand their dynamics and subcode relationships within each of these larger, more salient codes, based off of their applicability to the research questions, which focused on how parents understand different forms of young children's symbolic representation. For example, when I examined data coded as alphabetic principle, I noticed that the discussions infrequently focused on the child's understanding of the concept that words are made up of letters and letters represent sounds. Instead, the data indicated an emphasis on correctly forming letters and spelling words. Next, I compared it to other existing codes and found that it was similar to parents' attention to precision and accuracy. After reflection on the similarities of the two codes, I incorporated "Alphabetic Principle" into "Precision and Accuracy". I revised the definition to state: "Emphasis on the accuracy of children's symbolic representation (i.e., letter formation, directionality, and spelling)". During axial coding, five tentative categories emerged: (1) parent and child interactions, (2) child's interest and understanding, (3) parent interest, (4) personal connections, and (5) precision and accuracy. I continued to edit, revise,

remove, and collapse codes, while keeping detailed code memos and creating graphic representations to demonstrate my understanding (see Figure 4).
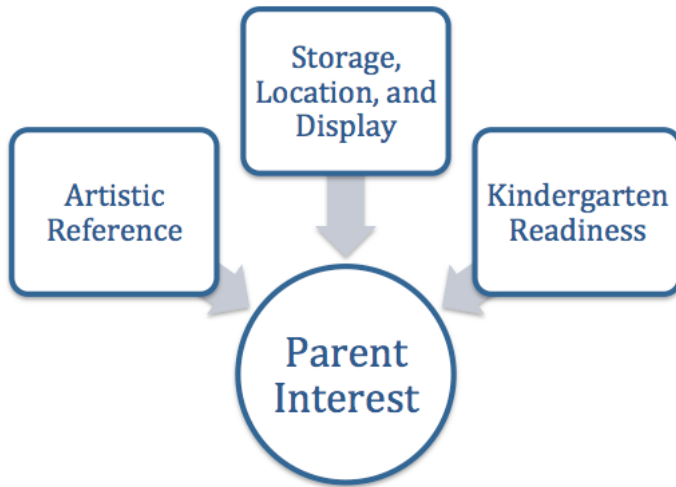
Figure 4. Visual graphic axial coding for parent interest

The final phase of coding, selective coding consisted of working to understand how these most salient codes fit together to tell the story of how parents understand symbolic representation or the "process by which all categories are unified around a 'core' category" (Corbin & Strauss, 1990, p. 14). Through an iterative process with mentors on this project, in which we reviewed the various types of data, considered the literature, and re-examined the data the five major codes that emerged during axial coding were organized into two core categories: (a) making meaning, and (b) structure of children's symbolic representation.
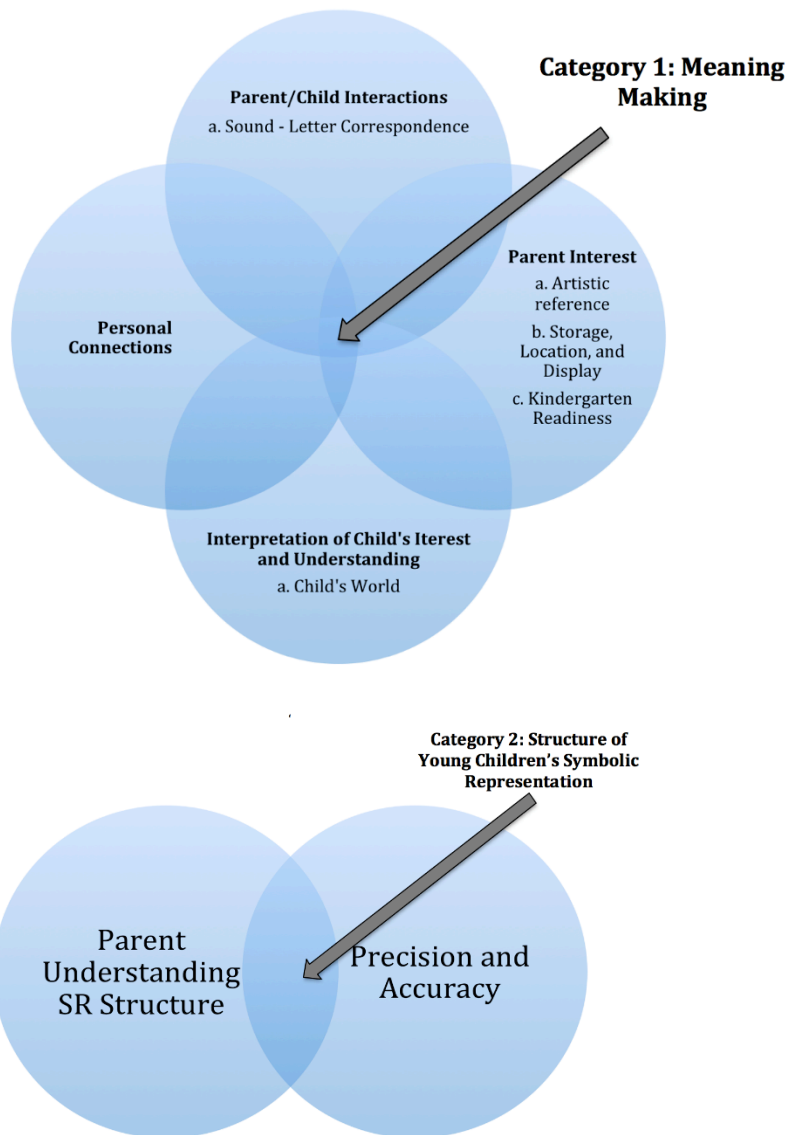
Figure 5. Visual graphic of categories

Based on this, "Parent-child Interactions" were subsumed as a code under my first category (see Figure 5). However, upon further analysis of the data, I was unable to tease this code out of the others. Consequently, I continued to reflect on my analysis and revisit my code memos for additional exploration and examination of my categories (Maxwell,

2013) as I attempted to identify any nuances I may have previously missed. I revisited the transcripts and the observations, comparing them to my codes. I reflected on the codes and categories I had developed, revised, added, and removed throughout data analysis. As I reviewed all data sources and my existing categories, there was a fundamental shift in how I viewed the data such that I recognized "Parent-child Interactions" seemed to "bleed over" into other categories, and was not necessarily an isolated component of my findings. Given that parent-child interactions appeared in all categories and codes, it followed that parent-child interactions were at the core of participants' understanding of young children's symbolic representation. Instead of focusing on parents' interactions with their children as an isolated category it was through these interactions that I could learn about how they understood symbolic representation. "Parent and Child Interactions with Symbolic Representation" emerged as the overarching theme that unified my data (Corbin & Strauss, 1990; Merriam, 2009).

Corbin and Strauss (1990) explain that categories created during axial coding may need revision during selective coding, to more clearly articulate their connection to the core category. After identifying parent and child interactions as the core category or theme, I reconceptualized the two categories that emerged during axial coding by reviewing my code note memos. From my code note memos, I revisited my data analysis in its entirety in relation to my core category, and as such I restructured my categories to reflect the integral nature of parent-child interactions within the data. From this work, three categories emerged (see Figure 6): (a) prompting children to create, (b) dialoguing with children, and (c) parent interest in young children's symbolic representation.

Data Quality

Krefting (1991) states that a researcher's job is "representing those multiple realities revealed by informants as adequately as possible" (p. 215). I attempted to accurately represent those multiple realities through triangulation, peer examination, and reflexivity. These three strategies were employed throughout the duration of this study to increase the level of trustworthiness.

Triangulation. I collected data from multiple sources, aiding in triangulation (Glesne, 2011; Maxwell, 2005). Conducting focus group discussions, in-depth interviews, and observations provided credibility to my findings, because analyzing across multiple data sources, "minimizes distortion from a single data source" (Krefting, 1991, p. 219). Analyzing multiple data sources and considering how they (in some instances) diverged, pushed me to dig deeper and look at participants' experiences from multiple angles, providing a more comprehensive picture about how parents understood young children's symbolic representation. Additionally, triangulation contributed to confirmability as it allowed me to corroborate evidence through various perspectives, reducing the possibility of misinterpretations (Creswell, 2012; Gibbs, 2007; Maxwell, 2013). Potential weaknesses in one form of data were offset by other collected data. Triangulation also ensured trustworthiness of the study because it improved the dependability or consistency of findings (Krefting, 1991).

Peer examination. To further ensure trustworthiness I enlisted the help of peers during data analysis. I worked with a co-facilitator during data collection and analyses, and two mentors (committee members) to discuss and analyze data. The co-facilitator

analyzed randomly selected interviews and observations during open coding and we negotiated emerging concepts and categories to achieve internal consistency (Corbin & Strauss, 1990).

Throughout data analysis, I met with my committee chair and methodologist to discuss progress and analysis procedures. We exchanged emails, held virtual conferences, and conducted face-to-face meetings. During these discussions, I reflected on the reliability of my developing codes and categories as well as identified next steps in my data analysis, further ensuring credibility.

Reflexivity. As a researcher, I must consider how my personal background and experiences impact my study from start to finish. My decision to research parents' understandings of young children's symbolic representation reflects my personal experiences as an elementary school teacher, a graduate student, and a graduate research assistant. My research interests evolved since I began teaching writing to fourth grade students. As a classroom teacher, I was committed to teaching my students how to write. At that time, I was concurrently pursuing a Master's degree in reading. During my first year in the program, I took a writing methods course. This course enriched my understanding and knowledge of teaching writing and allowed me to apply theory to practice. I made meaningful connections to writing instruction, which enabled me to more effectively teach students how to write.

The more I reflected on my writing instruction, the more I realized I was not meeting the needs of my students. I needed to create an authentic, engaging writing environment where students took ownership of their writing. As I made these

instructional changes, I witnessed a remarkable change in my students' writing. My students committed themselves to their writing. They came to class enthusiastic about writing and took pride in their work. I wanted to share my newfound passion for teaching writing with my colleagues and inform them about my students' enthusiasm for writing

My research interests have evolved since I began teaching writing to fourth grade students. As a classroom teacher, I was committed to teaching my students how to write. During this time, I was concurrently pursuing a Master's degree in reading. During my first year in the program, I took a writing methods course. This course enriched my understanding and knowledge of teaching writing and allowed me to apply theory to practice. This positive experience heavily influenced my appreciation of writing and my desire to continue learning about it, eventually leading me to pursue my doctoral degree.

Once I began working on my doctoral degree, I was hired as a graduate research assistant (GRA) for two professors in early childhood education. During the three years I worked as a GRA I conducted focus group discussions, transcribed, and helped analyze collected data about young children's writing instruction. These opportunities to collect and analyze data exposed me to various stages of young children's writing development in preschool and kindergarten, providing a different perspective on writing instruction than what I experienced as a classroom teacher. The experiences I had as a GRA influenced my research focus and proved helpful in developing the research design and the analysis of my data.

As a GRA, I studied many aspects of emergent writing, conducting interviews with preschool and kindergarten teachers, resulting in a heightened awareness of various

forms of symbolic representation. During focus group interviews, several participants referred to samples with no identifiable characteristics as "just scribbles" and explained that they would throw them away. My own experiences researching emergent writing gave me a different perspective, understanding that this was a developmental stage in children's emergent writing. This background experience results in me following up with further questions and probing to find out why they would discard these types of creations. My background as a research assistant and previous course work likely contributed to my line of inquiry examining parents' rationale for not keeping certain types of symbolic representation. Without these experiences, I believe that my research would have been more superficial, as I would not have the background knowledge to recognize the need for further exploration of parents' responses.

Towards the end of my doctoral coursework, I took a class on early childhood education and families. During this course, I realized the importance of understanding the social and cultural contexts of the home environment, where children's understandings and beliefs originate. This course emphasized the influential nature of the home environment and helped develop my research study to focus on parents.

My interest in writing research evolved throughout my experiences in the past eight years. I began with a focus on improving writing instruction in the classroom, which led to interest in perceptions of young children's symbolic representation, and examining parents' understandings of young children's symbolic representation. I believe that my line of inquiry into young children's symbolic representation will continue to evolve throughout the course of my research.

Before beginning the study, during data collection, and throughout analysis, I kept reflective notes throughout the research process. Prior to beginning this study, I identified my personal perspectives and biases in my researcher identity memo to lend insight into "how a particular researcher's value and expectations influence the conduct and conclusions of the study" (Maxwell, 2005, p. 108). I documented, self-monitored, and noted my analysis procedures (LeCompte & Priessle, 1993). Reflexivity kept me cognizant of my personal biases, including the various experiences as a classroom teacher, doctoral student, and GRA. Code note memos were a means to record data collection, analysis procedures, and development of codes and categories (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). I kept detailed memos throughout the study to help actively explore my understandings during data collection and analysis, keeping a detailed account of the processes I employed during each stage (Maxwell, 2013). The memos provided an opportunity for critical self-reflection and helped further understand the processes I employed to analyze (Finlay, 2002).

Summary

In this chapter, I explain the data collection methods and analysis procedures used for this study. My methodological approach was grounded in a focus on parental ethnotheories, which is one component of Super and Harkness' (1986) developmental niche theory. This theoretical framework complemented the qualitative, constructivist design as it allowed for exploration about why parents interact with their children and symbolic representation through focus group discussions, in-depth interviews, and observation of a parent-child joint activity. Additionally, I discussed the recruitment and

participant selection. I then detailed how I ensured data quality through triangulation,

peer examination, and reflexivity. Chapter 4 will explore the results that emerged

throughout the data collection methods and analysis procedures outlined in this chapter.

Chapter Four

This research study examined how parents understand young children's symbolic representation through their interactions with their children. In this chapter, I discuss parents' reported and observed interactions with their children during symbolic representation activities by exploring how parents: (1) encourage their children to create symbolic representation, (2) support children's search for meaning, and (3) parents' understandings of important components of symbolic representation. Results are organized according to these three major codes and their related subcodes (see Figure 6). The first two codes, "Encouraging Children to Create Symbolic Representation" and "Supporting Children's Search for Meaning," address parents' self-reports and observations of conversations or interactions with their children. The third code, "Parents' Understanding of Important Components of Symbolic Representation" is more reflective in nature as parents' comments go beyond observations and conversations to include information impacting their understanding from their broader social context (e.g., talking about writing in relation to kindergarten readiness based on their experiences with their older child). Codes and subcodes are not mutually exclusive; therefore multiple examples from the same parent may be discussed across multiple codes or subcodes.
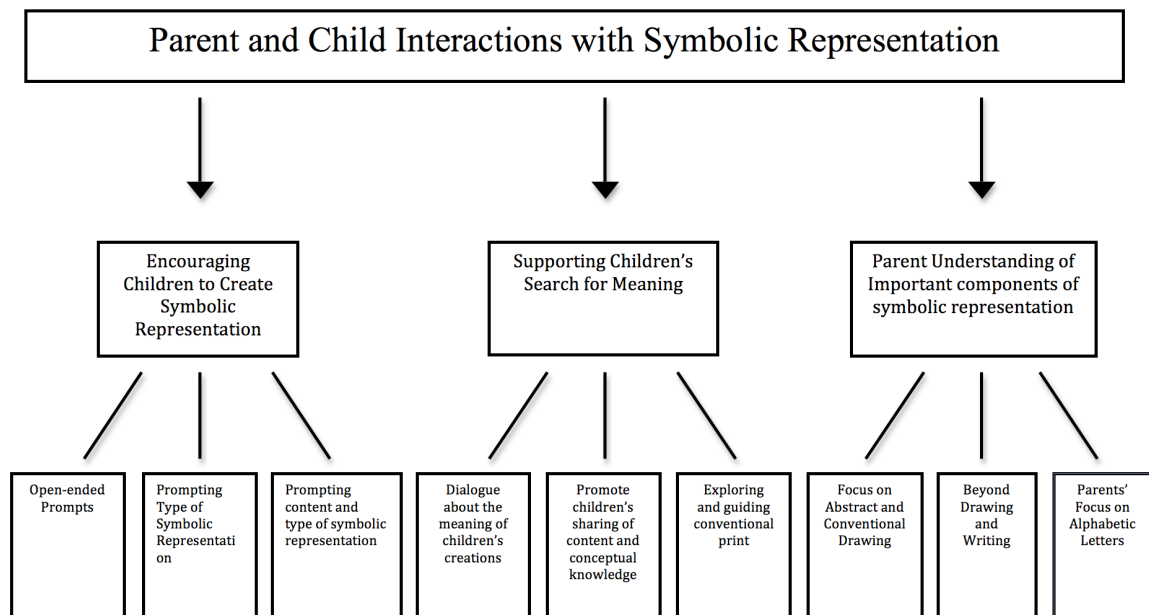
Figure 6. Graphic of results

Encouraging Children to Create Symbolic Representation

Parents in this study indicated that they encouraged their children to create symbolic representation. Parents' self-reported and observed interactions with their child illustrate all participants in this study prompted their children to create symbolic representation. Individual parents' prompts ranged from general to explicit and were usually presented in the form of questions; however, the level of guidance and direction they provided when prompting their children varied across content and types of symbolic representation. The level of structure and guidance of the prompts included: (a) open-ended prompts, (b) prompting type of symbolic representation, and (c) prompting content and type of symbolic representation.

Open-ended prompts. Sometimes parents posed very broad, open-ended questions when encouraging their children to create (*n* = 3). For instance, during the observation of the joint activity, Kenneth, a multilingual father, asked his daughter Amanda, "What are you going to make?" This line of questioning allowed his daughter to openly explore and decide what she would create (see Figure 7). After several seconds, Amanda asked her father what she should draw. Again, Kenneth emphasized that she could make whatever she wanted. Amanda then began drawing on the whiteboard side of the toy, stopping once to look at her father and smile.
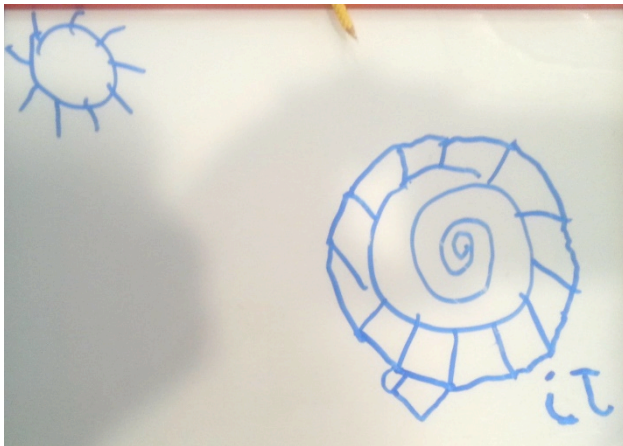
Figure 7. Amanda's lollipop from joint activity

Similar to Kenneth, Jaclyn gave little direction during the same activity. Jaclyn, a monolingual English-speaking mother of two, helped her daughter open the toy and discussed the various materials within. After discussing the magnetic letters and numbers, Jaclyn asked her child, Jaime, what she would like to "work on" during the observation

of the joint activity. After flipping to the side with the whiteboard, Jaime immediately

began drawing a picture of her family (see Figure 8).

Figure 8. Jaime's family from joint activity

 In both interactions, parents did not provide any additional guidance other than general,

open-ended encouragement for their child to create.

Nicole, a monolingual English-speaking mother provided encouragement similar

to Kenneth and Jaclyn, prompting her daughter, Anna, to create through broad, open-

ended suggestions. During the interaction, her prompts were general and did not attempt

to focus Anna's creations on a specific form of symbolic representation, instead allowing

her daughter to decide. After helping Anna remove the toy's packaging, Anna uncapped

the dry erase marker and began drawing a picture of herself (see Figure 9) without any

further guidance from her mother.

Figure 9. Anna's self-portrait from joint activity

While Nicole provided general, open-ended encouragement during the observed

activity, she also reported instances where she provided higher levels of structure to her

daughter. During her individual interview, Nicole indicated she provided both broad

suggestions to Anna, similar to those provided during the observed activity, as well as

more structured guidance. Specifically, she reported instances where she directed Anna's

attention to drawing, prompting the type of symbolic representation. Nicole, whose career

focused on art, detailed how she encouraged Anna to create, "I will usually suggest, 'oh

let's draw,' and follow up by asking, 'what are you going to draw?'" She then offered a

sample of her child's drawing to support her statement (see Figure 10). Nicole's

explanation provides insight into instances when parents give a variety of prompts.

Figure 10. Anna's trip to the beach from individual interview

Prompting type of symbolic representation. The majority of parents'

interactions (*n* = 9) provided a higher level of structure and guidance than those

interactions observed during the joint activity with Jaclyn, Kenneth, and Nicole. For

example, Erin, a monolingual English-speaking mother, shared how she prompted her

daughter and only child, Maria, to create via a specific forms of symbolic representation

when discussing a work sample that Maria drew of her family (see Figure 11). She

explained that when interacting with Maria, she would sit down and ask her if she would

like to draw, but explained she would not provide further guidance, preferring things to

happen "organically." Erin's statements demonstrated a higher level of structure during

shared interactions because she specified drawing as the form of symbolic representation

for her child.
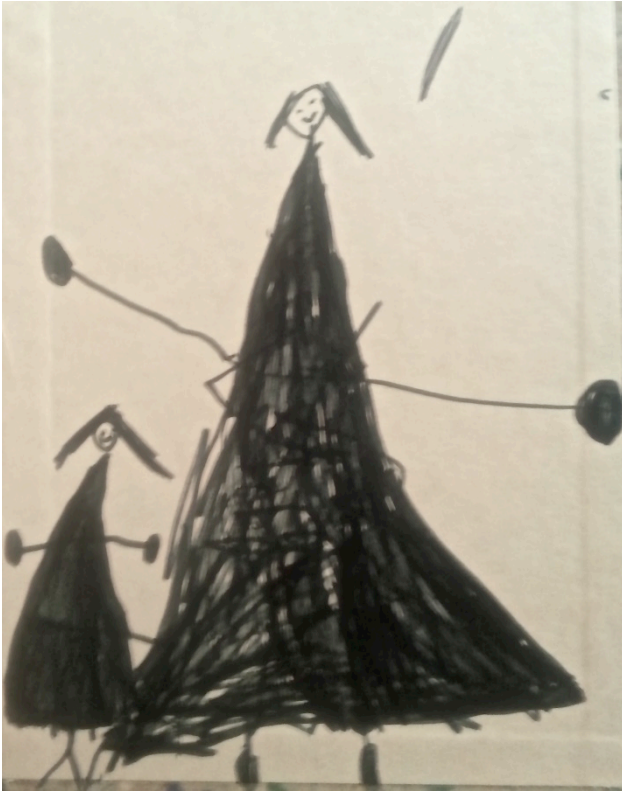
Figure 11. Maria's family from individual interview

Some parents (*n* = 7) prompted their children to create in ways similar to Nicole,

Erin, and Leslie who emphasized a specific form of symbolic representation but did not

attempt to guide *what* their children created. Leslie, a monolingual, English-speaking

female, also prompted her daughter, Danielle, to create with a specific form of symbolic

representation, during the observed activity. After discussing the various materials

contained within the toy, Leslie asked her daughter, Danielle, "What would you like to

write?" While Leslie, a mother of two, emphasized writing when encouraging Danielle to

create, she did not attempt to redirect her daughter when she began drawing a rainbow

and flowers (see Figure 12). While Leslie attempted to direct Danielle's focus towards

conventional alphabetic writing, she did not insist that Danielle create this way and ultimately allowed her to choose.

Figure 12. Danielle's rainbow and flowers from joint activity

Like others, Ashley attempted to direct what her daughter, Ellen, created by choosing to focus on writing alphabetic words during the observed activity. Ashley, a monolingual English-speaking mother, asked her daughter several questions about what she created; to which Ellen explained she was drawing a fort (See Figure 13). After learning about the meaning behind Ellen's drawing, Ashley tried to redirect her daughter's focus from drawing to writing conventional letters, when she asked Ellen, "Do you know how to write the word *fort*?" While Ashley prompted her daughter to write, Ellen continued to draw her picture, despite repeated attempts to focus her attention to conventional writing. Unlike Jennifer and Cynthia, who provided guidance before the

original message in their child's work sample was established, Ashley's guidance

emerged after the original message in her daughter's drawing.
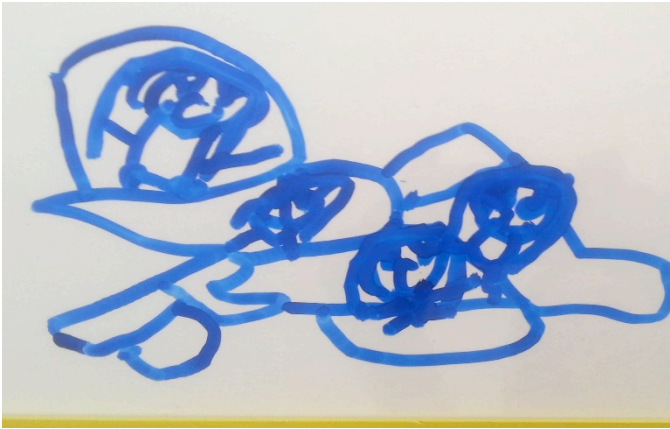
Figure 13. Ellen's fort from joint activity

Jennifer, a monolingual English-speaking mother, also prompted her daughter,

Tara, about the type of symbolic representation to create with; however, she offered a

higher level of guidance than Ashley or Erin. During her home interview, she stated that

when she worked with her daughter, she would tell her to, "Focus on the letters, and then

start writing them out." Jennifer's reported interactions with her daughter, Tara, during

the individual interview corresponded to the observed joint activity. After opening the

toy, Jennifer immediately focused Tara's attention on the magnetic letters. First, Jennifer

asked her daughter if she would like to write or "do the alphabet?" While Jennifer

initially prompted Tara in the form of a question, she then made the decision for her

daughter when she told Tara, "Let's do the alphabet." During this interaction, Tara

located and placed the magnetic letters in alphabetical order. After she placed each letter

on the board, her mother would ask her to say the alphabet up to the most current letter placed on the board, and then ask her what letter came next. This structured, parent-led, interaction continued until all the magnetic letters were placed on the toy in alphabetical order.

   Prompting content and type of symbolic representation. Some parent interactions encouraged children to create with a specific form of symbolic representation; other interactions ($n = 2$) provided additional structure by specifically suggesting both the type of symbolic representation they should create and the focus of their work sample. For instance, Carrie, a monolingual English-speaking mother, provided a higher level of structured guidance to her son, Zachary, when she explained how she asks her son to draw. During the individual interview, she explained an interaction with her son where she prompted him to create Turbo, a cartoon snail who was the major character in an animated movie with the same title: "I said, 'Let's draw Turbo.' Because we had just seen Turbo." Additionally, during the parent-child joint activity, Carrie was observed providing direct, explicit suggestions. While they sat at the kitchen table during the joint activity, she prompted her son to write his name. Despite numerous attempts to get him to write his name, he instead elected to draw a lion (see Figure 14). Carrie's observed interaction with Zachary is similar to those she reported during her individual interview. While the observation and Carrie's reflection differ in the type of symbolic representation, both interactions provided a very structured context for Zachary about what he should create.

Figure 14. Zachary's lion from joint activity

Similar to Carrie, Cynthia focused on both the type of symbolic representation

and the content of the message in her child's creations. Cynthia, a monolingual English-

speaking mother, emphasized letter identification and letter-sound correspondence during

the observed joint activity. While the toy contained magnetic letters and numbers, chalk,

and a dry erase marker, Cynthia focused Jackson's attention to the magnetic letters.

Numerous times during the activity, she asked Jackson to find specific letters and asked

him what sound they make. At one point, they began a 'spelling' game where Jackson

placed letters on the board and she guessed what word he intended to spell. In this

example, the mother asks him if he spelled 'rigs' (see Figure 15). He enthusiastically

agreed and then asked her how she knew. She pointed to each letter (during the activity,

she identified the number 1 as the letter I), said the letter's corresponding sound, and then

phonetically sounded out the entire word. As described in this vignette, Cynthia's

emphasis on conventional writing was also evident during the focus group discussion and in-depth interview.
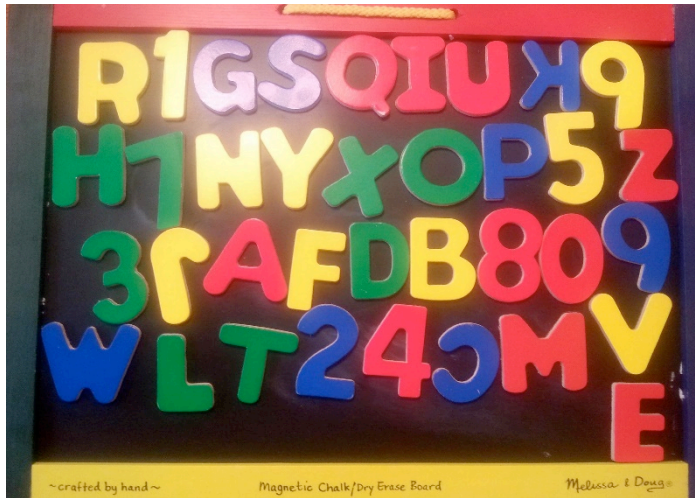
Figure 15. Jackson spells 'R1GS' from joint activity

Summary. When examining forms of symbolic representation, parents broadly suggested that their children "make something," others encouraged their children create through a specific form of symbolic representation, while yet others were explicit, telling their child exactly what they should make. This section explores interactions where parents supported children's expression by prompting them to engage in symbolic representation. These interactions included broad, general words encouraging children, to explicit, detailed suggestions about what they should create and the type of symbolic representation they should create with. When suggesting the type of symbolic representation they use to create their message, parents foci was fairly evenly split

between drawing and alphabetic writing. Two parents focused on both drawing and writing.

Supporting Children's Search for Meaning

In the previous section, I discussed ways parents initiated children's interactions with symbolic representation through verbal prompts during the observation and individual interviews. They ranged in level of structure and direction and served to encourage children to create. In this section, I explore how and why parents actively sought out their child's perspectives to better understand the meaning behind their creations. This section focuses specifically on the parent reported and observed interactions, which occurred during or after their child created symbolic representation. Most parents ($n = 9$) indicated they wanted to learn about their child's intended message and therefore engaged them in conversations about their work samples. Parents adjusted their dialogue according to the type of symbolic representation created to access different types of information. This section examines how parents used dialogue to: (1) understand child's intended message, (2) seeking to gauge child's knowledge of what they created, and (3) guiding and correcting child's conventional print in an effort to understand the intended message.

Interactions with scribbles and drawings focused on gaining insight into the child's intended message and dialogue, which encouraged children to share their knowledge about the intended message. When conventional alphabetic print appeared in children's work samples, parents engaged in dialogue to further their children's knowledge of print. First, I review how and why parents sought to understand the

intended message of their child's symbolic representation, as well as examine how parents engaged in conversations to learn about their children's understanding of what they created, and finally I will examine how parent-child discussions focused on furthering children's understanding of various features of conventional alphabetic writing to further search for meaning in their children's symbolic representation.

Dialogue about the meaning of children's creations. Parents ($n = 4$) used dialogue to understand children's work samples in instances where they had limited ability to interpret what was created, specifically drawings and abstractions. During conversations about drawings or abstract images, parents discussed finding it difficult to draw meaning from these works without their child's explanation. Margaret, a multilingual non-native English-speaking mother, explained she asked her son about his creations to better understand the meaning behind his work samples, "I'll ask him, 'what are you drawing?'" During the interview Margaret shared a work sample he created (see Figure 16); however, she was neither present when he created it, nor had Margaret asked him anything about it prior to our discussion. She made several guesses about the meaning behind it but she was unable to provide much detail. She acknowledged that "There's a story behind this . . . I think a character might talk or tell people," then explained that she was unable to determine the meaning without his help. She then asked Arnold about the work sample, but he shrugged his shoulders and walked away. Without Arnold's explanation, Margaret was unable to identify the intended message of his work sample, which highlights why participants emphasized the importance of engaging their children in meaningful dialogue about their creations.
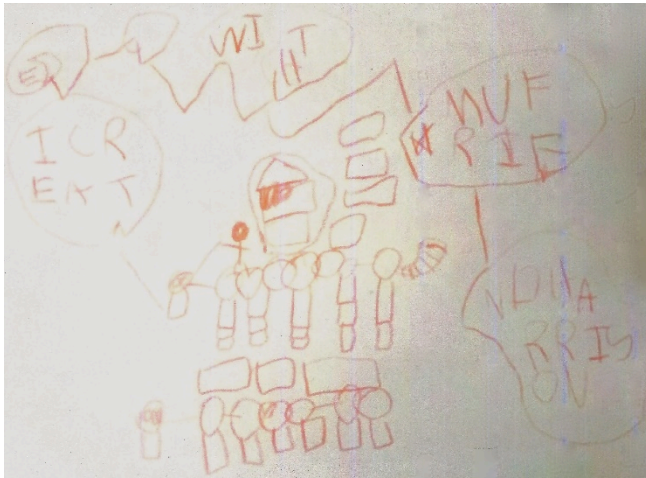
Figure 16. Arnold's mystery drawing from individual interview

During focus group discussions, Cynthia provided further insight about why parents engage their children in dialogue about drawings and scribbles. She explained that parents' perspectives change after speaking with children about what they created, "The child is creating whatever they're creating and it means something to them. If an adult asks them what the story is in the picture, then they're giving meaning to it that we as adults can understand." This statement exemplifies why participants (*n* = 9) asked their children about work samples they created. During the same discussion, Cynthia explained that she asked her son, Jackson, about his work samples because it gave her a better sense of the meaning behind his work, allowing her to understand his intended message. When she was unable to identify the meaning of his creations, she reported asking him, "What is this?" She then elaborated further on why it is important to ask her son about his work samples and how his explanation changes how she viewed and understood his creations.

I think that our perception changes when we know that there is a story behind it

and so I mean that's why we always ask when Jackson comes home, 'what is this

a picture of . . . I think that makes a difference having a story behind it . . .how we

perceive it.

Cynthia went on to discuss a work sample that Jackson drew (see Figure 17) and how the

conversation they shared helped her understand the meaning behind his drawing. After

asking him about it, she learned that the character on the left was a depiction of him

wearing a mask in a ninja costume and that the character on the right represented her.

Cynthia noted Jackson's emphasis that she was angry in his drawing, pointing out the

slanted eyebrows and downturned mouth. After learning this, she prompted Jackson

about why he portrayed her as angry. She reported asking him, "Am I usually angry?" To

which he responded, "sometimes." She then reiterated again that she asked Jackson about

what he creates as a way to understand "what he was thinking about . . . it helps, that sort

of interaction." Cynthia acknowledged the shared dialogue helped further her

understanding of the intended meaning of Jackson's work sample and also provided

insight into how he perceived her.
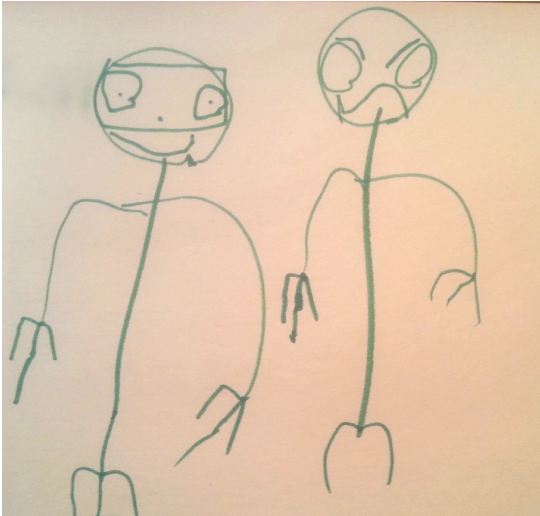
Figure 17. Jackson and his mother from individual interview

Similar to Margaret and Cynthia, Carrie indicated she engaged her son in purposeful discussions about his work samples because she sought understanding about his intended message. During her interview, she shared that sometimes when she looks at what he's creating and is unable to identify the meaning behind his work sample, she wonders, "What is this mess?" However, after asking Zachary about his creations, her understanding of his work samples changed, "Once he explains it, it's almost like it makes it extremely special. You're like 'oh okay! Now I can almost see it through your eyes now. I know exactly what you were making.'" During this discussion, Carrie pointed out she could better understand Zachary's creations and his perspective after engaging in meaningful dialogue with him about his work samples. Carrie then discussed an instance where she asked Zachary about what he had drawn. He pointed to various parts of the paper and explained that they were Disney characters. Once he told her about

his drawing, she could identify the various characters he'd drawn (e.g., Mickey Mouse and Goofy).

Observations of Jaclyn demonstrated further probing when interacting with her child and symbolic representation. She initiated dialogue to understand the intended meaning behind Jaime's drawing and then transitioned into more focused questions about various aspects of the work sample. Her initial questions were open-ended and similar to those mentioned by parents previously in this section, but she then followed up with more focused questions about specific aspects about Jaime's drawing (see Figure 8). Jaclyn first posed a broad question when she asked Jaime about the short vertical lines she started drawing on the dry erase board. When Jaime did not answer, she followed up with a more focused question, asking if the sticks were grass. Jaime confirmed Jaclyn's guess with a head nod. Her subsequent questions continued a similar line of inquiry, asking about other specific features her daughter had drawn. As her daughter's drawing began to take shape, Jaclyn probed further. After Jaime drew several figures on the dry erase board, Jaclyn asked Jaime to identify the people in the picture. Jaime replied that they were her family. Jaclyn followed up with a more direct question by asking her daughter to identify each family member she'd drawn. As Jaime's drawing evolved, Jaclyn's questions moved from broad to increasingly more specific and detailed.

Parents indicated that they posed broad, open-ended questions about drawings and scribbles because they struggled with identifying the intended message. Many indicated they asked their children about their drawings and scribbles in hopes of further understanding them. These participants acknowledged that the work samples had an

intended meaning, further supporting the need to ask their children about what they created. Speaking with their children about their work samples provided perspective and understanding of what they created, as well as insight into their children's experiences and perspectives, which they may not otherwise have understood.

Promote children's sharing of content and conceptual knowledge. When parents were unable to determine the meaning behind work samples, the conversation focused on identifying what their children created. Once parents knew what their children intended to create, some engaged in dialogue that prompted children to share their knowledge about what they created. In this section, I discuss how parents ($n = 2$) promoted conversations with their children to ascertain knowledge about what they created. For example, Leslie engaged her daughter, Danielle, in dialogue about her work sample to find out what she knew about flowers (see Figure 12). During the joint activity, Danielle used the dry erase board to draw a rainbow with two flowers underneath. After drawing them, Leslie asked Danielle if she knew where the petals were. In response Danielle pointed to the half circles she'd drawn around the center of the two flowers. Leslie informed Danielle that she was right and then asked her if she knew where flowers began. Danielle pointed to the base of one of the flowers and told her mother that they began "in the ground." Leslie enthusiastically exclaimed that she was correct. This differs from previously discussed parent-child interactions because Leslie asked specific questions about various aspects of Danielle's drawing to gauge understanding. Leslie's discussion with her daughter about flowers demonstrates how some parents engaged their children's in conversations to gain insight into their children's knowledge about

creations. It is important to note again that even though Leslie prompted writing, her daughter Danielle made a drawing as described in the prompting section of the findings. This dialogue about the details of the drawing give further indication of how Leslie asked for elaboration about Danielle's form of representation rather than a sole focus on writing.

Similar to Leslie, Elizabeth structured her conversation with Edward to ascertain what her son knew about his drawing. A multilingual, non-native English-speaking mother, Elizabeth also encouraged drawing as was described in the section on prompting. After opening the toy, Edward told his mother he wanted to draw a helicopter, and then retrieved one he'd previously made out of LEGOs, to use as a model. While he worked on his drawing, Elizabeth pointed to various sections (see Figure 18) and asked Edward which parts of the helicopter he had drawn. Edward identified the propeller, rotor, and tail. After he identified each of these parts, she followed up by asking him what each part "did" on the helicopter.

Figure 18. Edward's helicopter from joint activity

Because she knew the intended message of her son's work sample, Elizabeth's interaction with Edward focused on his knowledge about helicopters. She was able to engage him in a conversation that encouraged him to share his knowledge of helicopters. Both Leslie and Elizabeth knew the intended message of their children's work samples and therefore directed the conversation in a way that promoted their children to share their knowledge about their work samples. These parents exemplified how conversations around symbolic representation shifted once parents knew the meaning behind children's creations.

Exploring and guiding conventional print. An additional shift in conversations around symbolic representation once parents knew the intended message in children's writing. When work samples contained conventional alphabetic letters, parents directed their discussion to promote children's knowledge of alphabetic print ($n = 3$). Once again we focus on Leslie. During the one-on-one interview Leslie asked her daughter Danielle about a sample she had selected to discuss. Danielle's work sample (see Figure 19) contained a drawing of each family member and several characters from the movie *Frozen* and the corresponding name for each person and movie character. Leslie's discussion of this work sample, produced previously by her daughter, focused on the alphabetic letters. When Leslie attempted to explain the sample to me, she struggled with identifying some of the letters; consequently, she enlisted Danielle's help, asking her about what she was attempting to write. After Danielle pointed to her name in the top left corner of the work sample, Leslie asked about the word she wrote directly underneath her name. Danielle pointed to the word and explained she'd written "daddy." Once Danielle

pointed out the word "daddy," Leslie acknowledged that she spelled it correctly and then

pointed out inaccuracies in the directionality of some of the letters, "Oooh . . . you drew a

little 'd' there . . . A backwards little 'd' but that's d-a-d-d-y." Leslie then pointed out

how the letter "d" was written backwards and that the way she'd written it was the letter

"b". Next, she explained that to make the letter "d" she needed to write it the other way.

During this interaction, Leslie sought her daughter's help to determine what she had

intended to write. After learning Danielle's intended message, Leslie shifted the

conversation to help her daughter understand the directionality of the two letters. This

interaction exemplified how participants asked initial questions about conventional letters

and then proceeded to provide support and guidance to identify and correct children's

errors.

Figure 19. Danielle's family and *Frozen* from individual interview

During the joint activity, Michael, a multilingual, non-native English speaker, commented on his daughter's letter formation after receiving clarification from her about the letter identity. He sat beside his daughter, Angel, and watched as she wrote on the toy's cellophane packaging, then drew on the dry erase board, and chalkboard. As Angel drew on the dry erase board, Michael picked up the cellophane packaging, and held it up to the light. He pointed to various letters Angel had written on the cellophane packaging and asked about several of them. When she identified the lowercase letter "b" and the uppercase letters "A" and "C", he commented on how well she formed her letters; "Your letters are looking better and better," providing feedback about the correctness of her letter formation.

Similar to Leslie and Michael, Erin focused on conventional alphabetic features of her child's work sample. During the observation, she encouraged her daughter to create a message with alphabetic letters. She concentrated on conventional writing and emphasized letter-sound correspondence when she asked Maria, "Would you like to write, 'Thank you Miss Nedra?'" Maria nodded and proceeded to begin writing the message (See Figure 20). While Maria wrote, Erin supported her. They worked together to isolate the phonetic sounds in words and their corresponding letter(s). Erin would say the word and break it into individual phonemes. After stressing a phoneme, Erin would then ask Maria "What letter makes that sound?" After helping Maria spell *thank*. Erin asked her daughter if she knew how to spell the word *you*. Maria nodded and wrote the alphabetic letter "U" on the dry erase board. Erin asked her why she wrote the letter "U". Maria pointed to the letter "U" and explained, "This says *you.*" Erin smiled, affirmed that

the word did make the "U" sound, and suggested they move on to the next word. Maria's explanation helped Erin understand that her daughter was applying the same strategy to spell the word *you* that they had used together when spelling the previous word, *thank*. While not spelled correctly, Maria sounded out *you* by using her sound-letter knowledge. During the joint activity with Maria, Erin focused on furthering her daughter's knowledge of letter-sound correspondence. While she provided explicit directions and feedback throughout the interactions, she reported a lower level of structure during her in-depth home interview when prompting her daughter to create. During the interview she focused on drawings Maria created; however, the joint activity focused on more conventional aspects of symbolic representation. When Maria drew, Erin encouraged her daughter to create, but provided little direction. During the observation, Erin directed Maria's focus towards a specific task and provided support and guidance throughout the process. While these two interactions were different, they were not contradictory. The conditions under which the two interactions occurred and the types of symbolic representation created were different, and this contributed to how Erin approached the activities with Maria. Considering the variation in these two situations, the interactions were more complementary than contradictory.
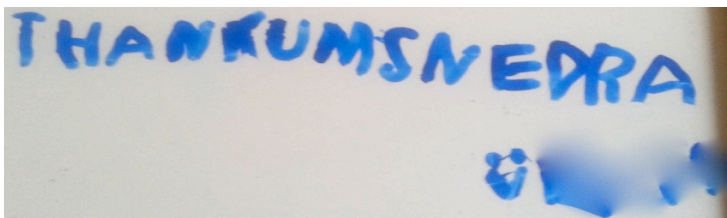
Figure 20. Maria's message from joint activity

When work samples contained more conventional letters, parents focused on providing feedback to further their children's knowledge of various aspects of conventional alphabetic print. In these instances, parents asked targeted questions about what their children wrote and then focused on furthering the child's understandings of writing. Once children clearly articulated the intended letters or words in their work sample, parents followed up with feedback that guided their children's letter formation, letter-sound correspondence, spelling, or name writing.

Summary. In this section I examined how parents interacted with their children to further their understanding of the intended message. They reported, and were observed, asking for details to better gain insight into their children's knowledge about their creations. Examination of these interactions revealed parents tended to provide varying levels of structure when communicating with their children about symbolic representation. When parent-child dialogue centered on abstract and conventional drawings, discussions tended to be more open-ended because parents were unable to assign meaning to the samples without their children's explanation. Parents indicated that the purpose of these interactions was to learn about their child's intended message and better understand their children's perspective about what they created. As parent-child interactions became more structured, parents engaged in dialogue in hopes of learning about their children's understanding of concepts represented in their creations, including knowledge about the content of drawings and writing alphabetic letters. After determining the extent of their children's knowledge participants supported their child with feedback about what they had created.

Parents' Understanding of Important Components of Symbolic Representation

The majority of participants (*n* = 10) ascribed higher levels of importance to more conventional forms of young children's symbolic representation, such as drawing and writing. For example, both an identifiable drawing (e.g., a flower) and a string of recognizable alphabetic letters could be considered conventional forms of symbolic representation. Many participants indicated their interest in the more conventional forms of symbolic representation was due in part to their ability to ascribe meaning to the work samples.

Focus on abstract and conventional drawing. In focus group discussions, parents viewed a variety of work samples, including drawings, alphabetic letters, and abstractions. These abstractions did not have discernable characteristics and contained (what appeared to be) random marks on the page, such as swirls, dots, and back and forth swipes. Parents sought to learn the intended message behind these abstractions or 'scribbles', but tended to focus their attention and discussion on representational drawings, work samples containing some identifiable characteristics (e.g., people or buildings), or alphabetic letters. For example, during focus group discussions, parents were asked to reflect on an image of swirls and loops (see Figure 17). During the discussions parents attempted to guess the meaning behind the work sample, but most participants (*n* = 10) did not recognize these samples as meaningful representations. One participant, Carrie, stated that she viewed work like this as a "mess" and explained, "this is what my son would bring home if the teacher made him sit at a table and draw, but he didn't really want to, so he just scribbled." Because Carrie interpreted scribbles as

something that her son only created when he was uninterested, she expressed little interest in them. Other participants shared similar sentiments, explaining that they needed to be able to understand the meaning and purpose behind their children's symbolic representation if they were to keep it or put in on display. When they were unable to understand the meaning and purpose, they would throw away the work sample. Jennifer specifically identified the image of swirls and loops (see Figure 21) as one she would throw away, explaining that it "wouldn't make the cut for me" because it didn't look like it meant anything. As the discussion continued, parents were asked about the importance of scribbles and agreed that it was not something they identified as important in comparison to drawings and work samples of alphabetic letters.
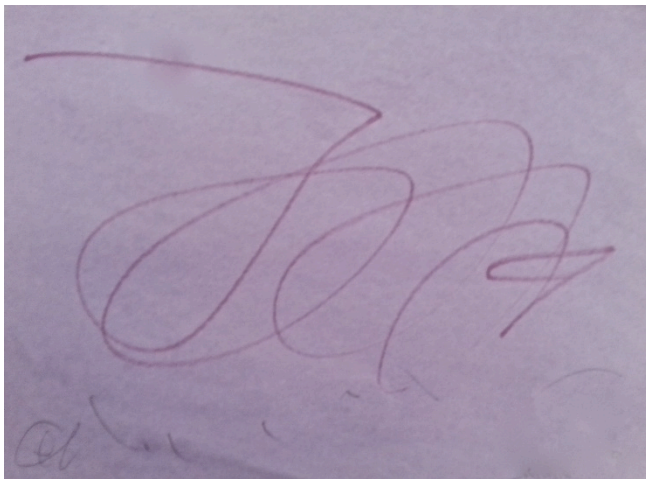
Figure 21. Focus group work sample #7

One participant's discussion around the scribble sample contrasted with other parents. Nicole, who identified herself as a visual artist, acknowledged that her

occupation influenced her perspective about messages young children convey. In the focus group discussion when the group was prompted for thoughts regarding a work sample of swirls and loops, Nicole offered an explanation for why she was interested in the scribbles more than other participants, "I'm an artist. I'm a visual artist so I like marks." Additionally, she shared that she enjoyed seeing her daughter create similar work samples containing scribbles, "I am actually kind of pleased when I see my daughter do this [scribble] . . . I often say, 'oh I like to scribble! I think it's fun.'" Nicole further emphasized her appreciation for scribbles during her in-depth interview. When asked about symbolic activities that she shared with her daughter, she described a game that she and Anna played involving scribbles. "One person just draws a scribble and the other one turns it into something. She's really good at that game and she has the best ideas." Nicole specifically emphasized an interest in scribbles.

Two participants indicated preference for unconventional work samples they identified as artistic, and aesthetically pleasing. During focus group discussions around an unconventional work sample (see Figure 21), Carrie explained that this was not something she would keep. When discussing interest in some of her son, Zachary's unconventional work samples, Carrie explained that she was particularly interested in his creations that she considered "artistic" because they "look creative." She reinforced this statement later in the interview when she discussed a particular work sample Zachary created, a painting she described as "splattery" (see Figure 22). She compared her son's painting to artist Jackson Pollock, an abstract expressionist whose work both she and her husband enjoyed. Carrie's statements indicated that her and her husbands' interest in

Pollock's artwork helped them make a personal connection to some of creations. Carrie's emphasis on keeping work samples that she found artistic and associated with Jackson Pollock indicated an interest in the aesthetic aspects of Zachary's symbolic representation. While Carrie expressed little interest in the unconventional work sample during the focus group discussion, she expressed interest in her son's abstraction. While they were both unconventional, Carrie understood Zachary's creation to be artistic and creative, where she identified the focus group sample as a "mess". As demonstrated by Carrie's complex understandings, these codes are not mutually exclusive and the same participants may be identified across several codes and subcodes.

Figure 22. Zachary's 'splattery' painting from individual interview

Similar to Carrie's interest in unconventional work samples, Erin discussed artistic aspects of Maria's creations. During focus group discussions, Erin stated she would display Maria's work samples that she found aesthetically pleasing or had "visual

appeal". Erin's in-depth interview aligned with the statements she made during focus group discussions. She framed some of her daughter's, "sort of cooler abstractions, or whatever seems really fun." Erin elaborated on what she meant by "fun," referencing a painting Maria created, explaining it just "looked really pretty . . . it doesn't even necessarily look like a child did it, it's um, it's just kind of funky . . . I think it's just, like art. You know? Sometimes it speaks to you." While Nicole, Carrie, and Erin discussed the aesthetic value of their children's unconventional products, most of the other participants ($n = 7$) emphasized representational drawing and alphabetic writing, more conventional aspects of symbolic representation.

Beyond drawing and writing. The majority of parents conveyed minimal interest in unconventional forms of symbolic representation, instead emphasizing more conventional forms, such as representational drawing and alphabetic writing. Some participants explicitly ($n = 3$) expressed interest in children's work based on its aesthetic appeal. While these parents indicated interest in work samples with either a conventional or unconventional form of symbolic representation, two parents indicated interest in work samples containing forms of symbolic representation beyond writing and drawing. During focus group discussions, Michael shared, "I like painting and writing [combined] or writing and painting." He supported his statement by explaining that they seemed "more complete" when they were combined together. Michael's expressed interest in multiple forms of symbolic representation also emerged during his interview when he chose to discuss two work samples created by his daughter Angel, which contained multiple forms of symbolic representation. The first work sample he selected (see Figures

23) was a painting coupled with alphabetic words. He focused on both the characters painted on the sheet of paper and the alphabetic words on the page, using the words to help him figure out who the characters were in the picture. He attempted to decode Angel's words as he read, "Mr. Sunshine is shining down on me." Next, he pointed to the largest figure on the page and identified it as Angel, then pointed out that the rest of the people in the image were various family members. After discussing the first sample, he decided to retrieve another sample his daughter created. The second sample (see Figure s 23 and 24) also contained multiple forms of symbolic representation: drawings, alphabetic letters, and pieces of paper cut out and glued onto the page. Michael again emphasized his interest in Angel's creations that contained conventional and unconventional forms of symbolic representation. He explained his daughter created the work sample as a gift for her great aunt and uncle. Similar to the first sample, he attempted to identify the meaning of the drawing by reading the letters on the page.

Figure 23. Angel's Mr. Sunshine from individual interview

Figure 24. Angel's gift to aunt and uncle from individual interview

Similar to Michael's statements during focus group discussions, Nicole also indicated

an interest in the integration of multiple forms of symbolic representation. While Nicole

emphasized her interest in scribbles during focus group discussions and her interview,

she also shared her interest in work samples that integrated drawing and writing. To

illustrate her point, she shared two 'books' Anna wrote and illustrated, which were about

her trip to the beach and an ostrich at the zoo (see sample Figures 10 and 25). Nicole

pointed out that both work samples combined writing and drawing to form one message,

explaining how her daughter "integrated pictures and words into a story." Her reflection

of her daughter's illustrated stories highlights her understanding that synthesizing

representational drawing and alphabetic writing enhanced her daughter's ability to

communicate her intended message. Nicole's perspective about the integral nature of

writing and drawing contrasted with other parents, discussed in the next section, who stressed conventional writing as a form of symbolic representation.

It is important to note that other participants shared work samples containing drawing and writing; however, they were not included in this section because the different aspects of symbolic representation were discussed in isolation, not in relation to one another. They did not indicate that different forms combined to make a more complete or comprehensive message. These examples were included because both parents used them to emphasize the complementary nature of multiple forms of symbolic representation.

Figure 25. Anna's illustrated book from individual interview

Parents' focus on alphabetic letters. While other participants discussed samples containing alphabetic letters and drawings (*n* = 7), they specifically directed their focus towards alphabetic letters. This differed from Nicole and Michael, who emphasized the comprehensive, integrative nature of multiple forms of symbolic representation. The parents discussed in this section indicated a higher level of interest in this form of symbolic representation. For example, when Leslie shared her daughter's labeled drawing of family and important Disney characters (see Figure 19), she directed her attention to the alphabetic print features. Danielle, Leslie's daughter, drew each family member and several characters from the movie *Frozen* then wrote each person and character's names. Leslie explained that the drawings were not the reason she selected that particular sample, "I chose it because it has some of her actual writing on it." Leslie specifically selected the sample because of the conventional print features, while the drawing played a secondary role in her selection, indicating a higher interest in Danielle's alphabetic writing. Leslie's description of Danielle's work sample and the accompanying conversation focused around alphabetic letters and words in the work sample. This emphasis aligned with over half of parents, who had a marked focus on these aspects when other, less conventional, forms of writing were present.

Other parents provided similar rationale for their sample selection. Margaret discussed a sample her son Arnold created that contained a drawing in orange pencil with accompanying alphabetic letters (see Figure 16). She selected the sample because "this one had letters." Like Leslie, Margaret selected a sample specifically containing

conventional print features, indicating that she too was more interested in her child's alphabetic writing.

Jennifer also shared a work sample because of its print features (see Figure 26). She explained that she selected the sample because it had alphabetic letters. While she briefly pointed out two images that her daughter, Tara, drew on the work sample (a kitten in the bottom right corner of the page and a rocket ship in blue marker), she directed her focus to the alphabetic letters in the middle of the page. Jennifer explained that they were "only letters" (not whole words) then read the letters, A-R-P-B-L-I-H-T-O, that Tara wrote from bottom left side of the page to top center, emphasizing their formation and directionality.

Figure 26. Tara's kitten, rocket, and alphabetic letters from individual interview

Kindergarten preparation. When discussing conventional alphabetic letter writing, referred to as "writing," parents frequently emphasized kindergarten preparation. Parents explained their child needed to identify and write letters, words, and their names before beginning kindergarten. A majority of parents who focused on alphabetic letters (n = 4 of n = 7) repeatedly emphasized kindergarten preparation when discussing their children's conventional alphabetic writing. Three of them further supported their emphasis on writing by discussing experiences their older children had in kindergarten, where writing was an important and necessary skill.

When parents discussed alphabetic writing, they related their emphasis back to kindergarten preparation. For example, Erin shared how her experiences at R. S. Thackston Preschool influenced how she interacted with her daughter and why she focused their interactions together on conventional alphabetic writing. Erin explained that R. S. Thackston Preschool emphasized writing as an important skill for kindergarten and therefore, she focused on it at home. She then shared how Maria's teacher encouraged letter identification and formation in preparation of Maria's transition from preschool to kindergarten stating that her teacher has, "her eye on the kindergarten readiness prize . . . they spend a lot of time doing letters and alphabet . . . and that's helpful. It cues me in to what I could be, being more supportive of." Erin's statement indicates she understood writing to be important for her daughter because her teacher emphasized it in the classroom. Her understanding of the importance of writing is also demonstrated during the joint activity with Maria, where they worked together to create a message discussed in detail earlier in the chapter (see Figure 20).

Cynthia also emphasized conventional alphabetic writing as an important kindergarten skill. She explained she wanted her son to "be able to write the alphabet and recognize it . . . to make sure he was ready for kindergarten." Cynthia provided a detailed account explaining her decision to place Jackson at R. S. Thackston Preschool to help him prepare for kindergarten. She recalled a discussion she had with her cousin and aunt, both elementary school teachers, about Jackson. During the conversation, both women emphasized important skills Jackson needed prior to entering kindergarten. To prepare, Jackson needed to be able to identify and write the alphabet and be able to write his name. Cynthia "panicked" because she was concerned he may not acquire those skills before beginning formal school, which ultimately resulted in her relocating Jackson from a private, in-home daycare to R.S. Thackston. She explained, "I wanted him in a preschool setting to get some of those skills so that he would be kindergarten ready and be able to write his name and be able to write the alphabet." She emphasized that Jackson should be exposed to and provided opportunities to interact and learn about "letters, linking words, and other concepts," to prepare him for kindergarten.

Several other parents discussed the personal experiences they had with their older children in kindergarten when explaining their emphasis on conventional alphabetic writing. For example, Ashley identified writing as a necessary skill for her daughter Ellen, "I think letters right now are pretty important." She followed up with this statement by pointing out that letters are stressed in her son's kindergarten classroom, "I have an older child . . . they focus on letters and saying the sounds [in kindergarten]." Based on

her older son's experience, Ashley identified writing conventional letters as an important skill her daughter needed for kindergarten.

Kenneth shared a similar perspective when discussing his older son's experiences in school. He explained that his son frequently brought home schoolwork requiring him to write the alphabet and practice spelling words. He would often address the same concepts and ideas with his daughter, Amanda. When he helped his son with writing and spelling words, he also included his daughter in the discussion, "we bring up spelling . . . when she's writing those letters . . . she knows spelling is copying letters and she copies the letters." Kenneth's statements indicated his son's school assignments, which required him to work with alphabetic letter formation and spelling, influenced how he interacted with Amanda and symbolic representation.

Ashley and Kenneth's experiences with their older children influenced their understanding of writing as an important skill that is emphasized in kindergarten. They indicated that they focused on this aspect of symbolic representation because of their experiences with their older children. Parents identified kindergarten preparation as a reason to emphasize conventional forms of print. They supported this rationale through their own personal experiences with older children, family members, and what they observed at R. S. Thackston Preschool.

Summary. In this section I examine data related to parents' interest in various forms of young children's symbolic representation. Parents' discussions and observed interactions highlighted their emphasis on more conventional forms, specifically drawing and writing. Results indicate that parents expressed high levels of interest in drawing and

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writing because they contained identifiable characteristics, and therefore were able to ascribe meaning and make connections to what their child created.

In instances where there were multiple forms of symbolic representation in one sample, parents tended to direct their focus to alphabetic letters. Participants understood alphabetic writing to be a requisite skill for kindergarten, and emphasized the importance of their children being prepared to enter formal schooling. Accordingly, the majority of parents ($n = 10$) who emphasized alphabetic writing identified it as an essential skill required for kindergarten success.

Conclusion

This chapter reported on parents' understandings of young children's symbolic representation. Findings indicate parents provided various levels of support and structure when they engaged their children in creating symbolic representation, ranging from general positive encouragement to more guided, specific prompts. Parents' complex, multidimensional understandings of young children's symbolic representations were demonstrated through their self-reported and observed interactions with their children. Nicole embodied this multifaceted understanding as she asked open-ended questions about her daughter, Anna's work, concentrating conversations to further understand her daughter's intended message. Additionally, Nicole's statements indicated awareness that symbolic representation goes beyond conventional forms of symbolic representation and encompasses more abstract creations.

Finally, most parents expressed higher levels of interest in more conventional work samples, specifically drawing and writing. When alphabetic letters and drawing

appeared in a sample, parents concentrated their focus on the written letters. In another example illustrating parents' rich, complex understandings of symbolic representation, Leslie demonstrated an awareness of the importance of conventional, alphabetic writing while still giving her daughter the freedom to make choices about what she created. Leslie prompted her daughter to write alphabetic letters, but accepted Danielle's decision to draw, supporting her decision by asking about specific aspects of her work sample. Inquiring about Danielle's drawing provided her an opportunity to demonstrate her in-depth knowledge and provide Leslie with insight into her daughter's understanding of what she created. Parents further supported this emphasis and interest through their expressed understanding that writing was a necessary skill for their children's academic success in kindergarten.

Chapter Five

Introduction

Young children's home environment plays a critical role in their literacy development (Burgess, 2002; Burgess, Hecht, & Lonigan, 2002; Dickinson & Tabors, 1991; Van Steensel, 2006). Social and cultural interactions within the home environment inform children's understanding of written language (Baghban, 1984; Bradford & Wyse, 2012; Dunsmuir & Blatchford, 2004; Heath, 1983; Martens, 1996; Ring, 2006; Schickedanz, 1990). Examining parents' understandings of young children's symbolic representation provides researchers with more comprehensive knowledge of influential social and cultural environments impacting young children's literacy development.

This qualitative study sought to provide information and insight regarding parents' understandings of young children's symbolic representation. The study explored their understandings through observed and reported interactions with their children in the form of focus group discussions, in-depth interviews, and parent-child observations. This chapter discusses findings from Chapter Four and connections to extant literature. I will present an overview of the findings, draw connections to existing research discussed in Chapter Two, present limitations, discuss implications, and identify the theoretical and practical significance of the study.

Utilizing constant comparative analysis (Corbin & Strauss, 1990), my initial

research questions evolved during the study and converged into one focal question. This

study sought to identify how parents' interactions with their children in relation to

symbolic representation inform us of their understandings. Parents' interactions with their

children were assessed through self-reported interactions during focus group discussions

and in-depth interviews as well as during an observation of a shared parent-child activity.

Results and Connections to Literature

Results from data analysis indicate that when parents engage their children in

conversations about symbolic representation, they provide a range of support and

structure, which is oftentimes connected to the type of symbolic representation discussed.

Parents reported and were observed adapting their conversations to accommodate the

child's work sample. Focus group discussions, in-depth interviews, and observations of a

parent-child joint activity indicate parents had higher levels of interest in more

conventional forms of young children's symbolic representation (i.e., drawing and

alphabetic letter formation). In instances where both forms of conventional symbolic

representation were present, parents directed their attention to alphabetic letters. They

support their emphasis on this conventional form because they associated alphabetic

letter-writing as an important skill for kindergarten preparation. This is consistent with

prior research in which parents gave their children increased levels of support when

interacting with conventional aspects of alphabetic print (Aram, 2010; Baghban, 1984;

Bissex, 1980; Buell et al., 2011; Burns et al., 2012; Casbergue et al., 2013). A new

finding from the current study, which is not present in the studies cited above, highlights

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parents increased levels of support when focusing on conventional drawing (representational drawing). In the current study, parents placed higher levels of support and concentrated their focus on conventional aspects of symbolic representation, including representational alphabetic letters and drawing. One potential reason for this emphasis is that parents noted that they were able to ascribe meaning to representational drawing and alphabetic letter formation and make connections to their child's intended message.

The structure of this chapter is aligned with the three major categories and their subcodes, presented in Chapter 4 (see Figure 6): (1) encouraging children to create symbolic representation (2) supporting children's search for meaning, and (3) parents' understanding of important components of symbolic representation.

Encouraging children to create symbolic representation. Parents in the current study reported and were observed prompting their children to create symbolic representation. Parents encouraged their children to create through a variety of verbal prompts, which served as a way to support children's expression. These prompts were categorized into one of the following three subcodes: (a) open-ended prompts (b) prompting type of symbolic representation, and (c) prompting content and type of symbolic representation. The findings in the section are presented according to these three types of prompts. Parents' verbal cues included open-ended suggestions and more direct, explicit prompts.

Open-ended prompts. Findings from the current study indicate that some parent participants ($n = 3$ of 12) provided open-ended prompts. During these self-reported and

observed interactions, parents provided broad suggestions when encouraging their children to create. These parents provided verbal cues, which afforded children the autonomy to decide both the meaning and the message in their creations as well as the type of symbolic representation they used to create their work sample. These findings are contrary to existing studies that explore parent-child interactions with conventional forms of symbolic representation (i.e., drawing and alphabetic writing). Previous studies of joint interactions (Baghban, 1984; Buell et al., 2011; Burns & Casbergue, 1992; Burns et al., 2012; Casbergue et al., 2013; DeBaryshe et al., 2013; Martens, 1996) report parents provided more structured forms of encouragement, directing children's focus towards creating with a specific type of symbolic representation, or both the type of symbolic representation and the content of the intended message.

When considering potential reasons that open-ended prompts emerged during this study, the researcher's directions for the joint activity and the types of questions presented during the in-depth interviews are worth noting. In the current study, the researcher conducted in-depth interviews with each parent, something absent from other studies researching parent-child interactions. During the interviews, the researcher used the term 'symbolic representation' instead of specifying a particular form (e.g., alphabetic writing and drawing). Purposefully using an encompassing, expansive term during the interviews may have helped parent participants consider alternative forms of symbolic representation that they would not have considered otherwise and also reflect on ways they encouraged their child to create these forms. Additionally, in the aforementioned studies, researchers gave more detailed directions before observing parent-child joint

interactions. Participants in these studies were asked to complete a specific task with their child using a particular form of symbolic representation (e.g., write a friendly letter). These clear-cut, well-defined directions set parameters for the observed activities, most likely resulting in more direct prompts from parents. In the current study, the researcher purposefully did not provide specific instructions in an effort to learn more about parents' ethnotheories about young children's symbolic representation through the observed interactions. The next two sections explore connections between the levels of prompting in the current study in relation to findings reported in other studies.

Prompting type of symbolic representation. In the previous section, I reported parents' open-ended prompts. These types of prompts did not specify the content of the message or the type of symbolic representation, allowing children to decide what they would like to create. These open-ended prompts were presented in one-fourth of parent participants in the study; however, existing research provides no indication of similar levels of encouragement. This section draws connections between the current study and existing research where parents encouraged children to create by providing prompts that focus on the type of symbolic representation children use when creating.

Several studies report similar levels of prompting during an observed parent-child letter-writing activity and further substantiate parents' various levels of prompts in their descriptive studies of parent child early writing interactions (Buell et al., 2011; Burns & Casbergue, 1992; Burns et al., 2012; Casbergue et al., 2013; DeBaryshe et al., 2013). In these studies, researchers instructed parents to co-construct a letter with their children. Reports by Buell et al. (2011) and DeBaryshe et al. (2006) noted instances where the

parent encouraged their child to create with a specific form of symbolic representation, discussing whether they would write or draw.

While the level of prompting present in the aforementioned studies aligns with the results of the current study, it is worth noting differences in the data collection process. The researchers in existing studies provided participants with detailed directions, asking them to jointly construct a letter with their child. This specificity of instructions may have resulted in this level of prompting. The current study also has instances where parents encouraged their child to create with a specific form of symbolic representation; however, I did not give explicit directions to parents, instead only asking them to 'explore' the toy with their child. Because parents were not given detailed instructions, their prompts were more representative of their ethnotheories, providing further insight into their understandings of young children's symbolic representation.

Two additional researchers conducted longitudinal case studies of their young children's literacy development (Baghban, 1984; Martens, 1996). The two reported instances where they identified a specific form of symbolic representation when they encouraged their children to create. While they identified a particular form of symbolic representation when prompting their children (i.e., drawing or writing), they did not make suggestions about the content or message of their creations. Both parents chose to give their children autonomy when deciding the message of their creations. The level of prompting they provided aligns with parents in the current study. These two studies help substantiate similar types of encouragement present in the current study. The two researchers have earned doctoral degrees and the majority of parents in this study had

earned master's or doctoral degrees. The similarities in levels of education help reinforce the results of the current study. While Baghban and Martens' studies offer similarities, it should also be noted that there are several differences.

The current study included focus group discussions, in-depth interviews, and observations, which contrasts with the self-reports of children's literacy development in the aforementioned research. Baghban and Martens' studies focused on their children's early literacy development. Any reported instances of parent-child interactions played a secondary role, serving as a supplementary piece and directing attention to the child's responses. In contrast, my focus for this study was on parents' understandings, with analysis about their self-reported and observed interactions to better identify their ethnotheories of young children's symbolic representation. The current study further contributes to existing research because its primary focus is on parents' understandings, whereas previous studies reported in this section direct their attention to interactions and children's literacy development.

This section explored studies that found similar levels of prompting to those identified in the current study. Specifically, this section examined parent-child interactions where parents only encouraged their child to create with a specific form of symbolic representation. These interactions directed children to create with conventional forms (i.e., drawing and alphabetic letter formation); however, they did not suggest or direct children's content. The next section explores instances where parents provided supports that prompted both the type of symbolic representation children create with and the content, or intended message of their creations.

Prompting content and type of symbolic representation. The previous section

drew connections to the current study and existing research regarding parent-child

interactions where parents prompted children to create with a specific form of symbolic

representation. This section explores interactions that are more explicit as they not only

prompt children about the type of symbolic representation but also suggest the content of

their intended message. In the current study, parents reported in the interviews that they

prompted both the type of symbolic representation their child create with and content, or

topic, of the work sample. These explicit, detailed suggestions were also present in other

studies examining parent-child interactions. This section explores existing studies where

parents provided similar levels of prompts, which directed children's content and type of

symbolic representations during parent-child joints interactions.

Findings from the current study suggest that some parents (n = 2 of 12) provided

high levels of structured support when interacting with their child, specifying both the

content of the message and the type of symbolic representation that their child used when

constructing their message. These findings are consistent with that of other research

studies (Buell at al., 2011; Burns & Casbergue, 1992; Casbergue et al., 2013).

Researchers in these studies, reported interactions during observations align with parents'

self-reported and observed prompts in the current study. These three studies all identify

highly structured interactions where parents suggest both the type of symbolic

representation with which children create and the content of the child's message. As

mentioned in the previous two sections, these studies provided detailed directions to

participants, which potentially resulted in more explicit prompts during observed

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interactions. The current study purposefully provided broad directions for the joint activity, adding to existing research studies because it goes beyond parent-child interactions. The self-reported and observed interactions were a means to gain further insight into parents' ethnotheories to help illuminate their understandings about young children's symbolic representation.

In her case study, of her young daughter's literacy development, Baghban (1984) reported similar levels of guidance to her daughter Giti. For example, she reported asking Giti if she could write her name, write her Grandmother's name (p. 65), and write McDonald's (p. 83). Baghban identifies the type of symbolic representation (writing) and then suggests names and words (content) to write. Participants in the current study prompted their children to create in similar ways. Baghban has a terminal degree and the majority of participants in the study have levels of education beyond a bachelor's degree. This further substantiates the findings reported in this section because Baghban and parents in the current study had similar levels of education. The current study focused on parents' understandings of symbolic representation whereas Baghban's study primarily focused on her daughter's literacy development. Any self-reported interactions with her daughter were secondary to this, serving to provide context.

These directives demonstrate how parents prompted children about both the type of symbolic representation and the content of the message during joint activities. While existing research discussed in this section help substantiate results their primary focus differs from the current study. The focus of this study is to learn about how parents'

understandings, it provides further insight into parents' ethnotheories of young children's symbolic representation.

Summary. All parents in the current study reported and were observed prompting their children to create. While all parents provided supports, the way that they encouraged their children to create varied across content and type of symbolic representation. Parents' prompts included: (a) broad, open-ended encouragement; (b) focus on the types of symbolic representation children create with; and (c) prompts that targeted both the type of symbolic representation and the content included in their work sample. Parents self-reported and in some instances, were observed, encouraging their child to create. The next section will focus on parents' self-reported and observed conversations with children to further understand their intended message, purpose, and perspectives of their work samples.

Supporting children's understanding of symbolic representation. The previous section drew connections from the current study and existing research about ways that parents prompted children to create symbolic representation. This section explores how and why parents engaged their children in conversations about their creations. Parents' shared conversations were a means to further understand their children's perspectives about what they created. Engaging children in discussions about their work samples were a way to gain insight into the child's intended message. Previous research studies examining shared conversations between parent and child yielded similar results, indicating participants engaged their children in conversations about drawing and other abstract forms of symbolic representation to learn about the intended message of a

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work sample. Specifically, this section organizes the conversations according to the three subcodes within this category, as presented in Chapter 4: (a) dialogue about the meaning of children's creations, (b) promote children's sharing of content and conceptual knowledge, and (c) exploring and guiding conventional print.

Dialogue about the meaning of children's creations. Results from the current study revealed parents ($n = 4$ of 12) engaged their children in purposeful dialogue about drawings and scribbles when they were unable to identify the child's intended message. Whether or not they could draw meaning from the work samples, they acknowledged that these creations held meaning to their child. During these conversations, parents posed broad, open-ended questions to learn more about what their child created. They reported that conversations with their child about their drawings and scribbles provided perspective and understanding about the intended message behind their creations.

Parents' self-reports and observations of the joint activity revealed that they purposefully engaged their children in conversations about their children's drawings and abstractions (i.e., scribbles) to understand the purpose and meaning of their work samples. The results of the current study are similar to existing research engaging participants in conversations about the meaning behind children's creations. Burns and Casbergue (1992) and DeBaryshe et al. (2011) report instances where parents sought to understand the child's intended message. During observations of a joint letter-writing activity, Burns and Casbergue (1992) reported that when drawings and scribbles were present in children's work samples, parents inquired about what the child created. In DeBaryshe et al. (2011), a similar line of inquiry was present during an observed joint

letter-writing activity. The study reports that mothers asked broad questions about children's drawings. This type of broad, open-ended questioning also emerged during parent focus group discussions and in-depth interviews as well as during observation of the joint activity. In both studies, parents posed broad questions when engaging their child in dialogue about their drawings. The observed conversations revealed that participants in both aforementioned studies engaged children in purposeful dialogue to learn about the intended message of the child's work sample.

The aforementioned studies align with data collected from parents' self-reported interactions and observations from a joint activity in the current study; where parents sought to learn about the child's message by inquiring about their work samples. While similarities exist, some studies differ in fundamental ways from the current study (e.g., Burns & Casbergue, 1992; DeBarshe et al., 2011). The previously conducted studies focused on the interactions of the joint letter writing activity, reporting on shared dialogue and the samples produced during the observation. This contrasts with the current study, which used focus group discussions, in-depth interviews, and observations to as a means to learn about parents' understandings of young children's symbolic representation. The current study further contributes to existing literature as it repositions the focus of interactions to learn about parents' ethnotheories of young children's symbolic representation.

Further exploring how parents engaged their children in conversations about work samples to learn about the intended message, Baghban (1984), Martens (1996), and Schickedanz (1990) are discussed. All three mothers conducted in-depth longitudinal

studies documenting their children's writing development. These longitudinal studies examined children's writing over the course of several years. The mothers in these three studies report engaging their children in conversations to gain insight and understanding about the intended message of the work sample. Their open-ended questioning parallels to the current study, where parents purposefully initiated discussions to learn about the intended meaning of their child's creations.

While the results of the current study share similarities to Baghban (1984), Martens (1996), and Schickedanz (1990), it should be noted that they were all longitudinal case studies where the mother was collecting research on her child. Additionally, their foci centered on their child's literacy and emergent writing development. Any mention of shared parent-child interactions, was infrequently discussed, and served as a supplementary component to contextualize writing instances. Their research focused on children's development, diverging from the current study, which focused on parents' understandings.

This section explored instances where parents actively engaged their children in conversations to learn about the intended message of their creations. Existing research reported in this section connects to the results found in the current study in relation to the broad, open line of inquiry parents provided when seeking to understand the meaning behind children's work samples. The current study shifted focus of the shared dialogue to gain further insight into how parents understand symbolic representation. Through parents' self-reported and observed dialogue with their children, I learned that one of the underlying reasons for this line of inquiry was to learn about the meaning of young

children's creations. Without engaging children in this shared dialogue, parents indicated that they were unable to determine the meaning or purpose behind their children's creations. Once parents knew the meaning behind their child's creations, they directed conversations to explore children's understanding of the content. The next section discusses existing research and current results, exploring conversations where parents actively sought to learn about children's conceptual understanding of the content in their creations.

Promote children's sharing of content and conceptual knowledge. The previous section explored how parents purposefully engaged their children in dialogue to understand the intended message behind their drawings and abstractions. When parents knew children's intended message, conversations about symbolic representation shifted to focus on children's knowledge. The shift in conversations promoted children to share their knowledge about what they created.

Some participants in the current study ($n = 2$ of 12) focused on learning about their child's understanding of the content in their creations. They posed questions to ascertain their child's knowledge about what they had drawn. Burns and Casbergue (1992) observed instances parents engaging in conversations, which encouraged children to elaborate on their message to share their understandings about the content. During these discussions, participants asked for details and explanation about what their child's creations. These shared conversations align with the current study as participants in both sought to learn about the child's content and conceptual understanding in relation to their work sample. These interactions demonstrate how parents engage in meaningful dialogue

to learn about children's knowledge of what he or she created. This provides additional insight into parents' understandings of young children's symbolic representation. The conversations indicate that parents understood their children's content and conceptual knowledge of their creations as important.

Exploring and guiding conventional print. Similar to the current study, Burns and Casbergue (1992) identified parents' emphasis on various aspects of conventional print. When focusing on conventional print during a letter-writing activity, parents directed their children's focus to alphabetic letter formation, spacing, spelling, and sound-letter correspondence. Additionally, parents in the study focused children's attention to the structure of friendly letters, identifying the greeting and closing. Further substantiating results, Aram (2010) likewise identified parents' emphasis on more conventional aspects of writing during observations of a joint activity. Participants stressed accuracy of letter formation, spacing of words, and directionality. Burns et al. (2012) also yielded similar results during a joint letter-writing activity. Participant demographics consisted of predominantly African American, low-income primary caregivers. While differences in participant demographics exist from Burns and Casbergue (1992), similar findings emerged, indicating that participants supported conversations promoting children's knowledge of conventional alphabetic print. During the letter-writing activity, primary caregivers' foci included letter formation, directionality, spelling, and spacing. Casbergue et al. (2013) similarly noted that parents and primary caregivers gave support during a joint letter-writing activity with emphasis on features of a friendly letter, spelling, capitalization, and letter formation. Also focusing

on aspects of conventional print, Baghban (1984), Bissex (1980), and Schickedanz (1990) shared snapshots of conversations with their children that often focused on various aspects of conventional print.

These studies report instances where parents directed their child's attention to aspects of their creations to help further their understanding and knowledge of conventional print. Their focus on conventional print aligns with parent emphasis in the current study. In instances where alphabetic writing was present, parents engaged their children in conversations to promote children's understanding of conventional print.

While DeBaryshe et al. (2006) also found that parents directed children's attention to conventional aspects of print when observing mother-child dyads during the joint construction of a friendly letter. Mothers' emphasis on conventional aspects of print, including spelling, letter formation, and directionality align with the current study as well as others discussed in this section (Aram, 2010; Baghban, 1984; Bissex, 1980; Burns & Casbergue, 1992; Burns et al., 2012; Casbergue et al., 2013; Schickedanz, 1990). These interactions align with those reported and observed in the current study, where parents directed their child's attention to various aspects of conventional print, specifically sound-letter correspondence, and spelling.

In contrast to both the current study, and other existing research discussed in this section, Martens (1996) explicitly states she purposefully did not tell her daughter how to spell words. During an instance where her daughter was struggling to spell the word *the*, Martens details the thoughts that went through her mind.

I realized that if I "helped" her by spelling t-h-e . . . it would have been a one-time

fix solution that focused her attention on conventions and accuracy at a time when

she needed a strategy to keep her focused on the purpose of writing: to create,

represent, and share meaning. I wanted Sara to understand, though, that correct

spelling was not intended to, and should not inhibit, deter, or stop the creation of

meaning. (p. 50)

Martens' reflection explains why she chose not to focus Sarah's attention on accurate

spelling. Instead, she stressed the importance of learning to create meaning with emergent

writing, promoting her daughter's message instead of emphasizing getting it 'right'.

In summary, previous studies and the current study explored how parents directed

children's attention to conventional aspects of alphabetic letter formation. Parents came

to understand what their children knew about conventional writing and provided them

with targeted feedback to address alphabetic letter formation, letter-sound

correspondence, spelling, name writing, spacing, and punctuation. When alphabetic

writing was present, parents directed their attention to conventional aspects of print,

specifically precision and accuracy of conventions (Aram, 2010; Baghban, 1984; Bissex,

1980; Burns and Casbergue, 1992; Schickedanz, 1990), letter formation and

directionality (Aram, 2010; Buell et al., 2011; Burns & Casbergue, 1992; Casbergue et

al., 2013), and spelling (Baghban, 1984; Bissex, 1980; Burns & Casbergue, 1992;

Casbergue et al., 2013; DeBaryshe et al., 2006).

Summary. This section explored how and why parents engaged their children in

conversations about what they created. Findings indicate that parents engaged children in

discussions about their work samples to gain insight into the child's intended message. Previous research further substantiates these findings, as they identify instances of shared conversations where parents engaged their children in conversations to: (a) learn about the meaning of their children's creations, (b) promote children's sharing of content and conceptual knowledge, and (c) explore and guide children's conventional print. The next section explores what aspects of symbolic representation parents understood as important.

Parents' understanding of important components of young children's symbolic representation. In the previous section, I drew connections to the current study and existing research exploring how parents supported children's search for meaning. In the current study, participants indicated higher levels of interest in more conventional forms of symbolic representation, specifically drawing and writing. When multiple forms of symbolic representation were present, parents directed their attention to more conventional features of the work sample. This section explores various aspects of young children's symbolic representation that parents understand as important through the three subcodes: (a) focus on abstract and conventional drawing, (b) beyond drawing and writing, and (c) parents' focus on alphabetic letters.

Focus on abstract and conventional drawing. In the current study, parents participated in focus group discussions where multiple children's work samples were discussed. These samples included drawings, alphabetic letters, and abstractions. When discussing these various samples, the majority of participants openly inquired about abstractions or "scribbles"; however, they did not recognize them as meaningful

representations, because they were unable to determine the intended message. Parents focused their attention on more conventional samples of young children's creations (i.e., alphabetic letters and drawings), indicating that they were able to draw meaning and make connections to these forms of symbolic representation. It is important to note that I specifically asked questions about unconventional forms of symbolic representation to gain insight into parents' understanding young children's creations. Without directing parents' attention to this aspect of young children's symbolic representation, I am unsure if it would have been discussed.

While previous research addressed in this discussion also examined conventional aspects of young children's symbolic representation, less conventional, abstract forms were absent. A potential reason for this absence is presented in the current study. The current study identified relatively few parents (n = 3 of 12) who expressed interest in children's abstract creations. Parents' limited emphasis on this type of symbolic representation indicates that without questioning parents, it may not have been addressed, potentially explaining why children's abstract creations are absent from existing literature. In the current study, parents may have only addressed abstractions or scribbles because I purposefully brought it to their attention during focus group discussions. Without providing children's work samples during focus group discussion and asking questions about this form of symbolic representation, parents may have not discussed it.

Beyond drawing and writing. The previous section explored how parents in the current study understand less conventional forms of children's symbolic representation and identified a gap in existing research exploring these abstract creations. I explored

how parents brought attention to either conventional drawings or unconventional aspects of young children's symbolic representation; however, two parents indicated interest beyond drawing and alphabetic writing. During focus group discussions they indicated an interest in work samples containing a variety of conventional and unconventional forms. This expressed interest extended beyond focus group discussions, appearing again during home interviews, where both parents shared work samples containing drawing and writing and incorporated additional forms of symbolic representation. These additional forms included materials (i.e., pieces of paper) and paintings. Parents explained that the combination of various forms of symbolic representation enhanced children's intended message, contributing to a more comprehensive creation.

In contrast, parent discussions and expressed interest in forms of symbolic representation beyond drawing and writing were absent from existing research. The nature of the methods of these studies focused on more conventional forms of children's symbolic representation (Buell et al., 2011; Burns & Casbergue, 1992; Burns et al., 2012; Casbergue et al., 2013), or children's emergent writing development (Baghban, 1984; Bissex, 1980; Martens, 1996; Schickedanz, 1990). While case studies exploring children's writing development included mothers' thoughts (Baghban, 1984; Bissex, 1980; Martens, 1996; Schickedanz, 1990), these thoughts served a supplementary role to provide further context for the reader.

Further, it is important to take into account the unit of analysis and data collection methods. The current study specifically focused on parents' understandings through their self-reported and observed interactions with their children by conducting focus group

discussions, in-depth home interviews, and observing the shared interactions of parent and child during a joint activity. This differs from existing studies, which focused on the child's understanding of writing, emergent writing development, or observed interactions of parent and child. The different research questions, data collection methods, and units of analysis are all worth examining as potential reasons for the absence of children's work samples containing types of symbolic representation other than drawing and writing.

Parents' focus on alphabetic letters. In the previous two sections, I reported on how parents in the current study expressed interest in children's abstractions, conventional drawings, and creations containing various forms of symbolic representation. This section examines how parents emphasized conventional alphabetic letters when multiple forms of symbolic representation were present. The majority of parents ($n = 7$) indicated that drawing played a supplementary role to conventional writing, frequently using the alphabetic letters present in children's work samples to identify the intended message of the drawing. They often supported their emphasis on alphabetic writing as important for kindergarten preparation, which potentially contributed to their interest in this form of symbolic representation.

While the current study aligns with existing research in the form parent-child observations, additional data in the form of focus group discussions and in-depth home interviews is included. Parents indicated the importance of kindergarten preparation during focus group discussions and home interviews, data collection methods absent from other studies. Without focus group and one-on-one discussions, parents' understanding of

children's alphabetic letter formation as an important skill for kindergarten preparation may not have emerged.

Summary. Earlier in this chapter, I discussed how parents explore and guide children's conventional print when reporting on ways parents support children's search for meaning. I connected the results to existing literature by addressing studies of parent-child observed interactions (Buell et al., 2011; Burns & Casbergue, 1992; Burns et al., 2012; Casbergue et al., 2013) and case studies of children's emerging writing development (Baghban, 1984; Bissex, 1980; Martens, 1996; Schickedanz, 1990). While these studies provide insight into parents' emphasis on more conventional aspects of young children's symbolic representation, readers are not provided with insight as to why parents directed much of their attention to conventional alphabetic writing.

Summary of results and connections to literature. The aforementioned studies addressed in this chapter involve observations of parent-child joint writing activities and shared interactions; however, the current study provides additional data in the form of focus group discussions and in-depth interviews. Parents' emphasis on drawing and writing in the current study parallels to findings in previously conducted research (Burns & Casbergue, 1992; Burns et al., 2012; Buell, 2011; Casbergue et al., 2013; and Ring, 2006). In these studies, data were collected examining parents' interactions with their children in different writing activities. Furthermore, while the results of the current study share similarities to Baghban (1984), Bissex (1980), Martens (1996), and Schickedanz (1990), it should be noted these four studies focused on the child and their development. Any mention of shared parent-child interactions, was only discussed as a supplementary

component to their child's development. Their research focus on children's development diverges from the current study, which focuses on parents' understandings.

Research regarding parent-child interactions with symbolic representation varies across sociocultural contexts (Aram, 2010; Baghban, 1984; Bissex, 1980; Buell et al., 2011; Burns et al., 2012; Casbergue et al., 2013; Martens, 1996; Ring, 2006; Schickedanz, 1990). Parents' demographics ranged in level of education, income level, race, and gender. While there was a large discrepancy in their social and cultural backgrounds, they demonstrated similar types of prompts, dialogue, and expressed interest when engaging their children in various writing activities.

Limitations

The results of this study are important to gaining insight in the sociocultural contexts of young children's lives and how the different social environments in which they interact affect their values and practices concerning writing. Despite the potential importance of these results, there are limitations to the methods of this study that should be noted. My personal experiences and background contributed to my understandings prior to beginning the study. The limited amount of time to collect data potentially impacted the richness and depth of the data, as I do not believe I had reached saturation. Additional interviews, observations, and prolonged engagement in the field may have potentially yielded further insight as participants became accustomed to my presence (Krefting, 1991). Spending more time with participants provides opportunities for them to reveal thoughts, ideas, and interactions, which they may not be willing to share initially.

My previous experiences as an elementary school teacher, my master's degree in reading, my doctoral coursework, and the three years I worked as a graduate research assistant all informed my understandings throughout the study. These background experiences were considered and noted throughout data analysis to help document biases and their potential impact on the study. These are explored in further detail in Chapter 3.

Also, this study's participants were upper middle class professionals, most of whom ($n = 8$) had earned master's or doctoral degrees during the time of data collection. Because of their high levels of education and socioeconomic status, they are not a representative sample and thus are inadequate for generalization; however, Krefting (1991) identifies transferability as an alternative when conducting qualitative research. Instead of generalizing findings, transferability examines the application of a study's finding to populations with similar studies. Weiss (1994) supports transferability by explaining that researchers can, "expect the same behavior from any other group with the same dynamics and constraints" (p. 27). Based on Krefting (1991) and Weiss (1994), the findings of this study could be transferred to other educated, upper middle class professionals who have four-year-old children attending an independent, play-based preschool.

Implications for Future Research

In the previous section, I explained the study's results were not generalizable across populations. Results of the current study indicated parents focused on alphabetic writing because they understood it to be a requisite skill for kindergarten success. Examining parents' understandings of various forms of symbolic representation across

diverse populations (e.g., socioeconomic status, gender, and native language) may uncover an emphasis on different areas other than alphabetic writing.

Interviewing and observing parents who enrolled their children in various types of preschools may also provide additional insight into their understandings. Potential sites to consider include Head Start, Montessori, franchised, and parochial preschools. These various preschool environments provide uniquely different experiences for young children and their parents. Exploring various preschool environments can further illuminate how classroom culture impacts parents' ethnotheories of young children's symbolic representation.

Further research about the influential nature of early schooling is needed to provide further insight about parents' understandings. Longitudinal case studies exist that focus on the child's development (Baghban, 1984; Bissex, 1980; Martens, 1996; Schickedanz, 1990), but devote limited time to parents' understandings. Extending the length of data collection to include the transition from preschool into kindergarten may provide additional insight into parents' evolving understanding of symbolic representation. Additional exploration into parents' understandings as children transition into preschool and then formal schooling may provide insight into the sociocultural influences of classroom environments. As children progress into formal schooling, exploring the shift in parents' ethnotheories about symbolic representation can help inform researchers and practitioners about the influential nature of the school environment on parents' understandings.

Theoretical implications. Examining how parents understand reading and

writing within the context of the home environment provides further understanding of sociocultural contexts influencing and informing children's literacy. This study examined how parents interact with their children in relation to symbolic representation. I used parental ethnotheories to provide insight into ways parents situate symbolic representation with their child in everyday sociocultural environments. This theoretical grounding afforded me a unique perspective when examining how parents understand young children's symbolic representation in the context of the home environment.

This study used a focused approach to Super and Harkness' (1986) theoretical framework, specifically examining parents' ethnotheories of *literacy* within the home environment. Currently, research on parents' understandings of young children's writing exists, but it is not viewed through a sociocultural framework focused specifically on parental ethnotheories. Examining parents' ethnotheories in relation to young children's literacy development allows researchers to consider the specific sociocultural roots of parents' interactions with their children and symbolic representation. A focus on parental ethnotheories allows researchers to embrace a new perspective of early literacy research, illuminating the specific sociocultural role of parents and the home environment on young children's understandings of reading and writing.

Implications for practice. This study has important implications for early childhood educators working with young children and their families. Primarily, educators may use evidence from this study to continue encouraging parents to engage in dialogue with children about their symbolic representations. In so doing, teachers recognize parents appreciate the communicative power of young children's work, seek to in

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enhance children's increased efforts in expressing content knowledge, and support their exploration of different forms of symbolic representation.

Findings from this study inform us that parents work to understand the meaning children are seeking to express through their symbolic representations. As revealed in observed dialogues of parent-child interactions, parents are already primed to ask probing questions to their children about their work. With this knowledge, teachers may work to establish and encourage parents in ongoing dialogue about their children's symbolic representations. Continued dialogue about children's creations both strengthens oral language and expands children's vocabulary. As parents engage their children in conversations about their creations, they often move beyond surface level questions, probing further to better understand what their child created and why they created it. Educators can encourage parents to see these interactions as strengthening children's awakening to the communicative value of their symbolic representations.

Early childhood educators may also embrace aspects of this study that recognizes parents as natural facilitators of writing and drawing opportunities for their children. Just as parents use deep, probing questions to gauge children's knowledge and understanding of the subject matter, educators can also engage in similar conversations with their students. One way to help support educator, parent, and student connections would be the implementation of home-school journals. With these journals, parents and educators can help bridge the communication of the activities children have with symbolic representation in the two different environments.

This study illuminates that parents understand drawing as an important medium for children, as it is another way for them to demonstrate understanding of concepts and ideas (e.g., Edward's helicopter and Danielle's flower). While parents recognize that less conventional forms of symbolic representation hold meaning, there remains an emphasis on more conventional forms of alphabetic writing. Parents often facilitate and guide children's experimentation towards more conventional forms of symbolic representation. The study underscores the concern many parents are beginning to articulate about the need for using conventional print before their children enter kindergarten.

With this knowledge, practitioners can encourage parents to recognize and provide supports as their children experiment and explore various components of emergent writing. Early childhood teachers may encourage parents to continue to view less conventional forms of symbolic representation (i.e., scribbles and drawings) as natural parts of emergent writing, thereby assuaging some of parents' expressed concerns about kindergarten readiness. This knowledge allows parents to continue to support their child's experimentation with different forms of symbolic representation, even as parents work to prompt children's efforts to use more conventional letters and increased knowledge of the alphabet letter names.

Conclusion/Final Reflections

This study examined parents' interactions with their children and symbolic representation as a means to illustrate their understandings. This knowledge can help inform both theoretical and practical circles about the sociocultural influences of parents by learning about the values and beliefs they place on different aspects of symbolic

representation. Researchers and practitioners can utilize this knowledge to engage parents in culturally appropriate conversations about young children's writing. Researching young children's sociocultural experiences provides context to draw from when studying early drawing and writing in the classroom. With an enhanced understanding of literacy experiences that children bring to school, we can identify children's strengths and weaknesses, and improve home school communication.

In conclusion, parents' interest in more conventional forms of symbolic representation is important because they influence their children's understandings (Dunsmuir & Blatchford, 2004; Ring, 2006). The daily routines that occur in the home literacy environment regarding symbolic representation can empower or discourage children's use of various forms of symbolic representation. Including parents' voices in both practical and academic research provides additional insight about the values they place on symbolic representation. Connecting with families and acknowledging the important role parents play in young children's understandings of symbolic representation allows us to strive to cultivate strong home-school connections to further support children's development and learning.

APPENDIX A

IRB Approval Letter

Office of Research Integrity and Assurance

Research Hall, 4400 University Drive, MS 6D5, Fairfax, Virginia 22030
Phone: 703-993-5445; Fax: 703-993-9590

DATE: March 7, 2016

TO: Susan Burns
FROM: George Mason University IRB

Project Title: [544732-5] Dissertation: Parents' Understandings of Young Children's Symbolic Representation

SUBMISSION TYPE: Continuing Review/Progress Report

ACTION: APPROVED
APPROVAL DATE: March 7, 2016
EXPIRATION DATE: March 6, 2017
REVIEW TYPE: Expedited Review

REVIEW TYPE: Expedited review category #7

Thank you for your submission of Continuing Review/Progress Report materials for this project. The George Mason University IRB has APPROVED your submission. This submission has received Expedited Review based on applicable federal regulations.

Please remember that all research must be conducted as described in the submitted materials.

Please remember that informed consent is a process beginning with a description of the project and insurance of participant understanding followed by a signed consent form. Informed consent must continue throughout the project via a dialogue between the researcher and research participant. Federal regulations require that each participant receives a copy of the consent document.

Please note that any revision to previously approved materials must be approved by the IRB prior to initiation. Please use the appropriate revision forms for this procedure.

All UNANTICIPATED PROBLEMS involving risks to subjects or others and SERIOUS and UNEXPECTED adverse events must be reported promptly to the Office of Research Integrity & Assurance (ORIA). Please use the appropriate reporting forms for this procedure. All FDA and sponsor reporting requirements should also be followed (if applicable).

All NON-COMPLIANCE issues or COMPLAINTS regarding this project must be reported promptly to the ORIA.

The anniversary date of this study is March 6, 2017. This project requires continuing review by this committee on an annual basis. You may not collect date beyond this date without prior IRB approval. A continuing review form must be completed and submitted to the ORIA at least 30 days prior to the

anniversary date or upon completion of this project. Prior to the anniversary date, the ORIA will send you a reminder regarding continuing review procedures.

Please note that all research records must be retained for a minimum of five years, or as described in your submission, after the completion of the project.

If you have any questions, please contact Karen Motsinger at 703-993-4208 or kmotsing@gmu.edu. Please include your project title and reference number in all correspondence with this committee.

This letter has been electronically signed in accordance with all applicable regulations, and a copy is retained within George Mason University IRB's records.

Participant Demographics

Name of Parent	Child's Name	Gender of Parent	Number of Children	Ethnicity of Parent	Language of Parent
Jaclyn	Jaime	Female	2	White	Monolingual English
Nicole	Anna	Female	2	White	Monolingual English
Elizabeth	Edward	Female	1	Asian American or Pacific Islander	Multilingual, including English
Jennifer	Tara	Female	2	White	Monolingual English
Ashley	Ellen	Female	2	White	Monolingual English
Cynthia	Jackson	Female	3	White	Monolingual English
Erin	Maria	Female	1	White	Monolingual English
Michael	Angel	Male	1	White	Multilingual, including English
Leslie	Danielle	Female	2	White	Monolingual English
Margaret	Harrison	Female	2	Asian American or Pacific Islander	Multilingual, including English
Kenneth	Amanda	Male	2	Asian American or Pacific Islander	Multilingual, including English
Carrie	Zachary	Female	4	Asian American and White	Monolingual English

APPENDIX C

Parent Participation Request

Hello,

      My name is Nedra Cossa. I am a doctoral candidate at George Mason University. Currently, I am seeking parents to participate in a study on parents' ideas about different forms of young children's writing. The study consists of a small group discussion at the Child Development Center and then a one-on-one interview meeting in your home. During the interview, you will also be asked to complete an activity with your child. The group discussion and one-on-one interview will be audio taped for research purposes. Samples of your child's work will also be collected for research purposes. The focus group discussion will last approximately one hour, the interviews and activity together will be no more than 90 minutes. I look forward to working with you.

If you are interested, please contact me directly.

Best Regards,
Nedra

Nedra Cossa
Doctoral Candidate, George Mason University
ncossa@gmu.edu
434-238-7222

APPENDIX D

Informed Consent

Research Procedures

This research is being conducted to explore parents' understanding of different forms of young children's writing, including writing, drawing, painting, and other meaning making practices. If you agree to participate, you will be asked to discuss different aspects of multiple forms of young children's writing in a focus group discussion with other parents of children at the Child Development Center. The focus group discussion should last approximately one hour. You will also be asked to meet with me for a one-on-one interview in your home. The interview should last approximately one hour. At the conclusion of the home interview, you will be asked to interact with your child in a short activity lasting approximately ten minutes.

RISKS

There are no foreseeable risks for participating in this research.

BENEFITS

There are no benefits to you as a participant other than to further research in young children's writing.

CONFIDENTIALITY

The data collected in this study will be confidential. As a participant in the study, you will be assigned a pseudonym. This pseudonym will be linked to a case number. All work will be collected in a manila envelope, sealed, and filed in a locked cabinet until the end of the study. (1) Through the use of an identification key, the researcher will be able to link your transcribed focus group discussion, interview, and interactive activity with your child; (2) neither you or your child's name will be included in transcribed focus group discussions and interviews or notes of the parent/child activity; and (3) only the researchers will have access to the identification key. This code is linked to your original informed consent document. All collected data, including audio recordings of focus group discussions, interviews, and notes of the parent/child activity will be kept in a secure location and will be disposed of after three years.

There is one exception to confidentiality. It is our legal responsibility to report situations of suspected child abuse or neglect to appropriate authorities. Although we are not seeking this type of information in this study, nor will you be asked questions about these issues, we will disclose them as required under the law if discovered.

PARTICIPATION

Your participation is voluntary, and you may withdraw from the study at any time and for any reason. If you decide not to participate or if you withdraw from the study, there is no

penalty. There are no costs to you or any other party. If at any time you elect to no longer participate, the researchers will remove and destroy your previously shared data.

CONTACT

Nedra Cossa, at George Mason University is conducting this research study under the supervision of Dr. M. Susan Burns. Nedra Cossa may be reached at (434) 238-7222 and Susan Burns may be reached at (703) 993-2017.

You may contact the George Mason University Office of Research Integrity & Assurance at 703-993-4121 if you have questions or comments regarding your rights as a participant in the research.

This research has been reviewed according to George Mason University procedures governing your participation in this research.

CONSENT

I have read this form and agree to participate in this study.

_____ I agree to audio taping.

_____ I do not agree to audio taping.

_____
Name

_____
Date of Signature

Version date: June 7, 2013

APPENDIX E

Demographics Form

The following are questions regarding your background to help us gain insight into parent participating in the study. The information you provide will be kept confidential and will not be shared with anyone else besides the researchers.

Please respond to the following questions as fully as possible.

1. What is your gender?
   □ Male
   □ Female
   □ Other

2. Are there other adults that reside in the home? If so, could you please provide their role (e.g. Grandmother, aunt, cousin)?

3. What is your current marital status?

4. Which of the following best represents the level of education you have completed?
   ☐ Some High School or Less
   ☐ High School
   ☐ Attended some College
   ☐ Associates Degree
   ☐ Bachelor's Degree
   ☐ Master's Degree
   ☐ Post College Graduate

5. What are the age ranges of children you have and how many children do you have in the age range selected?
   ☐ Under 6: How many? _____
   ☐ 6-10:   How many? _____
   ☐ 10-14:   How many? _____
   ☐ 15-18:   How many? _____

6. With which of the following groups do you most identify? If you equally identify with more than one group, please select all that apply.
☐ African American
☐ Asian American or Pacific Islander
☐ Hispanic/Latino
☐ Native American
☐ Caucasian
☐ Other: _____

APPENDIX F

Focus Group Protocol

Introduction
Hello. Before we begin, I want to thank all of you for volunteering to participate in this study. While most of you have probably seen each other here at the early learning center, I would like to take a moment to go around the room and have everyone introduce him or herself. I'll begin.
　　　　　(Each individual introduces himself or herself)

Explanation of Study
I've brought you here today to share your insight into young children's means of symbolic representation. I would like to explain that when I refer to 'symbolic representation' I am referring to any form of meaning making that young children might use to express themselves. These mediums include, but are not limited to, handwriting, text construction, drawing, painting, transcription (by an adult), and use of the computer.
　　　　　* Introduce samples at this time*

Format of Discussions
Please let me point out there is no right or wrong answer. I am here to learn about your understanding of symbolic representation. To help guide the discussion today, I have brought six writing samples to refer to (shows the samples). All samples were created by four year old children. For today, I would like to take a few minutes to discuss each of the samples with you all. My hope is that you will participate in the discussion. Please feel free to add on to what another participant says or ask questions. You don't need to agree with others, but you must listen respectfully as others share their views. Also, if you have not done so already, I would greatly appreciate it if you turn your cell phones off.

Student Samples
Sample #1: Transcribed Picture
This is a sample of a child's transcribed picture. The child made the drawing then told the teacher what it was. The teacher then wrote out what the child said about the story.
- 　　Is there any part of this sample that stands out to you? Why?
- 　　Can you describe a situation when you have seen children writing like this?
- 　　What are your thoughts about the importance of young children's drawings being transcribed by an adult?

Sample #2: Alphabetic Letters
This is a sample of letters that a child wrote. The letters are not traced but written freehand.
- Is there any part of this sample that stands out to you?
- Can you describe a situation when you have seen children writing like this?
- What are your thoughts about the importance of young children forming and making letters?

Sample #3: Drawing
This is a young child's drawing. There are no letters or words on the page.
- Is there any part of this sample that stands out to you? Why?
- Can you describe a situation when you have seen children writing like this?
- What are your thoughts about the importance of young children drawing?

Sample #4: 'Scribbles'
This is another sample from a young child.
- Is there any part of this sample that stands out to you? Why
- Can you describe a situation when you have seen children writing like this?
- What are your thoughts concerning the importance of 'scribbling'?

Sample #5: Typed Letters on a computer
This is a printed out document of a four-year-old child's typing on the computer.
- Are there any parts of this sample that stand out to you? Why?
- Can you describe a situation when you have seen children writing like this?
- What are your thoughts on the importance of young children typing at a computer?

Sample #6: Painting
This is a painting sample. The child used a brush, colored paints, and an easel to create this.
- Are there any parts of this sample that stand out to you? Why?
- Can you describe a situation when you have seen children writing like this?
- What are your thoughts on the importance of young children painting?

I have only brought in six samples today; however, I could bring in countless others. Are there any other forms of young children's symbolic representation that you would like to discuss? Have questions about?

Is there anything else that you would like to discuss further about the samples here today?

When your child comes home from school, what kinds of symbolic representation do they bring? Do they discuss these with you? What do they say? What are your thoughts on the symbolic representation that they bring home?

       Probe 1: Do you see certain types of representation more than others (refer to the six different samples that are brought for the discussion)? If so, what types does your child more frequently bring home?

Does your child discuss the samples they bring home with you? If so, what are some of the things they say?

       Probe 1: Do they show any emotions about the samples they bring? Can you please describe of give specific examples?

What are your thoughts on the symbolic representation that they bring home?

       Probe 1: What types of samples do you enjoy seeing come home from school? Why?

       Probe 2: Do you place any of your children's work on display? Where? Which ones do you choose to place on display?

APPENDIX G

Interview Protocol

****
Interviewee:
Location:
Date:
Time Began:
Time End:
****
FIRST: Ask participant for the child's work sample. Sample will be basis for discussion.

1. Take me through a typical weekday with you and your child. From the time you wake

up in the morning until you go to bed at night, what types of interactions do you have

with your child?

2. Describe a typical weekend with you and your child.

3. What things related to symbolic representation, such as drawing and writing might you

do with your child on a weekday that you would not do with him or her on the weekend?

Why?

4. What things related to symbolic representation might you do with your child on the

weekend that you would not do with him or her during the week? Why?

5. As you know, I am interested in parents' interactions with their children regarding

different forms of representation, such as drawing and writing. An important part of these

interactions are parents' own experiences. I am wondering if you can tell me about your

experiences writing or drawing growing up. What do you remember about various forms

of symbolic representation (i.e. handwriting, tracing letters, drawing) in your household growing up? Did you write or draw with your mom, dad, sibling, etc.? How do you see this shaping your interactions around various forms of symbolic representation with your own children?

6. Can you tell me about other people or things that have influenced how you interact with your child during activities such as drawing and writing? Have your experiences with your child's preschool impacted your interactions? Have your own personal experiences influenced how you interact with your child concerning symbolic representation?

7. Can you tell me a little bit about the sample you are sharing?

8. Where was your child when he/she made this?

    Is this an area commonly used by your child?

    If so, what else does he/she do in this area?

9. Was this something that your child did independently or did he/she work with someone else?

    If worked with someone else:

    -Who did he/she work with?

    -Who initiated the activity?

    -How much guidance was given to the child during the activity?

    - Did your child pick out the materials to use or were they given to him/her?

    - What kinds of materials are available to him/her?

    If worked independently:

- Was this initiated by you or your child (i.e., I want to make a card for grandma vs. Why don't you write a card to your grandma).

- Did your child pick out the materials to use or were they given to him/her?

- What kinds of materials are available to him/her?

10. Did your child tell you anything in particular about this sample? If so, what did he/she say?

11. What made you decide to select this sample to share today?

12. Is this a good representation of what your child routinely creates at home?

If yes: Can you provide more detail or give me some examples?

If no: Can you explain or provide more detail about what is routine?

13. Are there times in which your child is indirectly exposed to writing, drawing, etc. (i.e. writing checks, making grocery lists, typing on the computer)? If so, what are they?

14. Are the experiences that you and your child have with (various forms of) writing similar to those you experienced as a child? Could you possibly elaborate?

15. Do you think your own experiences (throughout participant's life) with various forms of writing impact how you interact with your child?

16. Is there anything that you have questions on, would like to discuss, or reiterate?

APPENDIX H

Observation Protocol

****
Participant:
Location:
Date:
Time Began:
Time End:
****

At the end of the parent semi-structured interview, bring out a new toy. Explain to parent that I brought the new toy for you and your child.

I brought this for you and your child as a gift for participating in the study. Why don't you spend a few minutes exploring it together as I observe you before I leave?

Setting:
- Where do parent and child go when given the Play Desk?
  - o Is this a location that both parent and child seemed to gravitate towards (an area in the home that appears to be one which different forms of literacy occur?)
  - o What does this area look like?

Materials:
- Are there any materials that the child might use to create symbolic representation? If so, are they easily accessible to the child?
- What materials/objects from the Play Desk does the child seem most interested in? The parent? How do they use the materials in the Play Desk?
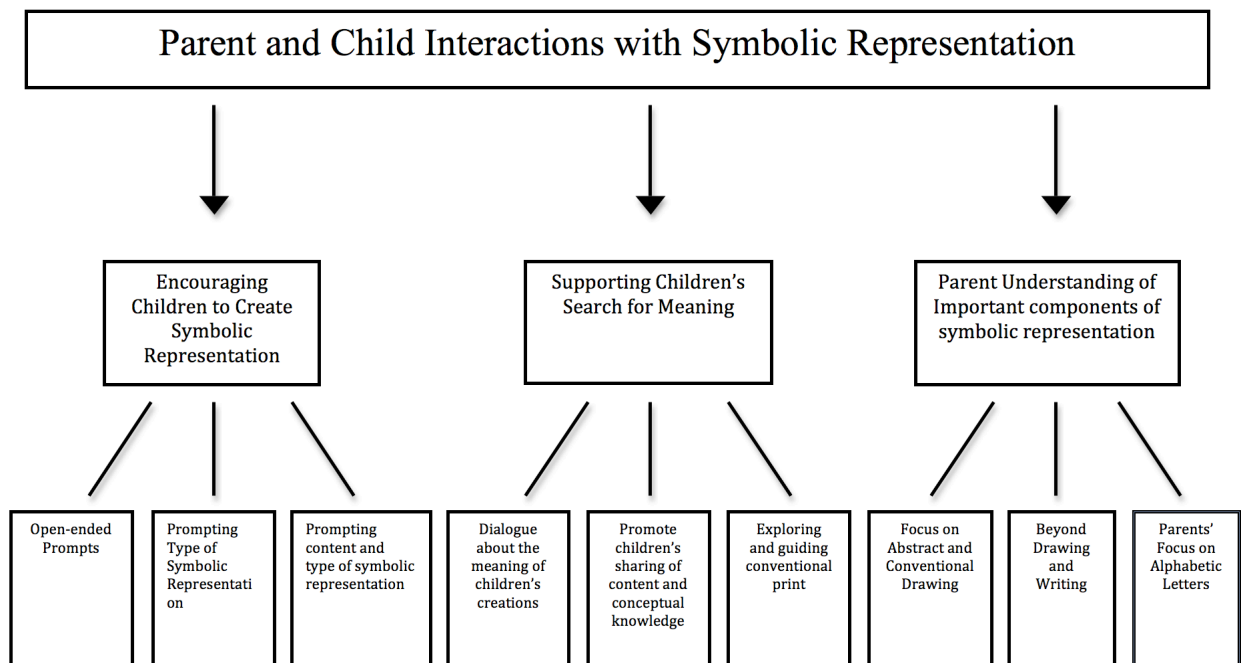
Interactions/Conversations:
- Where is the parent positioning himself/herself in relation to the child and the Play Desk?
- What kind of conversation are the parent and child having during the activity? Is the parent giving explicit directions? Is the child asking lots of questions?
- Are there any nonverbal cues?

Dissertation Code Book

This code book represents the latest iteration of data analysis, as discussed in Chapter 3 and reported in Chapter 4. The overarching theme, "Parent and Child Interactions with Symbolic Representation" unified my three codes and their subcodes, as demonstrated in the graphic below. Additionally, definitions of codes, subcodes, and examples are provided.

```
┌─────────────────────────────────────────────────────────────────────┐
│      Parent and Child Interactions with Symbolic Representation      │
└─────────────────────────────────────────────────────────────────────┘
           │                         │                       │
           ▼                         ▼                       ▼
┌──────────────────┐    ┌──────────────────┐    ┌──────────────────────┐
│   Encouraging    │    │Supporting Children's│  │Parent Understanding of│
│ Children to Create│   │  Search for Meaning │  │Important components of│
│    Symbolic      │    │                    │   │symbolic representation│
│  Representation  │    │                    │   │                      │
└──────────────────┘    └──────────────────┘    └──────────────────────┘
```

| Open-ended Prompts | Prompting Type of Symbolic Representation | Prompting content and type of symbolic representation | Dialogue about the meaning of children's creations | Promote children's sharing of content and conceptual knowledge | Exploring and guiding conventional print | Focus on Abstract and Conventional Drawing | Beyond Drawing and Writing | Parents' Focus on Alphabetic Letters |

THEME

Parent-Child Interactions with Symbolic Representation

Statements and observations about interactions parents have with their children' when creating, discussing, or seeking to understand young children's symbolic representation.

Codes

1. Encouraging Children to Create Symbolic Representation: Ways parents encourage their children to create symbolic representation

    a. Open-ended prompts: parent prompts that were broad, open-ended, and encouraged their child to create.

        Example: *Kenneth -"What are you going to make?"*

    b. Prompting type of symbolic representation: parent prompts that encouraged children to create with a specific form of symbolic representation.

        Example: *Leslie -"What would you like to write?"*

    c. Prompting content and type of symbolic representation: parents' prompts specifying both the content of the message and the type of symbolic representation they use to create the message.

        Example: *Carrie -"I said 'let's draw Turbo.'"*

2. Supporting Children's Search for Meaning: Ways parents engage children in conversations about symbolic representation and how they adjust their conversations according to the type of symbolic representation created

    a. **Dialogue about the meaning of children's creations**: parents engage their children in conversations about their work samples to help understand the meaning and purpose behind what they've created (specifically drawings and more abstract forms of symbolic representation).

Example: *Cynthia -"I think that our perception changes when we know that there is a story behind it and so I mean that's why we always ask when Jackson comes home, 'what is this a picture of . . . I think that makes a difference having a story behind it . . . how we perceive it."*

b. **Promote children's sharing of content and conceptual knowledge**: Conversations with children about their knowledge of the subject matter or content of their work sample.

Example: *Elizabeth (during observation) asking her son to identify the various parts of the helicopter while he was drawing it.*

c. **Exploring and guiding conventional print**: Conversations with children to promote their knowledge of conventional alphabetic print

Example: *Leslie engaging her daughter in a conversation around the letters she wrote: "Oooh. . . you drew a little 'd' there. . . A backwards little 'd' but that's d-a-d-d-y."*

3. Parent Understanding of Important Components of Symbolic Representation: Parents' understanding of important aspects of their child's symbolic representation, with more emphasis on conventional forms of symbolic representation (drawing and alphabetic writing).

a. **Focus on abstract and conventional drawing**: parents' emphasis on conventional drawings over scribbles, indicating that they couldn't draw meaning from more abstract forms of symbolic representation; participants who did

indicate interest more abstract creations indicated that they did so for the aesthetic appeal (not the intended message or meaning).

> Example: *Carrie -"It [sample of abstract work sample] wouldn't make the cut for me."*
>
> *Erin -"I think it's just like art. You know? Sometimes it speaks to you."*

b. **Beyond drawing and writing**: parents' interest in work samples containing multiple forms of symbolic representation (e.g., painting and writing)

> Example: *Kenneth-"I like painting and writing [combined] or writing and painting.*

c. **Parents' focus on alphabetic letters**: parents' emphasis or inclination to focus on alphabetic letters over other forms of symbolic representation; some emphasizing kindergarten preparation as support for their focus.

> Example: *Erin-"Maria's teacher has her eye on the kindergarten readiness prize . . . they spend a lot of time doing letters and alphabet . . . and that's helpful. It cues me in to what I could be, being more supportive of."*

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Biography

Nedra L. Cossa graduated from Brookville High School, Lynchburg, Virginia, in 2002. She received her Bachelor of Science from Longwood University in 2006. She was employed as a teacher in Campbell County for five years, working with fourth- and fifth-grade students. She received her Master of Education in Reading from Lynchburg College in 2011. Cossa continued in the field of education, working as a research assistant for three years for two early childhood faculty members at George Mason University. Additionally, she taught preservice teachers as a graduate lecturer at George Mason University. Currently, she is Assistant Professor of Reading at Armstrong State University in Savannah, Georgia. Her research interests include parents' understandings of emergent writing, children's emergent writing development, and preservice teacher education.