

A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF TEACHER PRACTICES AND FAMILY
PERSPECTIVES ON INCORPORATING FUNDS OF KNOWLEDGE IN EARLY
LITERACY LEARNING

by

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DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my husband, Jimmy, who has supported me with love and patience throughout this process, and to my grandmother, Dorothy Snyder, who taught me the value of persistence.

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ABSTRACT

A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF TEACHER PRACTICES AND FAMILY PERSPECTIVES ON INCORPORATING FUNDS OF KNOWLEDGE IN EARLY LITERACY LEARNING.

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This study examined teacher and parent perspectives of early literacy learning to begin to document practices that are used to teach literacy to culturally and/or economically diverse kindergarten students. Through individual interviews with kindergarten teachers and classroom visits to collect observational and artifact data, teachers were provided with an opportunity to articulate practices they believe have been effective in teaching early literacy skills. Using a voluntary written survey, the parents of children in the teacher participants’ classes were provided an opportunity to share their perspectives on early literacy learning, their connections with the school and teacher, and what home activities they believe have been and are most important to prepare their children for school-based literacy learning. The data were analyzed using a constant comparative method and grounded theory. Findings showed that both the teacher and parent

participants' ideas about the early literacy skills children needed to be successful in kindergarten were aligned. Teachers reported using both informal and formal assessment measures to determine a baseline of student knowledge and to measure student progress. The teachers also described engaging in a number of strategies, including literacy, oral language, and multimodal, to allow students to use their funds of knowledge to make connections to the school curriculum. Parents reported their involvement in their children's education, including documenting a number of strategies that they used at home to build early literacy skills. Implications of the study for research and practice were also provided. These included the possibility of using dramatic play as a curriculum strategy to gain information regarding students' funds of knowledge and the need for greater accessibility to quality preschool programs for all young children.

1: Introduction

Picture a kindergarten classroom during language arts instruction. A group of students sits at a table copying letters of the alphabet into small paper journals. Another group sits and listens with headphones to books being read on tape. Other students sit with the teacher in a guided reading group learning to read sight words in books with colorful pictures. Now picture one of these students at home. The child sits on the couch coloring while *Wheel of Fortune* is on the television in the background. Her mother is at the table making a grocery list of things to pick up on the way home from the evening church service they are going to attend. What do these two scenes have in common? Both sets of activities are helping to build the child's early literacy skills; however, there is often a misconception that the teacher-supported school activities are more important than family activities for building these skills. To change this misconception, it becomes important, then, to ask what teachers and parents are doing to build connections between home and school to allow literacy education to incorporate learning from both settings.

Statement of the Problem

Differing perspectives regarding school readiness skills needed for students to begin literacy learning in kindergarten have created challenges for both teachers and parents of young students. Students in kindergarten classrooms come from a variety of backgrounds and experiences that can be foundational for and aid in the development of literacy skills; however, not all students' home experiences prior to school directly relate

to what Lonigan (2006a) described as the “key” emergent literacy skills: phonological awareness, print knowledge, and oral language. These skills are often the ones used to determine the achievement gap in the performance of students from low income and/or minority backgrounds from that of middle to upper class Caucasian children. By using culturally-responsive teaching practices that connect students’ *funds of knowledge*, or background knowledge from both home and school, to classroom curriculum, it is thought that teachers can effectively foster early literacy skills while tapping into student experiences and building important relationships with parents (Gay, 2000; Gonzalez, Moll, & Amanti, 2005; Whitmore & Norton-Meier, 2008). Researchers report that much of the research in the area of family literacy has come from a deficit approach (Auerbach, 1995; Caspe, 2003; Gregory, 1998; Reyes & Torres, 2007). This approach assumes that parents need to be taught correct methods of working with their children to build early literacy skills. However, a recent shift in both quantitative and qualitative research has begun to examine what key emergent literacy skills can develop in classrooms when teachers view home experiences as an integral and positive part of student learning. Nonetheless, the question remains, how do teachers incorporate learning from home literacy activities into the early literacy curriculum to help students make the connections that support literacy learning?

Background of the Problem

This chapter provides an overview of issues related to family literacy and the funds of knowledge approach to teaching described by Gonzalez, Moll, and Amanti (2005). In addition, it explores why it is important to study the practices classroom

teachers use not only to incorporate the background knowledge of culturally and/or socioeconomically diverse kindergarten students in the classroom, but also to encourage parents or significant caregivers to participate in early literacy instruction at home.

Family literacy. In her groundbreaking 1983 ethnographic study, Shirley Brice Heath showed that children growing up in a low socioeconomic community were exposed to a variety of early literacy building skills that differed from the traditional approach of learning the ABCs. These children experienced literacy through daily activities like cooking, list making, and reading the paper and the Bible, activities that were considered a vital part of community life. Even without direct instruction in literacy skills, such as phonological awareness or shared storybook reading, the children developed literacy competencies that were considered part of the fabric of their community culture (Heath, 1983). Later, McLane and McNamee (1990) reported that children learn about reading from watching adults interact with print in their environment. They noted that while children who experience this type of home literacy may not be fluent readers when they enter school, they have familiarity with print and the concept of reading that provides them with some of the background skills needed to benefit from formal literacy instruction. Stainthorp and Hughes (2000) later echoed McLane and McNamee's position that children develop early literacy practices by watching the daily literacy practices of their families. Although it has been suggested by researchers Arnold and Doctoroff (2003) that the literacy of children from low-income or minority families may suffer from lack of exposure to print in the home environment, other researchers including Heath (1983), Teale (1986), Delgado-Gaitan (1987), Purcell-

Gates (1996), and Duke and Purcell-Gates (2003) have reported that this may not be the case. For instance, in her study of eight Mexican immigrant families, Delgado-Gaitan (1987) found that families do engage in a number of daily literacy practices like reading and writing items for interpersonal or school communication. In more recent research, van Steensel (2006) noted in his study of children's literacy development in the home environment, although many of the families he worked with could be seen as having a lack of literacy exposure in the home environment, most of the families regularly engaged their children in school-related literacy events. Whitmore and Norton-Meier (2008) presented case studies of two mothers who involved themselves in their children's literacy education despite the difficulties each of the mothers had faced while in school. Their studies showed the importance of the willingness of the children's teachers to incorporate culturally responsive teaching (Gay, 2000) and a funds of knowledge (Gonzalez et al., 2005) approach to include parents in building the early literacy skills of the students.

Culturally-responsive teaching and funds of knowledge. Culturally-responsive teaching encourages teachers to move beyond what is considered the dominant culture from the school's perspective to learn more about the cultural practices of the community at-large (Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1994). The construct of culturally-responsive teaching developed from observations that making connections between home and instructional knowledge for students helped them to have a better understanding of the material and opened pathways for classroom discussions (Gay, 2000). A funds of knowledge approach to teaching, discussed by Gonzalez et al. (2005), takes culturally-

responsive teaching a step further and advocates that students have background knowledge from both home and school that may be used to connect to classroom learning. When teachers incorporate children's prior knowledge and experiences into their instruction children can feel part of the learning community (Nieto, 2010).

Whitmore and Norton-Meier (2008) substantiated a funds of knowledge approach in their study by concluding that when teachers view students' homes as places that are "practicing educational settings, rich with literacy resources and expertise...[they may be able]...to redefine expectations for children and families traditionally labeled 'at-risk'" (p. 460). Pahl (2007) also described the benefits of using a funds of knowledge approach to family literacy. In her longitudinal ethnographic study, Pahl examined how a Turkish child in England made sense of learning early reading skills when his teacher encouraged him to connect his past home experiences to the material taught in the classroom. This research continues to support the importance of connecting homes and schools in an effort to enhance the educational experiences of children, but the question remains as to how kindergarten teachers incorporate standards-based literacy learning with the knowledge that children bring from home.

School readiness concerns for home and school. As early as 1908 in *The Psychology and Pedagogy of Reading*, Edmund Huey discussed the importance of parental involvement in children's learning, noting it was easy to determine which children had practiced reading at home, since they were able to read "naturally." He also stated that, "The school of the future will have as one of its important duties the instruction of parents in the means of assisting the child's natural learning in the home"

(Huey, 1908, p. 312). One hundred years later, connecting families and schools in the interest of developing the literacy skills of young children continues to be a challenge in both research and practice. Expectations of what early literacy skills children need when they enter kindergarten are unclear for parents and teachers. Goldenberg (2001) indicated that education goals developed for the year 2000 by the United States emphasized the importance of parental involvement in helping children build school readiness skills because they are highly influential in supporting their children's education prior to school. Furthermore, both Goldenberg (2001) and Kraft-Sayre and Pianta (2001) discussed the importance of building parent and school relationships to help clarify readiness expectations prior to children attending kindergarten. One of the main reasons that school readiness continues to be confusing for parents and teachers is that it is not clearly defined in education policy or research. In addition, school readiness has not been defined by practitioners, leaving school personnel to decide what skills they consider to be essential for children beginning kindergarten. Thus, the concept of school readiness may be different from school district to school district or even from school to school.

In their chapter on early education policy, Kagan and Kauerz (2007) discussed some of the difficulties with defining school readiness. They reported that although public schooling, including kindergarten, is seen as a right in the United States, the programs serving young children may vary depending on state and local education boards. This variability, combined with increasing federal interest in student outcomes, has made defining school readiness a difficult task (Kagan & Kauerz, 2007). Sayeski, Burgess, Pianta, and Lloyd (2001) described six readiness skills students need to engage

in early literacy: alphabet knowledge, phonological awareness, expressive and receptive language, verbal memory, concepts of print, and early writing. Lonigan (2006) reduced these to three “key” emergent literacy skills: phonological awareness, print knowledge, and oral language skills; however, he also advocated that in order for children to be ready to read, they should have some preschool exposure to curriculum addressing these skills. The necessity of preschool for kindergarten readiness already places some children at a disadvantage, because not all parents can send their children to preschool and some may choose not to for a variety of reasons (American Federation of Teachers, 2002). In addition, some parents whose children do not attend preschool may have specific views on the parental role in the education of the children, viewing learning to read as a skill that should be cultivated by direct instruction in the school setting or as a skill that is related to moral or religious purposes that do not pertain to the materials children bring home from school (Anderson, 1995; Gregory, 1998; Levinson, 2007; Sonnenschein, Baker, Serpell, Scher, Truitt, & Munsterman, 1997). Anderson, Fagan, and Cronin (1995) and Nebrig (2008) found that low income parents considered early literacy activities important for school success, but noted that they were unsure about what kinds of activities would be beneficial to their children.

A joint statement on developmentally appropriate practices for teaching children to read and write, published by the International Reading Association and the National Association for the Education of Young Children (Neuman, Coople, & Bredekamp, 1998), reported that kindergarten classes generally have children from a wide range of background experiences with literacy prior to attending school. Students in classes could

be functioning from between two to three years below or above what is considered by the school division to be early literacy skills for school readiness, making it challenging for teachers to meet the needs of all students. The confusion over defining school readiness for early literacy, the lack of adequate preschool programs, parental illiteracy, parental job commitments, language barriers, and cultural beliefs regarding education, are only a few of the factors that have led to a climate of frustration and anxiety for both parents entering the public school system and for the teachers preparing to educate kindergarten students in the United States and other countries. Family literacy programs, especially those using a funds of knowledge approach, are one opportunity that can allow parents and teachers to discuss school readiness concerns and to work together to promote the importance of appropriate literacy education for young students.

Family beliefs. Family literacy is the study of how families incorporate literacy skills into their home activities. While the field of family literacy has been addressing parental involvement in literacy education at home since the early 1980s, it has expanded to investigate the ways that extended family members, siblings, and intergenerational programs can impact children's literacy skill building (Gregory, 1998, 2004; Gregory, Arju, Jessel, Kenner, & Ruby, 2007; Williams & Gregory, 2001; Nurss, 2000; Paratore, 2005; Volk & De Acosta, 2001; Weinstein, 1998; Williams & Gregory, 2001). In addition, school-based programs that promote family literacy have also grown, opening up the opportunity for children attending school to share what they have learned at home and in the community as part of their classroom curriculum (Whitmore & Norton-Meier,

2008). These activities have been described as creating a “third space” where children can explore how their home and school cultures connect (Pahl & Kelly, 2005).

Some of the earlier family literacy studies were based on a *deficit* model that assumes parents, particularly from low socioeconomic or minority backgrounds do not use *appropriate* methods for teaching in the home (Auerbach, 1995; Caspe, 2003). Programs from this model, although intended to increase family involvement in literacy education, are generally based on the belief that families, particularly those who may be low income and/or from a cultural minority, do not understand how to teach children early literacy skills. These programs attempt to *correct* the problem by teaching families school-based activities to use at home (Caspe, 2003; Gregory, 1998; Reyes & Torres, 2007). Researchers have begun to address the deficit approach by gaining more descriptive information regarding what activities families are using in home and community settings to further literacy instruction for young and school-aged children (Baker & Scher, 2002; Compton-Lilly, 2007; Gregory, Arju, Jessel, Kenner, & Ruby, 2007; Heath, 1983; Hull & Shultz, 2002; Loudin, 1998; Nistler & Maiers, 1999). While previous studies have focused primarily on the students’ standardized reading test performance, more recent studies have brought attention to the opportunity to study home, school, and community literacy activities. Techniques, such as home observations and parent interviews, have allowed researchers to investigate funds of knowledge in family practices.

Teacher beliefs and the deficit model. School practitioners, including teachers, may also tend to view family educational practices from a deficit model. Compton-Lilly

(2007) reported that “tensions clearly exist between official reading capital and the local capital related to reading and schooling possessed by families” (p. 93). Teachers’ assumptions regarding the impact of home influences on students’ ability to learn to read may affect their interactions with students both socially and with the curriculum (Auerbach, 1989; Foote & Linder, 2000; Gregory, 1998). For example, Auerbach (1989) described how teachers may engage in teaching from either a deficit or wealth model. The deficit model assumes that home literacy learning does not impact a student’s ability to learn literacy skills in the classroom, while teachers who come from a wealth model look at home experiences as a building block for school curriculum (Auerbach, 1989). Teachers, who have learned to practice from the deficit model, may have misconceptions regarding the ability of students that they identify as *at-risk* for academic failure like students from low-income and/or minority or English as a Second Language homes (Swadener, 1990).

Teacher assumptions about families. In later research, Auerbach (1995) discussed some teachers’ assumptions that “language minority children come from literacy-impoverished home environments” (p. 65). Interviews with teachers conducted by Edwards, McMilon, Turner, and Laier (2001) showed that teachers believed that students who came from “violent neighborhoods and ‘unstable’ homes” came to school without the readiness skills for literacy (p. 147). Gregory (1998) also discussed a series of assumptions by school practitioners in the United Kingdom that described teachers’ negative opinions of parents who do not engage in school-based literacy activities with their children. These negative opinions developed regardless of what activities parents

did participate in with their children at home or regardless of parental ability and comfort levels with understanding the school-devised activities. Misunderstandings regarding cultural traditions, language barriers, and family obligations may lead teachers to believe that parents are not invested in their children's education because of their lack of involvement in the school setting or with homework assignments (Arnold, Zeljo, Doctoroff, & Ortiz, 2008). One way to help limit misunderstandings described by Kidd, Sanchez, and Thorp (2007, 2008) was encouraging preservice teachers to read and interact with culturally and/or economically diverse families. This practice enabled these teachers to have a better understanding of their own assumptions and biases while also developing respect for the important role that families play in the education of their children. Removing misunderstandings and communication barriers by forming partnerships between parents, teachers, and communities, is associated with beginning the collaboration to increase literacy skills and academic success (Amstutz, 2000; Nistler & Maiers, 1999).

Significance of the Problem

Data on how teachers form connections with families through literacy shed light not only on teacher perspectives about families, but also on how teachers use this information to incorporate students' funds of knowledge in the classroom. Building relationships between families, students, and teachers is vital to increasing the achievement of students who come from backgrounds that may have in the past been seen as at-risk for academic failure (O'Conner & McCartney, 2007). Articulating the

importance of building positive home and school relationships from families' first experiences with the education process, Nistler and Maiers (1999) stated,

When parents believe the school has their needs and those of their children at heart, they are more willing to be involved and supportive. Removing barriers to parent and teacher relations becomes a mindset. When teachers believe there is value in working with parents and commit to this belief, worthwhile time and energy are invested to this end. Family literacy is not about program guidelines, policy, or money; it is about relationships (p. 124).

When parents and teachers work together to build literacy skills in young children, it can significantly reduce the achievement gap in schools (Ladson-Billings, 2006; Ramey & Ramey, 2004; Rothstein, 2004). Limiting the achievement gap can then allow all students, regardless of their cultural or socioeconomic backgrounds, to have access to educational opportunities. In addition, the data on teacher and parent perspectives can be used to help school districts make data-driven decisions regarding their policies and practices about literacy.

Importance of the Study

The achievement gap between Caucasian students and minority students continues to be an area of concern in American education. This gap has historically demonstrated evidence that the academic performance of minority students is below that of Caucasian students. Evidence of the beginning of the gap is present in information from early education settings, including both preschool settings and the home. In fact, literacy research has shown that young students who do not live in language-rich

environments have vocabulary, memory, print, and oral language deficits that directly impact their early reading skills (Neuman, 2006; Sayeski, Burgess, Pianta, & Lloyd, 2001). These students may also be academically up to two years behind students who are exposed to language-rich environments (Ramey & Ramey, 2004). They may begin kindergarten with vocabularies that are noticeably smaller than other students their age, may not know the letters of the alphabet, and may not be familiar with the use of books and print (Kafer, 2004). The 1998 report from the National Reading Panel noted that if children do not learn to read well in the first few years of school, they will most likely have continued poor school performance (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998). This poor performance coupled with differences between a child's home cultural experience and the general culture of the school can lead to difficulties with children understanding the literacy curriculum and can delay the development of emergent literacy. This study is important because it attempts to document strategies that teachers are using in the kindergarten classroom setting to address concerns for building home and cultural connections with students to support their readiness for literacy learning.

Purpose of the Study and Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to investigate teacher and parent perspectives of early literacy learning in order to begin to document practices that are used to teach literacy to culturally and/or economically diverse kindergarten students. In this study, teachers were provided with an opportunity to convey their perspectives regarding practices that help students make connections to the kindergarten literacy curriculum. Parents were also provided a chance to share their perspectives on early literacy learning,

to share their connections with the school and teacher, and to share what home activities they believe have been and are most important for their children to be ready for school-based literacy learning. The following research questions formed the basis for inquiry.

Research Question 1. How do kindergarten teachers define school readiness in terms of early literacy skills?

Research Question 2. How do teachers' perspectives and/or beliefs influence the way they approach teaching beginning literacy?

Research Question 3. What perspectives do teachers hold regarding home and school connections for early literacy?

Research Question 4. What are parent perspectives about the home and school connection and what do they think will help their children be successful in kindergarten?

Research Question 5. How have interactions with their child's school impacted the way parents view themselves as a part of teaching early literacy skills to their children?

Definition of Key Terms

Achievement gap - A growing trend of a gap in educational performance between children from Caucasian middle- to upper middle-class homes and children who come from lower income and/or culturally diverse families (Nieto, 2010).

Culturally responsive teaching - A multidimensional view of students that allows teachers to move beyond what is considered the dominant culture from the school's

perspective and learn more about the cultural practices of the community at-large. (Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1994).

Early literacy - Pre-literacy and literacy skills that are developed by children prior to attending school and while they are in preschool or kindergarten programs.

Emergent literacy - “Emergent literacy is concerned with the earliest phases of literacy development, the period between birth and the time when children read and write conventionally” (Sulzby & Teale, 1991 p. 728). It supports the concept that children are continuously learning how to use print and oral language from a series of interactions with their environment.

Family literacy - Family literacy is the study of how families incorporate literacy skills into their home activities (Purcell-Gates, 2000).

Funds of knowledge - Funds of knowledge are described as “the essential cultural practices and bodies of knowledge and information that houses [people] use to survive, to get ahead, or to thrive” (Moll, 1992, p. 21).

Parent - A person who is the primary caretaker of a child. This person may or may not be directly related to the child.

School readiness - The set of skills children are expected to have before coming to the public school setting or kindergarten. Lonigan has described the *key* literacy readiness skills as phonological awareness, print knowledge, and oral language skills; however, there is no consensus on the definition of school readiness (Lonigan, 2006b).

Organization of the Study

This study examined teacher perspectives on literacy learning by documenting practices that teachers are using to help children connect to the kindergarten literacy curriculum. The study also investigated parental perspectives by offering parents an opportunity to share information regarding their role in literacy education both at home and at school. Using data from teacher interviews, parent surveys, classroom artifacts, photographs, research memos, and classroom visits, a set of research questions were explored in an attempt to expand the body of literature about early literacy instruction for children with diverse background experiences.

In the next chapter, relevant literature is reviewed to provide the connections between this study and the broader literature of emergent and family literacy, culturally responsive teaching and the funds of knowledge approach, and the achievement gap. Chapter 3 describes the methods used to gather the study data. Chapter 4 provides an analysis of that data. Chapter 5 presents a discussion of the data analysis, including limitations of the study and implications for research and practice.

2: Review of the Literature

This literature review provides the reader with background on key literature pertaining to the areas of emergent literacy, family literacy, and school readiness related to this study. It also provides a brief overview of achievement gap research and its connection to culturally responsive teaching practices that use a funds of knowledge approach for building connections with students and their parents.

Emergent Literacy

The study of early literacy skills development has roots in both education and developmental psychology. Sulzby and Teale (1991) describe emergent literacy as “concerned with the earliest phases of literacy development, the period between birth and the time when children read and write conventionally” (p. 728). Emergent literacy supports the concept that children are continuously learning how to use print and oral language from a series of interactions with their environment. The construct of emergent literacy is in contrast to the *reading readiness* model that suggests “young children need to be taught a series of prerequisite skills prior to reading, and that writing should be delayed until the children were reading” (Yaden, Rowe, & MacGillivray, 2000, p. 425). This section provides a historical overview of emergent literacy that serves as a framework for more current research that will be reviewed in later sections.

In the early 1990s, Mason and Sinha (1993) examined many of the early studies supporting emergent literacy theory that were completed by researchers such as Clay

(1979) and Heath (1983) and included the perspectives that seemed to be present in each work. These perspectives incorporated the idea that literacy begins prior to formal instruction and includes not only decoding, but also the idea that a child's point of view and social setting have to be acknowledged (Mason & Sinha, 1993). The early studies closely matched concepts present in Vygotsky's sociocultural learning theory.

Sociocultural learning. Lev Vygotsky, a Russian psychologist, developed the theory of sociocultural learning and the concept of the zone of proximal development, which are two ideas that directly impact emergent literacy. Vygotsky (1978) proposed that learning is socially-mediated, meaning that learning is advanced through the social interactions of people. In addition, he believed that people use tools to facilitate their learning, with language as the common tool all humans use to share thoughts and ideas. Kozulin (2003) expanded on Vygotsky's theory noting that each culture has its own set of tools, including language, signs, and gestures, that enable them to construct meaning. Because of this idea regarding cultural tools, children in any given school classroom may have different constructs for the same idea, and teachers must serve as mediators for negotiating the shared classroom meaning of information. Matthews (1996) anticipated that due to cultural differences, in a Vygotskian classroom, a core curriculum might not be effective for all students. Matthews also proposed that it is through continual assessment in the learning environment that children are able to work to their full potential.

When specifically discussing school readiness skills, Vygotsky (1978) noted that children should not be expected to come to school with skills directly related to reading

and writing. He thought, instead, that it was more important for children to begin school with an understanding of the cultural tools of their family and community, specifically language. Vygotsky (1978) proposed that it was the role of teachers to provide children with social experiences and activities that would allow them to learn to modify their prior knowledge to meet the demands of the classroom. Expanding on Vygotsky's original theory, Bodrova and Leong (2003) indicated that school readiness for kindergarten students should develop within the first few months of school and should be an on-going process instead of one that is measured prior to school attendance. From this perspective, all children should be ready to attend school as long as they have a developed language system.

According to Vygotsky (1978), if children are taught using tasks that have real world meaning, it is easier for them to internalize new concepts. Matthews (1996) used writing as an example of an emergent literacy skill that has real world applications that can be taught in the classroom. For example, she noted that allowing children to write letters or journals about themselves aided them in connecting their prior knowledge to the classroom curriculum. Another naturalistic way Vygotsky proposed that children could learn emergent literacy skills is during sociodramatic play.

Connection of play to emergent literacy. Vygotsky (1977) called make-believe play the natural environment for young children to learn language, reading, and writing skills. Play allows children to develop language skills by interacting with others and the social context of the activity directly influences the child's understanding of language and emergent literacy skills (Bodrova & Leong, 2007a). Bodrova and Leong (2003, 2007a)

discussed the use of play as a means for children to mediate what they already know with what they are learning. Play also allows children to practice self-regulation, since in most make-believe play, children abide by rules. In addition, play is an example of scaffolding, because children watch what others in their environment are doing and use these demonstrations to attempt to engage in problem-solving activities on their own (Duncan & Lockwood, 2008). Play allows children to engage all of their senses when learning a new concept. During play interactions, children develop language as they talk together to share ideas, express feelings, and participate in dialogue. They also construct their own understanding of the world around them (Duncan & Lockwood, 2008).

Children at play use emerging skills during the imaginary situation that might be still developing. In addition, play allows opportunities for helping children make connections between their activities at home and what they are learning in school (Hall, 2007). Bodrova and Leong (2007a) described several classroom examples of children modeling emergent literacy skills, such as creating a grocery list when playing grocery store and learning to sit at circle time while playing school. Bodrova and Leong (2007b) also indicated that make-believe play provides children with an opportunity to “master the symbolic nature of words” (p. 193) by using toys in representational fashions, such as pretending a block is a phone. Representational play allows children to understand the relationship between words and objects and is a precursor to understanding the written word. Representational play also enables children to use an object to stand for or symbolize something else, as words do in reading. Recent research studies have begun to answer the call from Morrow and Schickendanz (2006) for teachers to reincorporate

dramatic play as a curriculum strategy for teaching emergent literacy skills in the kindergarten setting (Graue, 2010; Gupta, 2009; Lysaker, Wheat, & Benson, 2010; Roskos, Christie, & Whitman, 2010). Using dramatic play in instruction of literacy skills also allows children to work within their zone of proximal development to increase their learning.

Zone of proximal development. The *zone of proximal development*, is Vygotsky's term for the place in learning where children are able to investigate new concepts with modeled help (Vygotsky, 1978). According to Vygotsky (1987) "What the child is able to do in collaboration today, he will be able to do independently tomorrow" (p. 211). Dixon-Krauss (1996a) explained Vygotsky's concept of the zone of proximal development by discussing two types of concepts: spontaneous and scientific. She referenced an earlier work of Vygotsky from 1962 that reported that children develop concepts first in a spontaneous manner. Spontaneous concepts come from the everyday experiences of children and how they understand their meaning (Dixon-Krauss, 1996a; Panofsky, John-Steiner, & Blackwell, 1990). Spontaneous concepts can also be considered to be part of a child's funds of knowledge, or the understanding of how experiences impact a child's world view (Au, 1990; Dixon-Krauss, 1996b; Karpov, 2003). Once children have had formal instruction, they begin to learn scientific concepts. Scientific concepts are also culturally-based, but require students to formulate their own ideas by interacting with the concepts with teachers and/or peers (Dixon-Krauss, 1996b). Scaffolding is one way that children can begin to integrate spontaneous and scientific knowledge. Scaffolding (i.e., providing teacher support for an activity that is gradually reduced as the student learns

the process) helps children move further within, or maximize, their efforts within their zone of proximal development and internalize the learning process. In relation to building emergent literacy skills, modeling, questioning, and working with peer partners are all scaffolding strategies based on Vygotskian principles that can help students learn to read and write by connecting these activities to familiar cultural activities from home (Gallimore & Tharp, 1990; Tudge, 1990).

In a classroom setting, teachers use scaffolding both to assess a child's zone of proximal development and to instruct a child within his or her zone. Johnson and Keier (2010) stated that often in classrooms, students are asked to complete tasks that are outside of their zone of proximal development, which leads to frustration for both the student and teacher. They provided several examples of using scaffolding to help find an appropriate zone for student instruction. One example is the teacher writing a morning message on the board for the students. Students would then be asked to interact with the message based on their level of knowledge. For instance, one student may be asked to come up to the message and circle all the words beginning with the letter *m*, while another student might be asked to read all the letter *m* words, and yet another might be asked to provide another word with the letter *m* that would make sense in the sentence.

Johnson and Keier (2010) stressed that instruction in the zone of proximal development is not a linear process and may need to change based on the child's response to activities. They also noted that during instruction in a classroom with young students learning to read, it is important for students to begin to internalize what they have learned so they can mediate their own learning. In kindergarten-aged students, internalization of

information can be observed as they move from using public speech, or discussing their reading aloud, to private speech, where they are able to remind themselves of reading strategies silently as they read. Bodrova and Leong (2003) provided examples of using scaffolding in literacy instruction, including the Scaffolded Writing method, which helps children learn to write. In this method, the teacher starts by drawing a line for each word while a student speaks what he or she wants to write. The child then repeats the message while pointing to a line for each word. The child then writes a letter or group of letters or symbols on the line to represent the word. As the child begins to internalize the strategy, he or she is expected to complete the process alone, until eventually the need for the lines is extinguished. Bodrova and Leong (2003) also discussed that as children begin to learn the strategy, they use private speech to help remember the words to write and to know what letters to write.

Oral language development. Vygotsky theorized that language was the key tool to learning. Emergent literacy research has supported this idea by demonstrating that the development of oral language skills is the single most important foundational skill needed for a child to be ready to learn to read (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998). Snow et al. (1998) reported that oral language development predicts later success with reading because children with well developed oral language tend to be better able to make connections between the verbal and written word. Storybook reading is one of the most researched strategies for using oral language to build emergent literacy skills. Whitehurst, Arnold, Epstein, Angell, Smith, and Fischel (1994) noted that dialogic reading was an effective strategy to build vocabulary skills. Dialogic reading is a type of storybook reading in

which an adult reads a story to a child and asks questions to connect it to what the child already knows. Dialogic reading helps children become active participants in reading and teaches them to become the storyteller. Whitehurst et al. (1994) found that low-income preschoolers who participated in dialogic reading with both their parents and preschool teachers experienced increases in their expressive vocabulary skills that continued to be present months after the intervention was completed. Whitehurst et al. (1994) reported that this information matched findings from their previous research with upper-income mothers, but cautioned that it was difficult to generalize outcomes from the 1994 study because it involved both teachers and parents.

Senechal and LeFevre (2002) reported in their five-year longitudinal study of parental involvement in reading skills that storybook reading was positively related to gains in children's receptive language skills. In addition, they noted that parents' knowledge of storybooks was predictive of the vocabulary and listening comprehension skills of their children (Senechal & LeFevre, 2002). Weigel, Martin, and Bennett (2005) found similar results regarding language skills in their work. They noted that the parents' literacy habits, activities, and beliefs were associated with a positive relationship to their children's expressive and receptive language scores. In related research studies, interaction between mothers and their children in literacy activities, such as storybook reading and beginning writing, was linked to an enhanced vocabulary, more developed abstract thinking skills, and increased letter-sound and alphabet knowledge skills (Aram & Biron 2004; Haney & Hill, 2004; Morgan, 2005). In addition, a 2006 study by Deckner, Adamson, and Bakeman also showed gains on the Peabody Picture Vocabulary

Test-Revised (PPVT-R) when children read storybooks with their mothers.

Improvements in receptive and expressive language skills on the PPVT-R at both 30 and 42 months of age were also noted. Britto, Brooks-Gunn, and Griffin (2006) found that mothers from low-income African-American families were able to facilitate significant gains in the children's expressive language skills by using strategies like questioning and providing additional information about stories while they were reading picture books. Finally, Senechal (2006), Collins (2005), and Blewitt, Rump, and Shealy (2009) also reported that picture book storytelling led to increased vocabulary skills in the young students they were assessing.

Much of the research on the influence of storybook reading and storytelling on children's early literacy skills has been carried out in the United States; however, in the past decade there has been an increase in international research. Aram and Levin (2002) in Israel and Senechal and LeFevre (2002) in Canada both completed research that supported the idea that children who were exposed to storybooks experienced an increase in receptive language skills as measured by adaptations of the PPVT-R and other assessments. Aram, Most, and Mayafit (2006) and Deckner, Adamson, and Bakeman (2006) also demonstrated gains in children's receptive language as measured by the PPVT-R. Aram et al.'s (2006) study in Israel examined storybook telling between mothers and kindergarteners with hearing loss to determine if it was an effective home literacy practice. This study added a storytelling element by asking the parents to tell a story to their children using a picture book with no words. Results on the PPVT-R found

that this activity increased the children's phonological awareness and receptive language skills.

Storybook reading and storytelling also appear to be beneficial for building the emergent literacy skills of nonverbal students who may be unable to discuss questions from their reading aloud with others. Skotko, Koppenhaver, and Erickson (2004) videotaped 195 storybook reading episodes between four girls with Rett Syndrome and their mothers. They found that the girls learned to communicate answers to questions about the stories by using adaptive switch devices. The researchers reported that the reading episodes made available a way for the girls to engage in activities of joint attention and interactive communication. Consequently, the girls' progress with using the adaptive switches demonstrated that communication could lead to more positive assumptions about the ability level of the young girls. In addition, Fletcher and Sabo (2006) found that storybook reading interactions between parents, infants, and toddlers allowed the opportunity for non-verbal children to display their interest and attention in a story by communicating with the reader by pointing to photographs or pictures.

Yaden, Rowe, and MacGillivray's (2000) review of emergent literacy showed that parents are important players in socially mediating their children's literacy learning. The review addressed the impact of family practices on a child's reading performance, citing 1992 and 1995 studies from Bus and van Ijzendoorn that asserted that attachment between a mother and child "predicted the frequency of storybook reading in the home" (Yaden et al., 2000, p. 430). In addition, the review discusses other literature involving the examination of emergent literacy in the home setting. Storybook reading had earlier

been reported to be effective in increasing vocabulary skills in young children and Yaden et al.'s review supported Ruddell and Ruddell's (1994) idea that children's language development for school success could be positively impacted by interactions with parents. A recent review of parent interventions with emergent literacy skills by Reese, Sparks, and Leyva (2010) also supported this idea. Another emergent literacy skill where parental involvement has been examined is the skill of print knowledge.

Print knowledge. Print knowledge, or the understanding that print relates to letters, words, and sentences, is another important emergent literacy skill that has been addressed in the research literature. Scholars studying the home activities of mothers and their children using measures such as *Clay's Concepts about Print* (Clay, 1977) to examine the print knowledge of children have found relationships between maternal reading activities and children's knowledge of print. For example, Haney and Hill (2004) determined that children of parents who engaged in teaching language and literacy skills at home scored higher on measures of understanding print concepts. The same effect was noted by Weigel et al. (2005). They also found that print knowledge was related to parental literacy habits and beliefs. In their 2006 study, Weigel, Martin, and Bennett confirmed these findings. Children of mothers who engaged in literacy activities that stressed vocabulary knowledge and relating information in books to their own lives showed a better understanding of how to use print than children whose mothers tended to wait for the school to provide instruction (Weigel et al. 2006).

In a slightly different type of research, Saint-Laurent and Giasson (2005) determined that children whose parents participated in a structured family literacy

program demonstrated more gains in reading skills, including print knowledge, than did children whose parents engaged in literacy activities at home without guidance. It should be noted, however, that in a recent study by Deckner et al. (2006), longitudinal research did not support the children's gains in print knowledge, although the researchers suggested this discrepancy could have resulted from restrictions in performance on the print concepts measure used in the study. Regardless, the overall results of maternal teaching research studies appeared to support maternal teaching as an influential part of increasing children's understanding of print knowledge. Finally, new research in the use of environmental print and electronic media has begun to reveal strategies that have the potential to enhance emergent literacy skills. Using environmental print like road signs, logos, and billboards, parents can play games like "Memory," that allow children to build print recognition skills (Neumann & Neumann, 2009; Prior, 2009). Electronic media, such as e-books, computer software, video games, e-mail, educational DVDs and television programs, can also offer opportunities for exposure to activities that build print knowledge and recognition (Hillman & Marshall, 2009; Hisrich & Blanchard, 2009; Rasinski & Padak, 2009; Thurlow, 2009; Zucker, Moody, & McKenna, 2009). However, additional research is still needed regarding the use of environmental print and electronic media as a strategy for building emergent literacy skills in young children.

Phonological awareness. Lonigan (2006a) described phonological awareness as "the ability to detect or manipulate the sound structure of oral language" (p. 78). When children demonstrate phonological awareness skills, they are able to engage in activities such as identifying rhyming words and understanding how sounds blend together to form

words (Whitehurst & Lonigan, 2001). They are also able to store and recall sounds from memory, which aids in the beginning process of decoding words (Whitehurst & Lonigan, 2001). Children who have more developed vocabularies have a greater ability to break words down into their phonological parts and may be more prepared to make the letter-sound connections needed for beginning print knowledge and emergent writing skills (Blachman, 2000; Lonigan, 2006b). This ability is important because children must be able to segment spoken words in order to benefit from phonics-based instruction (Griffith, Beach, Ruan, & Dunn, 2008). Children are often able to demonstrate well-developed phonological awareness skills by using rhymes, clapping out word segments, and changing consonant sounds at the beginning of words to show word families (Griffith et al., 2008). As phonological awareness develops, so does the skill of emergent writing.

Emergent writing. At the same time that children are beginning to develop phonological awareness and print recognition, they are also beginning to understand their correspondence to the written word. Clay (1975) completed one of the first studies that investigated patterns in children's early writing. She noted that children in the emergent writing stage engaged in a variety of written skills including scribbling, drawing, copying, stringing letters, and using inventive spelling. Sulzby (1989) followed up this research with her investigation of the development of kindergarten students' writing over a school year. Sulzby noted that children moved from scribbling in the fall of the school year to using representations of letters, letter strings, and then finally inventive spelling by either the end of kindergarten or the beginning of first grade. Later reviews of studies have examined the impact of phonological awareness and social contexts on the

development of children's writing (Whitehurst & Lonigan, 2001; Yaden et al., 2000). For example, Yaden et al. (2000) described a study by Richgels in 1995 that indicated that children who demonstrated strong inventive spelling skills were better able to use phonological strategies for reading than students who did not demonstrate inventive spelling skills. Whitehurst and Lonigan (2001) reviewed a study by Clarke (1988) that indicated that children who used inventive spelling showed more progress in spelling and decoding skills than children who did not use inventive spelling. In addition, Whitehurst and Lonigan (2001) referred to a study by Torgeson and Davis (1996) that found inventive spelling to be a reliable predictor of children's progress when using phonologically-based reading strategies. In terms of the social contexts of writing, Yaden et al. (2000) included several studies in their review that demonstrated that peer interactions during writing motivated students to practice writing skills. Each of these studies focused on the importance of encouraging young children to experiment with writing before they enter the school setting.

Family Literacy

As emergent literacy research became more focused on studying the literacy interactions of families, questions began to arise about whether or not a new specialization in the literacy field was developing. In 2000, Purcell-Gates published a chapter that described a body of research concerned solely with the impact of home and family-based practices on the development of young children's early literacy skills and referred to these practices as family literacy. Like emergent literacy theory, the theory of family literacy is not consistently defined in the literature. Early research in family

literacy sought to uncover relationships between home practices and school success, particularly for families with low socioeconomic status, diverse cultural backgrounds, and/or who speak English as a second language. Researchers have examined factors such as “parents’ educational level, the uses of print in the home, the number of books in the home, and the frequency of parent-child storybook reading events” (Purcell-Gates, 2000, p. 854) and their correlation to children’s performance in school. Although results continue to be mixed, studies have indicated that family literacy practices, such as shared storybook reading, appear to positively influence the language skills of children.

Family literacy theory. Family literacy projects can be described in several ways, including projects that train adults and programs that investigate traditional home practices. The Harvard Family Research Project (2003) describes one theory, the deficit model, that has received criticism but continues to be the basis of most policy-promoted programs. The deficit model addresses the idea that parents, particularly those with low incomes, do not understand the skills needed to promote child learning; therefore, family literacy programs must educate parents in ways to aid in their child’s education. Some family literacy researchers have described the presence of a deficit model in relation to the types of programs that have been supported by policy (Caspe, 2003; Purcell-Gates, 2000). Deficit models generally involve teaching parents how to work with their children in certain ways to increase children’s literacy skills without considering how literacy fits into the student’s home and community. Typically these types of programs have focused on preschool aged children and their parents and have centered on interventions using shared storybook reading. However, the deficit model does not acknowledge the cultural

practices of families or ways that literacy may already be used in the home as assets to building children's literacy skills (Caspe, 2003). In fact, in the past, many family literacy programs have implied that the way low income parents teach literacy skills was not sufficient when compared to school models (Gadsden, 2000; Reyes & Torres, 2007).

The deficit model of family literacy instruction appears to stem from stereotypical views from both educators and parents. The Harvard Family Research Project (2003) addressed the view from educators that parents, particularly those with low incomes or who speak English as a second language, do not understand the skills needed to promote children's learning; therefore, programs must educate parents in appropriate ways to aid in their child's education. This perception does not consider cultural practices or ways that literacy may already be used in the home. Some critics of the deficit model "argue that family literacy programs should instead empower mothers to question the role of authority, recognize the importance of personal experience as a source of knowledge, and explore the perspectives of different races, class, and culture" (Caspe, 2003, p. 3). These critics discuss family literacy as an agent for education and social change following the models of Freire (1970) and Bourdieu (1977).

Proponents of a Freirean model suggest that family literacy programs should look at the sociocultural context of literacy, including the fact that culture plays a significant role in how individuals learned and disseminated information. This suggestion supports Freire's (1970) notion that educators should be either members of or should be immersed in the culture of a community before they are given the responsibility of guiding learning so that they can help the programs become meaningful for the individuals they are

serving (Casper, 2003; Freire, 1970; Reyes & Torres, 2007). Similarly, supporters using a model based on Bourdieu's (1977) theories believe that teachers or facilitators of family literacy programs should understand the "symbolic capital (cultural, social, linguistic)" families bring with them in order for programs to be beneficial for those who are involved (Gregory, 2004, p. 97).

Despite the development of more family literacy programs that are based on sociocultural theory, participation by parents continues to be limited in many programs. Problems with distrust, miscommunication, exclusion, and power struggles are a few of the main issues that Edwards (2004) cited as reasons for limited parent participation in family literacy programs in schools. Recently, family literacy programs have attempted to overcome these issues by partnering with parents to incorporate community literacy practices such as storybook reading, writing, oral storytelling, and cooking, into school literacy instruction (Crawford & Zygouris-Coe, 2006; Edwards, 2004; Nistler & Maiers, 1999). In addition, intergenerational programs in England and South Africa describe family literacy programs as providing a link or space between home and school, called a *third space*, where students and adults can understand and appreciate the connection between the culture of the community, home, and school as related to literacy instruction (Nurss, 2000; Pahl & Kelly, 2005).

Family literacy models. Purcell-Gates (2000) discussed the deficit model in relation to family literacy, noting that there can be many ways of incorporating literacy and print in the lives of children. She specifically referenced the work of Taylor (1997) and Auerbach (1995) who opposed the standard three types of family literacy programs

(Purcell-Gates, 2000). These program types are based on the work of Nickse (1991) and include programs that focus instruction on adults and children, programs that provide instruction only to adults, and programs that provide instruction only to children, with the latter two types intending that the other party will indirectly benefit (Purcell-Gates, 2000). Thomas, Fazio, and Stiefelmeyer (1999) adapted an earlier family literacy model from Nickse (1991) to identify four types of family literacy programs: 1) parents and children both receiving literacy instruction, 2) parents only receiving instruction in how to engage in literacy skill building activities with their children, 3) programs where adults provide additional literacy skill building by volunteering directly in the classroom, and 4) programs that are offered to the community where parents and children can participate in literacy activities, like library story hour. In their review of family literacy programs, Brooks-Gunn, Belin, and Fuligni (2000) discussed programs that do not provide a specific “adult education component” but “aim to improve children’s literacy and academic achievements by enhancing parent-child literacy interactions and family literacy environments” (p. 557) through activities like home visits where volunteers teach parenting skills and instruct families on how to engage in activities such as storybook reading.

Intergenerational family literacy and family literacy are terms that are often used interchangeably. Intergenerational family literacy refers to programs that involve participants across age groups, for example, parents and children. These programs examine a variety of facets of literacy education, including parental engagement in literacy activities with their children, the impact of participation in intergenerational

experiences on literacy skill building of adults, the relationship of literacy to community history and values, supporting parenting skills, and addressing the needs of English language learners and their families (Gadsen, 2000). Weinstein (1998) describes one of the goals of intergenerational family literacy programs as increasing school involvement for parents. This increased involvement can be achieved in a number of ways such as using school-based programs designed to help parents learn about using the home environment to foster literacy skills, training parents to volunteer in the classroom, or assisting parents with learning to communicate with school staff to advocate for their children's educational success. Intergenerational programs have expanded to include not only parents, but grandparents, siblings, aunts, uncles, and involved adults from the community and provide an opportunity for oral and written language traditions as well as cultural and family experiences to be handed down to new generations (Nurss, 2000). In the urban community, intergenerational family literacy programs can work to raise educational expectations for students while providing an avenue for parents and teachers to open lines of communication (Handel, 1999).

Although studies in the area of intergenerational family literacy continue to be somewhat limited, research has begun to investigate the impact of these types of programs on the literacy skills of children (Baker, Mackler, Sonnenschein, & Serpell, 2001; Morgan, 2005; Saint-Laurent & Giasson, 2005). Studies examining the relationship of home-reading participation on children ages three through seven have shown that parental reading behavior plays a large role in the reading experiences of younger children. Research from the United States and the United Kingdom highlighted the

finding that parents in urban homes engage in a variety of reading styles when working with their young children. For example, Morgan (2005) noted from her observations of mother-child reading sessions that mothers from an urban, low socioeconomic neighborhood engaged in skills like questioning and making connections for their children that were previously linked mainly to higher socioeconomic status parents. In addition, participation in a positive literacy experience with their parents may indirectly lead students to increased motivation to participate in literacy activities and to engage in reading challenging materials (Baker et al., 2001). Several other studies confirmed the importance of social interactions in literacy activities and stressed the significance of parents modeling a positive attitude toward engaging in reading and writing for children from low socioeconomic backgrounds (Baker et al., 2001; Baker & Scher, 2002; Hammer, Nimmo, Cohen, Draheim, & Johnson, 2005; Morgan, 2005; Vandermaas-Peeler, Nelson, & Bumpass, 2009; Weigel et al., 2005).

Looking at urban environments nationally and internationally, researchers have found that mothers' participation in a school-based literacy intervention led to gains in their preschool-aged children's reading and writing scores on standardized measures (Aram & Biron, 2004; Blewitt et al., 2009; Caspe, 2009; Saint-Laurent & Giasson, 2005, Weigel et al., 2005; Whitehurst et al., 1994). Specifically, programs that focused on activities such as shared storybook reading and/or shared writing demonstrated significant increases in preschoolers' alphabet knowledge, vocabulary, word writing, and expressive and receptive language skills. Increases were also noted in the reading and writing scores of first grade students whose parents participated in a school-based family

literacy program (Saint-Laurent & Giasson, 2005). Mothers have been the primary caretaker involved in most traditional family literacy programs; however, data are also available regarding the role of fathers, siblings, and extended relatives (Anderson, Anderson, & Friedrich, 2010; Aram, 2010; Bauman & Wasserman, 2010; Caspe, 2003; Gregory, 1998, 2001, 2004; Gregory, Arju, Jessel, Kenner, & Ruby, 2007; Kennedy, 2010; Mui & Anderson, 2008; Nurss, 2000; Paratore, 2005; Rosowsky, 2006; Volk, 1999; Volk & De Acosta, 2001; Weinstein, 1998; Williams & Gregory, 2001). The results of these studies clearly point to the importance of educators and parents working together to create connections in family literacy programs that can provide participants with an experience that encourages the continuance of literacy activities in the home, school, and community settings.

Family literacy programs often use a variety of materials and activities to meet the needs of their participants. It has been suggested that participants should be involved in the planning and development of the activities and programs (Neuman, Caperelli, & Kee, 1998; Nistler & Maiers, 1999). Some examples of materials and activities that can be effective in promoting family literacy are home visits, newsletters, parent-teacher meetings, take home book programs, literacy learning kits, journaling, book clubs, and involving parents as classroom tutors (Crawford & Zygouris-Coe, 2006; Edwards, 2004; Lonigan & Shanahan, 2008; Dail, McGee, & Edwards, 2009; Smith, 2001).

Family literacy programs can be seen by educators as a way to connect home and school learning through the use of literacy activities (Pahl & Kelly, 2005). For benefits to occur, however, parents have to be invested in the success of the program. Previous

attempts at developing family literacy programs have shown that, “Family literacy is not something that can be ‘done’ to people” (Neuman, Caperelli, & Kee, 1998, p. 250).

Rather, family literacy requires participants to actively engage in the development and implementation of programs. Successful programs build on parents’ background knowledge and involve them in the planning and assessment of activities.

Family connections. Family literacy programs of all kinds have been described as having the ability to open lines of communication among families, schools, and communities and a number of researchers working with family literacy programs have described the importance of establishing these open lines of communication (Amstutz, 2000; Auerbach, 1995; Nistler & Maiers, 1999; Swick, 2009). For example, Miller (2003) states, “Ideally school personnel should recognize that they have as much to learn from parents as parents have to learn from the school” (p. 24). To be open to engaging children and families in literacy education, teachers need to consider that the home experiences of students are relevant and important to their academic learning (Crawford & Zygouris-Coe, 2006). This consideration begins with both parents and teachers examining their preconceived theories about their involvement with literacy instruction, for instance, teachers assuming that parents are not interested in their children’s education and parents believing that they are not welcome in the school setting (Dudley-Marling, 2009; Edwards et al., 2001; Foote & Linder, 2000; Swick, 2009). The assumptions that teachers have about parents can even impact the school’s policies toward families (Nieto, 2010). Moreover, teachers’ and parents’ expectations about school participation do not always match. Parents possess funds of knowledge about

school participation that are developed from their own experiences with their own parents, community norms, and values of the community and their friends (Griffith et al., 2008). In fact, Lee (2005) found that the expectation that families would attend functions and would participate in communication with the school was contrary to the cultural norms of many families.

Hoover-Dempsey and Whitaker (2010) proposed that families can be involved in supporting their children's learning in four ways. First, parents can support and encourage their children to have high expectations for themselves as learners. Second, parents can involve their children in activities at home that support the learning process. Third, parents can engage in open lines of communication with the school, and fourth, parents can become involved in school functions (Hoover-Dempsey & Whitaker, 2010). Teachers should work with families to determine and encourage family practices that support literacy learning and on how parents can use their own daily activities to engage children in literacy practices (Hoover-Dempsey & Whitaker, 2010). Family literacy programs are one vehicle for giving parents and educators an opportunity for understanding and acknowledging each others' concerns about topics such as school readiness, especially for students who may be from diverse economic, cultural, or linguistic backgrounds (Weinstein, 1998).

Serpell, Sonnenschein, Baker, and Ganapathy (2002) found that family culture played a major role in the development of students' literacy skills and recommended that building trusting relationships between home and school is one of the ways that parents and teachers can work to build students' academic skills. One way that family literacy

programs can support this goal is by increasing school involvement for parents (Weinstein, 1998). This can be accomplished in a number of ways, such as using school-based programs designed to help parents learn about setting up the home environment to foster literacy skills, by training parents to volunteer in the classroom, or by assisting parents with learning to communicate with school staff to advocate for their children's educational success. Taylor and Whittaker (2009) described the positive effect that acknowledging that parents want to be involved with their children's learning can have on building relationships and participating in school or family literacy activities. Even with parent and educator involvement in a family literacy program or family literacy activities, participants may continue to be hesitant about sharing information or changing their home or classroom activities. This hesitation should not be viewed as a setback; rather it can be used as the starting point for additional conversation about how to help parents and educators become more connected to meeting the goal of having children become successful students. Family literacy programs can work to raise educational expectations for students while providing an avenue for parents and teachers to open lines of communication (Handel, 1999).

Examples of family programs from the models. A variety of family literacy programs from each model of family literacy exists across the United States and internationally. For example, the Intergenerational Literacy Project began in 1989 in Chelsea, Massachusetts and emphasizes the adult learning component, focusing on skills such as teaching adults basic literacy skills for home and community use. Parents attend classes four days per week while their preschool children are engaged in a school-based

literacy program. The Intergenerational Literacy Project also allows time for parents and children to interact in the classroom setting (Morrow, Tracey, & Maxwell, 1995; Paratore, 2001; Paratore, 2005). Another example of a large, long running family literacy program, Motherread, Inc., is an organization that was founded in 1987 in Raleigh, North Carolina, to teach parents how to serve as reading models for children. Motherread works with a variety of populations including urban, rural, and incarcerated parents to help improve both their reading and writing skills so they can effectively support their children's literacy development (Morrow, Tracey, & Maxwell, 1995). It is important to note, however, that while these programs have been able to continue for an extended period of time, limited information is available regarding research into their effectiveness for children and families.

In addition, individual researchers have reviewed family literacy programs that have been used with culturally diverse families in the United States and internationally. Neuman (1998) discussed examples of programs that incorporated the sociocultural model of family literacy in a number of settings, including low income families in Alabama, families in the Navajo Nation, and bilingual families. Nurss (2000) described an approach using storytelling with families in the United States and South Africa. Research by Pahl and Kelly (2005) and Reyes and Torres (2007) described family literacy programs that investigate the connection of culture and home and school literacies. Gregory, Arju, Jessel, Kennel, & Ruby (2007) discussed an intergenerational program that focused on storybook reading by Bengali families in England, and Hirst, Hannon, and Nutbrown (2010) reported on an intergenerational bilingual family literacy

program used with Pakistani families in England. As with the programs described previously, each of these studies not only provides important information about the literacy activities of families in the home but also about the impact of family culture on home literacy. However, limited information is available on what the researchers defined as effective and whether or not the programs met those definitions.

Other programs that are working to connect home and school literacies by bringing parents into the classroom are The Parents as Classroom Storybook Readers Project in Boston and the Roving Readers program in Washington, D.C. Both programs train parents, family, and community members to serve as volunteer readers in their children's classrooms, allowing students to see them as literacy role-models and helping family, community members, and teachers to build relationships with the school (Paratore, 2001; Teaching for Change, n.d.). In addition to these programs, qualitative research projects have begun to examine family literacy interventions that are not based on specific programs. For example, Duke and Purcell-Gates (2003) looked at the types of literacy materials that are used in homes and gave examples of how these materials could be incorporated for use in the classroom setting. Mui and Anderson (2008) and Whitmore and Norton-Meier (2008) expanded on using family literacy materials in the classroom by completing case studies that looked at how family activities such as cooking and camping have increased children's funds of knowledge for school. However, based on observations of school settings, these researchers note that these types of activities are still not seen by some educators as beneficial to literacy learning (Mui & Anderson, 2008; Whitmore & Norton-Meier, 2008.) Finally, Compton-Lilly (2007, 2009)

investigated family practices in the home related to literacy and found that parents and family members of at-risk children acted as models for engaging in activities like reading. These studies demonstrate that while there is limited information regarding the effectiveness of using family literacy strategies on improving children's reading achievement, families are engaging in activities at home that are related to the skills needed for children to be ready for literacy learning at school.

The Achievement Gap

Why is it important for families and teachers to learn about and implement family literacy programs and activities in classrooms? One major reason is the opportunity for these programs to help increase student academic performance, and to develop learning activities that are more meaningful to children with the goal of boosting their achievement in reading and other subjects. The 1998 report from the National Reading Panel noted that if children do not learn to read well in the first few years of school, they will most likely have continued poor school performance (Snow et al., 1998). In past years, research has identified a growing trend of a gap in educational performance between children from Caucasian middle- to upper-middle class homes and children who come from lower income and/or culturally diverse families (Nieto, 2010). This gap appears to be present from the student's first experiences with school and is of concern to educators working to provide a *level classroom playing field* for all students.

Although the achievement gap has been present in educational conversations since the 1954 ruling of *Brown v. Board of Education*, this gap in educational performance between minority and non-minority students continues to be addressed in

the educational research community. Slavin and Madden (2002) stated that the gap in performance between African-American and Latino students and their Caucasian classmates starts early in elementary school and has a direct impact on the future educational and social lives of these children. Lee and Burkham (2002) also proposed that there are significant differences that can be attributed to race and ethnicity in children's performance on standardized tests when they first enter kindergarten. These researchers attributed the gaps in performance to differences in the socioeconomic status of the student's families, which indirectly caused them to attend lower quality schools than students with middle-class family backgrounds. Fryer & Levitt (2004) in an investigation of data from an Early Childhood Longitudinal Study kindergarten cohort remarked that although they did not find definite proof, they felt that attendance in a low-quality school was a strong factor in the achievement gap between African-American and Caucasian students.

In each of these studies, the achievement gap was defined by progress in reading and mathematics as measured by performance on standardized tests. Some researchers, such as Lee and Burkham (2002), additionally defined the achievement gap in terms of social advantages based on factors like type of childcare, family activities, and home demographics. Ladson-Billings (2006) described the socioeconomic impact of the achievement gap as an achievement "debt," noting that there is a mismatch in the funding given to schools in locations that are primarily inhabited by Caucasian Americans and the funding given to urban schools that primarily serve students of African-American and Latino backgrounds. She asserted that until funding in schools is equal, the students who

attend poorly funded schools will continue to fall behind, adding to the educational debt that is already present for these students. In addition, Ladson-Billings (2006) contended that cumulative factors, such as poor nutrition and poor health care, will continue to add to the achievement gap in schools until these issues are addressed in the greater community. Rothstein (2004) wrestled with the same issues: nutrition, health care, and housing, in his book that addressed the impact of social and economic reforms in closing the achievement gap. In fact, Rothstein reported that family income at age five was more important to the outcome of high school graduation of a student than the family income at a later age. Both of these authors accentuate the impact that a child's life experiences outside of school may play a significant role in the background knowledge that the child brings to school.

Ramey and Ramey (2004) noted that there is an “undeniable cumulative toll of limited learning opportunities and low expectations for children from high-risk home environments” (p. 475). Their examination of studies of the pre-k educational performance of high-risk students showed that they were around two years behind students who did not live in at-risk conditions (Ramey & Ramey, 2004). Early literacy research has also shown that young students who do not live in language-rich environments demonstrate vocabulary, memory, print, and oral language deficits that directly impact their early reading skills (Neuman, 2006; Sayeski et al., 2001). These children may begin kindergarten with vocabularies that are noticeably smaller than those of other students their age, may not know the letters of the alphabet, and may not be familiar with the use of books and print (Kafer, 2004). The lack of early reading skills

significantly contributes to the achievement gap and may impact a student's education even into high school (Kafer, 2004). To address the lack of skills that contributes to the achievement gap, attendance in high-quality preschool programs has been suggested as an intervention. Students who attend high-quality preschool programs tend to have stronger language skills and perform higher on reading tests than students who do not participate in these learning experiences (American Educational Research Association [AERA], 2005).

Environmental differences in students' backgrounds may also impact the way they respond to classroom experiences when they enter the kindergarten setting. Students may come from a home setting that is significantly different from the classroom learning context. Cultural differences from the mainstream population and/or exposure to poverty may make it difficult for educators to interpret results of school readiness testing. Assessment measures may evaluate the environmental and developmental differences in students rather than their actual ability to learn (Pianta & Reeve, 1990). For example, kindergarten students who are learning English as a second language may have difficulties learning literacy skills in English because they are still acquiring literacy in their first language (Tabors & Snow, 2004). Jimenez, Smith, and Martinez-Leon (2003) and Smith, Jimenez, and Martinez-Leon (2003) in their articles reviewing literacy practices in Mexican schools, cautioned that students who have attended schools outside of the United States may have expectations of school literacy that are different from what they are asked to do in the classroom (i.e., emphasis on correctness in form of writing). Students from African-American or Hispanic backgrounds may be uncomfortable with

question-and-answer activities and may not engage in these types of book interactions (Vernon-Feagans, Hammer, Miccio, & Manlove, 2001). Because of these instances, students may be incorrectly targeted for interventions like special education, when in reality they may be experiencing a temporary developmental delay from lack of learning experiences that correlate to the school setting. To provide students with the supports they need to be successful in the school setting, it is important for teachers to learn about their students' background experiences to help them become motivated learners. One way of making these connections is by using a culturally-responsive approach to teaching.

Culturally-Responsive Teaching

Culturally-responsive teaching, moving beyond what is considered the dominant culture from the school's perspectives and learning more about the cultural practices of the community at-large, challenges teachers to learn about their students as *whole* children, not just *in-school* learners (Ladson-Billings, 1994). Culturally-responsive teachers realize that children's cultural experiences impact how they view school and understand that children learn better when teachers use what students already know to help them make connections to what they are learning in school (Ladson-Billings, 2001). Culture, as defined by Doucet and Tudge (2007) "refers to any group that has a shared set of values, beliefs, practices, access to resources, social institutions, and a sense of identity, and that communicates those values, beliefs, and so forth to the next generation" (p. 310). Culture is a fluid concept that, according to Gay (2000), includes our worldview, values, standards, and beliefs. It is influential on our thoughts and actions and can include things like food and holidays as well as concepts like family relationships,

family and community values, and even the way individuals speak or communicate with one another (Nieto, 2004).

Culture is a broad ranging construct that may be related to concepts like ethnicity or religion, but is not comprised solely of any one concept. A community, however, may have members of multiple cultures and/or it may have its own culture to which members adhere. Families are individual units within communities and they too may have their own cultural standards while at the same time experiencing incorporation into the unique culture of a neighborhood. Culture, language development, and learning are all linked for young children and these aspects are important in children's understanding of literacy (Espinosa, 2007). In the field of education, culture impacts not only the way that teachers provide instruction but also the way that students engage with and understand curriculum (Gay, 2000). In addition, Delpit (2006) states, "When a significant difference exists between the students' culture and the school's culture, teachers can easily misread students' aptitudes, intent, or abilities as a result of the differences in styles of language use and interactional patterns" (p.167). This means that when teachers come from backgrounds that are different from those of their students, they need to learn about the culture of the community to better understand how students may relate to school.

Both Montessori (1966) and Vygotsky (1978) suggested that parents play a major role in children's understanding of culture. They both theorized that children learn the norms of their culture through imitation and interactions with their family. These theories are important because children enter school classrooms that are comprised of as many cultural ideals as there are students. Teachers must have an appreciation and respect for

each of these views because, as Freire (1970) discussed, educational programs that do not respect the views of the people they serve will not be successful. Culturally responsive teaching “empowers students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically by using cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills and attitudes” (Ladson-Billings, 1994, p. 18). Ladson-Billings (2001) described learning about student culture as a necessity for teachers as a way for them to help students make connections between the curriculum and their culture and community. Nieto (2004) asserted that teachers who use culturally relevant practices understand the implication that being equal does not equate to being the same. These teachers realize that children’s cultural experiences may impact how they view school. Consequently, certain cultural experiences should not be associated with a deficit, but as a chance to learn from their students while holding their expectations high.

Gay (2000) believes that culture is a driving force in understanding the learning styles of students. She defined culturally responsive teaching as “using the cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of reference, and performance styles of ethnically diverse students to make learning encounters more relevant to and effective for them” (p. 29). In her book, Gay (2000) discussed the value of being aware of the out of school lives of students. She indicated that students gained knowledge in both home and school, but noted that rarely did the two bodies of information intersect to allow them to make connections between the environments. Gay emphasized the importance of teachers having high performance expectations for all of their students. This is especially important for children that teachers may perceive as at risk for having deficits in school

readiness skills primarily because of their cultural or socioeconomic background. Like Montessori, Vygotsky, and Freire, Gay (2000) asserted that making connections between home and instructional knowledge for students helped them to have a better understanding of the material and opened pathways for discussion. In support of this assertion, Edwards et al. (2001) reported that “attending to cultural issues and practices is every bit as important as worrying about curriculum” (p. 149). Teachers should engage in reflection to think about their own ideas regarding culture so that they can be aware of their own biases and can acknowledge them in their practice (Gay, 2000). Once teachers have addressed these concerns they are ready to focus on the techniques they will use to teach their students. From the early work of Montessori and Freire to the more recent theories of Gay, culture remains an important variable that teachers must explore, appreciate, and understand to successfully help their students connect to the classroom curriculum.

Funds of Knowledge

Gonzalez, Moll, and Amanti (2005) continued the discussion about linking culture and learning in their edited book, *Funds of Knowledge*. Funds of knowledge are described as “the essential cultural practices and bodies of knowledge and information that houses [people] use to survive, to get ahead, or to thrive” (Moll, 1992, p. 21). Gonzalez, Moll, and Amanti (2005) contended that by tapping into students’ familiarity with educationally based knowledge from home such as hobbies, parental careers, and cooking, teachers are better able to effectively engage them in learning. They asserted

that language and discussion were effective vehicles for transmitting information to students in a way that would promote the development of critical thinking.

Research has shown that educators' views on culture, student ability, and their own personal experiences as learners, form the techniques and expectations teachers have for their own students (Gay, 2000). Freire (1970), Gay (2000), and others discussed the importance of dialogic teaching, free choice, developing critical thinking skills, and experiential learning as effective techniques for helping students bridge the gaps between their home and school knowledge. Gonzalez et al. (2005) expanded on the importance of using teaching methods to build students' funds of knowledge by encouraging teachers to find out about the background knowledge of their students, including their home literacy practices, and to use this information to develop curriculum that would allow students to demonstrate their knowledge to the fullest extent. Examples of ways teachers may join with the families of their students could be through interviews and home visits (Browning-Aiken, 2005; Gonzalez, 2005; Amanti, 2005; Gonzalez, Moll, Tenery et al., 2005; Hensley, 2005; Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 2005; Tenery, 2005).

According to Moll et al. (2005), visiting families as part of data collection for their research, allowed them to see firsthand the learning activities that families were engaging in with their children. Based on these experiences they were able to invite parents to participate in classroom lessons and base curriculum around familiar activities for the students. Ginsberg (2007) suggested that home visits also provide opportunities to encourage family involvement in the school. Situations described in Ginsberg's article showed that the integration of families and their home cultural aspects enabled non-

majority families to become a part of school, incorporated community values into the school setting, and validated for the students the importance of their experiences with their parents and families (Ginsberg, 2007). Nieto (2010) also advocated for schools to focus on families as a way to help children feel a sense of belonging in the classroom, which enables them to see themselves as learners.

Because not all teachers are able to interview parents or conduct home visits, there are other ways that they can find out about students' funds of knowledge in the classroom. Attending parent workshops, keeping notes from working with students, examining children's play interactions, writing in family journals, and implementing critical literacy projects using picture books are a few examples of techniques that have been found to be valuable for learning about student home resources (Baskwill & Harkins, 2009; Compton-Lilly, 2006; Leland, Harste, & Huber, 2005; Reese, Goldenberg, & Saunders, 2006; Riojas-Cortez, 2001). Longwell-Grice and McIntyre (2006) and McNaughton (2001) examined funds of knowledge approaches from a family literacy perspective that addressed both teacher and parent perspectives. Longwell-Grice and McIntyre (2006) found that family literacy programs were appropriate places to examine cultural norms in relation to literacy skills. McNaughton (2001) and Riojas-Cortez, Flores, and Bustos (2009), noted that family literacy programs in schools tend to be more effective when both the parents and teachers understand each other's cultural backgrounds. Both of these studies concluded that more research is needed to help teachers and parents recognize the gap between home and school literacies and help young students transition successfully to the school setting. To address the gap between

home and school literacies, recent research has focused on learning about the literacy activities of families and studies have found that families engage in a number of daily living strategies that are beneficial to increasing the early literacy skills of children that build their funds of knowledge (Billings, 2009; Carter, Chard, & Pool, 2009; Compton-Lilly, 2009; Dudley-Marling, 2009; Kennedy, 2010; Neumann & Neumann, 2009).

Teachers may also have their own funds of knowledge regarding the learning process. In an informal survey of teachers, Delpit (2006) found that while the majority of teachers she interviewed described relying on external sources for information about learning, teachers from minority groups reported that they referenced their own learning experiences when developing learning activities for their students. In addition, teachers also may have funds of knowledge about what they expect in terms of parent participation in learning. If this view does not match what is happening in the classroom, teachers may mistakenly feel that parents are not interested in their children's education (Ladson-Billings, 2001).

There are a number of ways that parents can be involved in their child's education, which may or may not involve the actual presence of parents in the school setting. For instance, Epstein and Sanders (2002) described six types of parent engagement: providing parenting information, providing information about school events, volunteering at school, learning at home, participation in decision making, and collaboration with the community. In basic obligations, schools provide information to parents on how to support their child's learning and about events that are taking place at the school. Volunteering looks at providing opportunities for parents to participate in the

classroom or school. Learning at home implies that parents will help with their child's learning at home. Decision-making talks about participation on school committees and collaboration with the community entail the school working to provide parents with information about community resources (Epstein & Sanders, 2002). Nieto encouraged teachers to rethink their definition of "parent involvement," since her research with students showed that while students did not discuss parent participation in school activities as a reason for their school success, they did report that different types of parental support such as promoting high expectations, encouraging them to stay in school, and providing support for learning as important factors in their achievement (Nieto, 2004). Although teacher expectations of parent participation in literacy learning may vary, it is clear in the literature that parental involvement is an important factor in student success.

Culturally responsive teaching is an important concept for teachers. This concept can encourage teachers to take into account the backgrounds of the students as a factor in their learning. Since culture influences how children perceive the world, including the school curriculum, it is critical for teachers to have an understanding of the culture of their students. By tapping into students' funds of knowledge, or their background knowledge from outside of school, teachers can help students effectively understand and use what they are learning in the school curriculum. Using a funds of knowledge approach when teaching also provides teachers with the opportunity to form partnerships with families to work together to motivate students for learning.

Summary

This chapter provided a review of the literature regarding emergent and family literacy, culturally responsive teaching, and the use of a funds of knowledge approach to teaching. The literature indicates that home activities are directly related to building children's emergent literacy skills. The reviewed research demonstrated that children who have engaged in literacy activities such as storybook reading with a parent prior to coming to school perform better on standardized measures of school readiness than students who have not had these opportunities. Family literacy programs are one way to encourage parents to participate in literacy activities with their children. Although these programs primarily originated from a deficit model that asserts that parents should be taught how to work with their children, recent programs have focused on examining the activities parents use at home that can be beneficial to building emergent literacy skills. The chapter also described the importance of teachers learning to understand how culture can impact the way that students develop and understand concepts related to literacy learning. In addition, this chapter addressed the use of culturally-responsive teaching methods from a funds of knowledge approach as one way for teachers to establish a bridge between students' home knowledge and school curriculum. Chapter 3 will describe the methods used to collect data from the teacher and parent participants regarding the types of activities that they feel are beneficial to encourage readiness for literacy learning. Chapter 3 will also discuss the impact of the researcher's identity on the study as well as describe the theoretical perspectives used when designing the study.

3: Methods

Chapter 3 discusses the methods used to collect the data needed to address the research questions. The chapter begins with a description of the researcher's identity and interest in conducting the study based on personal experiences, theoretical orientations, and prior research. It then discusses the characteristics of the participants and the research design, including a discussion of the theories of constructivism and grounded theory research. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the procedures used in the data collection and analysis.

Researcher Identity

Before beginning any qualitative study, it is critical for the researcher to investigate personal connections with the research to understand how beliefs about the world may impact interpretation of the data (Glesne, 2006; Maxwell, 2005; Schram, 2006). Subjectivity does not have to negatively impact research and in fact, "instead of trying to suppress your feelings, you use them to inquire into your perspectives and interpretations to shape new questions through re-examining your assumptions" (Glesne, 2006, p. 120). As a psychologist, former teacher, and researcher trained in quantitative methods, my lens undoubtedly impacts the way I view my research. My first introduction to qualitative research was not in a general methods course, but in a self-study research class. Self-study is a newer genre of qualitative research (Pinnegar & Hamilton, 2009), and I have learned, not the easiest one for a beginning qualitative research student.

Nonetheless, I was intrigued and interested to learn more about it. It was difficult learning about “grounded theory” and coding, since I had always been taught research involved statistics, numbers, and formulas. While I tried the best I could to learn the very basics of qualitative research, I looked forward to understanding more about research methods that did not ask me to compress my information about people into a series of numbers. Since taking the self-study course, I have continued to build my knowledge as a qualitative researcher in subsequent courses and by conducting a number of research projects using grounded theory method. I have also participated in several conferences that have allowed me to broaden my view of qualitative research and helped me to feel more comfortable engaging in discussions about qualitative research methods.

In addition to learning about methods, I focused many of my research projects for my doctoral classes on listening to information from practicing teachers as preparation for my dissertation research. Since I work in a large, suburban school district as a school psychologist and I have been a special education teacher, I have a vested interest in making sure that the outcomes of my research are beneficial to teachers and their students. There is a division between research and practice and with my research I hope to start to bridge that gap. In the area of literacy in particular, there is a strong push for teachers to use research-based interventions with students; however, at this time, much of the research is quantitative and centered around specific intervention programs. With my research, I hope to highlight some of the techniques teachers are successfully using to help students learn literacy skills without relying on specific programs. Qualitative

research has opened the possibility for in-depth study of teacher practices to become part of the literature on documented research-based interventions.

During my doctoral internship, I was exposed to articles that discussed family literacy in the context of funds of knowledge and the *third space*. I found this notion fascinating, especially since it fit well with an interest I had in using storybooks and storytelling as a way to bridge community, cultural, family, and school values. My internship experiences led me to read more about funds of knowledge and the way that they can be used in the classroom setting to help children make connections to the curriculum. After the internship, I began to formulate questions that would become the basis for a class project looking at teachers' familiarity with the concepts of family literacy and funds of knowledge and their possible use of funds of knowledge as a teaching method. The results from this project were not what I expected. Most teachers I interviewed had never heard of funds of knowledge and had only a basic understanding of family literacy. Based on what I had seen in classrooms during my work as a school psychologist, I knew that teachers were using funds of knowledge to connect their students with the curriculum but realized that they may not have known to use those words to describe their methods. This experience became the basis for my dissertation research proposal. Using Maxwell's (2005) model for proposal writing, the initial components of my study included: 1) the purpose generated from my researcher identity and interests, 2) the context of my interest and experiences with a funds of knowledge perspective, and prior research, and 3) my research questions. In addition, my intent with this project was not to review or evaluate teaching practices. My purpose was to gain

access to teachers' voices and how they articulate the strategies they were using to help teach literacy to students they felt did not have the skills they would have liked them to have developed before coming to school. I felt that my background in the schools would be beneficial to this research, since I would be familiar with the curriculum, pedagogies, and assessments used by the kindergarten teachers.

Participants

To find participants for this study, I engaged in what Maxwell (2005) calls "purposeful selection." Maxwell describes purposeful selection as a strategy where particular persons "are selected deliberately in order to provide information that can't be gotten as well from other choices" (p. 88). Within purposeful selection, I used what Patton (2002) refers to as critical case sampling, which "permits logical generalization and maximum application of information to other cases because if it's true of one case, it's likely to be true of all other cases" (p. 243). This way, I was able to choose kindergarten teachers in specific environments whose articulation of strategies and methods would be informative to other kindergarten teachers.

Teachers. Kindergarten teachers were solicited for participation in the project from a large suburban school district in the mid-Atlantic region of the United States. The teachers were required to have at least three years of teaching experience so that they would be past the probationary period in the district in terms of experience. All teachers invited to participate were employed in elementary schools that served at least 45% minority students and where at least 45% of the students were considered to be from a low socioeconomic background as determined by the free and reduced lunch rate of the

school. After receiving approval from the George Mason University Human Subjects Review Board and the review board of the school division to conduct the research, both e-mails and letters were sent to principals of elementary schools meeting the selection criteria to ask for permission to contact their kindergarten staff. Once permission was granted by the principals, kindergarten teachers with three years of experience were contacted by e-mail regarding participation in the research. Eight teachers meeting the criteria expressed interest in participating in the study and were chosen to participate. Table 1 provides a breakdown of each teacher's years of experience and the grades they have taught.

Table 1

Participants' Experience

Participant	Years of Teaching	Grades Taught
1	8	K
2	10	K, 4 th
3	7	K, 3 rd , 5 th , taught abroad in Mexico
4	25	K, Pre-k, special education
5	16	K, 1 st , 2 nd
6	9	K, 4 th
7	10	K, Head Start
8	5	K, Pre-k

After the teachers expressed interest in participating in the study, an initial meeting was scheduled. At this meeting, the teachers were presented with a written copy of the Informed Consent Form which they were asked to sign if they agreed to participate (See Appendix A). By signing this form, the teachers agreed to participate in an approximately one hour long audio taped interview with the researcher. They also gave the researcher permission to take pictures of their classroom when no students were present, and agreed to send home surveys to the parents of children in their classes. They were informed that because of their participation, they would be entered in a drawing to win a \$50 gift certificate at a local bookstore.

Parents. The parents of every child in the classes of the participating teachers (156 parents) were given a survey to complete at home. An introductory letter that briefly explained the project was sent to the parents along with a survey form and informed consent form (See Appendix B, C, D). Parents were given the opportunity to anonymously return the surveys and consent forms in separate envelopes to maintain confidentiality. The surveys were provided in both English and Spanish. Parents who completed the survey were informed that they would be entered in a drawing to win a \$25 gift certificate to a local bookstore. Thirty parents responded with both the survey and informed consent form.

Research Design

Constructivism. I looked closely at qualitative research theory and practice to determine what would be the most appropriate method for gathering data related to teachers' perspectives and classroom techniques. As a researcher and beginning scholar

who has a constructivist view of learning and knowledge, I believe that experiences frame the way individuals construct their view of reality. More specifically, I tend to prescribe to the social constructivist view that our experiences are framed by our interactions with others. For example, my beliefs mirror that of one of the schools where I am part of the educational staff who defines itself as a “community of constructivist learners.” With this statement, the staff communicates that they understand that students come from a variety of backgrounds which frame their worldview and background knowledge and support interactive learning as a way for students to explore other ways of thought while learning the standard curriculum. It is only by starting conversations that learners are able to see beyond themselves and ponder the views of others. It is my hope that my research will help to open dialogue among teachers, parents, and community organizations as to how they can best work together to enhance literacy opportunities for kindergarten students. In regard to teachers, my intention is not to bring a value judgment about their teaching practices, but instead to investigate patterns of teaching behavior that may promote social justice and the understanding that all parents have essential contributions to make to the education of their children.

Grounded theory. To gather the data for my analysis, I critically examined reviews of qualitative methodologies that could help me to organize and understand the information in the most logical way for addressing my questions. Grounded theory provided this mechanism. Grounded theory, as described by Glaser and Strauss in their 1967 book, is a systematic way of examining qualitative data by using comparative analysis to generate theory. Further reading of Corbin and Strauss (1990) and Patton

(2002) helped me to understand that using the grounded theory method for analyzing my data would allow me not only to refine my questions and develop working theories, but also to use the process of writing memos to catalogue my ongoing understandings and interpretations of the incoming data. In addition, the idea of using a systematic examination to build theory appealed to my researcher identity as a psychologist by providing rigor to my assertions. This realization led me to read Charmaz's (2005) chapter in the *Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research*, which looks at using grounded theory methods to promote social justice research. Grounded theory, Charmaz explained, can enable researchers to analyze information while still allowing participants' voices to come through. Her discussion on the use of grounded theory to look at data in terms of fairness and equality while calling attention to those with less power and privilege seemed to capture what I was looking for in terms of highlighting how teachers bring the voices of parents and community members to the forefront in their classrooms (Charmaz, 2005). Grounded theory provided me with a research method that effectively allowed me to investigate my questions and formulate theories that will be beneficial to practitioners and researchers alike.

Procedures

Data collection. Data for the research study was collected through multiple and varied sources and included 1) teacher interviews, 2) a parent survey, 3) classroom artifacts, 4) photographs of teachers' classrooms, 5) field notes, and 6) researcher memos. Teachers were interviewed using a formal interview guide with 16 questions. In keeping with the grounded theory method, questions were slightly modified or expanded to gather

information about topics generated during the interviews (See Appendix E). The interview guide gave the researcher the opportunity to structure question topics while allowing for additional probes to follow up for additional information. It also allowed for the interviews to be completed in a more conversational manner because questions could be presented based on the discussion. The eight teacher interviews were audio taped for later transcription. The interviews were conducted between November and February. Each interview took place either before or after school hours in the participants' classrooms. The interviews lasted between 45 to 120 minutes and were followed by a short, approximately 15 minute session, where photographs were taken of materials in the participant's classroom.

Parent survey forms were a combination of open-ended and limited choice items (See Appendix D). They were also translated into Spanish, since according to the teachers that was the most prevalent language, other than English, spoken by the parents in the participating classrooms. Parent consent and interview forms were provided in envelopes to the classroom teacher at the time of the teacher interview. The forms were sent home in the students' backpacks. Entry into a participant raffle for a \$25 dollar gift card to a local bookstore was offered as an incentive for parents to return the surveys. Participating teachers were given envelopes to send the completed surveys to the researcher after they had been collected. Parent surveys that were returned before the last week in March were included in the data analysis.

Memos and field notes of classroom visits and artifact examinations were also part of the data collection. Ninety-eight photographs were taken of items in the

participants' classroom immediately following completion of the teacher interviews. Written copies of workbooks, assessment forms, and other materials were provided by four of the teachers. These photographs and written examples of classroom materials and student work provided additional data to support the information provided by the teachers during their interviews. The use of memos and notes was designed to provide triangulation and validation, critical to using a grounded theory method. All the visits were overt, meaning teachers were aware of what the researcher was looking for during classroom visits and examination of teacher instructional materials. Researcher memos written after interviews, classroom visits, or artifact examinations allowed the researcher to monitor how personal beliefs impacted the interpretation of the data.

Analysis. The data from the interviews were transcribed for analysis from the audiotaped material. A constant comparison procedure was used to generate, connect, and compare incidents and information in the data (Creswell, 2005). The grounded theory procedures used in this analysis are described specifically below.

Teacher Data Analysis. In the first level of analysis, interviews were transcribed from the audiotaped material. Then data were open coded line by line for major themes, as discussed by Charmaz (2006). Charmaz (1994) describes coding as “the initial phase of the analytic method...the process of categorizing and sorting data” (p. 97). Nine preliminary coding categories emerged from the first level of open coding: 1) assessment, 2) oral language, 3) parent participation, 4) early literacy skills, 5) teacher experience, 6) strategies, 7) curriculum, 8) funds of knowledge, and 9) cultural awareness. The data were sorted in these preliminary categories, then axial coding was conducted. After this

process, the themes were condensed into seven major thematic categories: 1) assessment, 2) oral language, 3) parent participation, 4) early literacy skills, 5) teacher experience, 6) strategies and curriculum, and 7) funds of knowledge, which combined strategies and curriculum into one category and funds of knowledge and cultural awareness into another. Once the data were divided into the seven thematic categories, it was then coded for subcategories within the themes listed in Table 2.

Table 2

Thematic Categories and Subcategories

Thematic Category	Subcategory
Assessment	Type: Formal OR informal Purpose: Class development OR baseline measure OR progress monitoring
Oral Language	Oral language Strategies Oral academic language Oral language-vocabulary Oral social language
Parent Participation	Parent participation Limited involvement Strategies for involvement
Early Literacy Skills	Preacademic Preacademic literacy Preschool Social/Self monitoring
Teacher Experience	Home experiences School experiences Evaluation of teaching practice
Strategies and Curriculum	Multimodal strategies Literacy strategies

	Literacy in other content areas
Funds of Knowledge	Strategies
	Cultural knowledge
	Family connections
	Community and home connections
	Child initiated sharing about home

At this point, the researcher assessed how the data informed each research question:

Research Question 1. How do kindergarten teachers define school readiness in terms of early literacy skills?

Research Question 2. How do teachers' perspectives and/or beliefs influence the way they approach teaching beginning literacy?

Research Question 3. What perspectives do teachers hold regarding home and school connections for early literacy?

Research Question 4. What are parent perspectives about the home and school connection and what do they think will help their children be successful in kindergarten?

Research Question 5. How have interactions with their child's school impacted the way parents view themselves as a part of teaching early literacy skills to their children?

Clustering was used to then divide each of the data points by within-category theme into each question. Clustering, as described by Charmaz (2006) is an organizational technique where each research question is written in the middle of the page and circled. Circles are then drawn around it with the data points and then attempts are made to connect the circles with lines or arrows to show relationships and significance to each other. A cluster

was completed for each research question. Each cluster resulted in themes that were present in the data for each one of the research questions. Once the themes were clustered, individual data points from the interviews were listed under each theme. This process was repeated for both the teacher and parent data.

Parent Data Analysis. Parents were given a written survey to explore their perceptions about early literacy instruction. The written survey was chosen to maximize ease of return and to promote the participation of all parents in the participants' classrooms (Fontana & Frey, 1998, Patton, 2002). Out of the 156 surveys sent, 30 parents completed surveys and returned the informed consent. Five parents completed the survey but did not return the consent form so their data could not be used in the analysis. Once the parent forms were received, the data for all of the closed questions were tallied by counting responses. Open ended items or items that allowed for additional written responses were compiled into a large form and like responses were tallied. These responses were then coded for thematic categories. Since the teacher interview and parent survey questions were aligned for consistency of responses, these thematic categories closely matched ones from the teacher responses. For example, in the teacher participant data, strategies used with students to build literacy skills were coded as kinesthetic, visual, auditory, or multimodal depending on the activity. Activities that the parents used at home were also coded for the same four types. Once these data were coded, they were added into the clusters described in the teacher data section in order to compare the responses between the two groups of participants. The completed data analysis was summarized by research question. The results of this analysis are presented in the following chapter.

4: Results

After the data were collected and analyzed and the themes determined, the findings were used to answer each of the five initial research questions to investigate how teachers provide instruction for children who may not have traditional school readiness skills. Returning to the original research questions, the themes were analyzed based on how the data informed each question. This chapter will present a discussion of the analysis as it relates to and informs each of the research questions.

Question 1

Question 1 examined how teachers define school readiness in terms of early literacy skills. Before looking at what teachers expected from children for school readiness in relation to literacy, the researcher sought to ascertain how teachers defined literacy. Each participant was asked to provide a description of literacy.

Defining early literacy as language. A key finding consistent across each of the interviews in terms of how teachers defined literacy, included children's involvement with "oral language," "being able to understand and interact with the world through print," and "teaching students how to read, write, and incorporate it all." One teacher described a view of literacy saying, "You can hear it, you can read it, and you can touch it." Other teachers expanded their definitions by including how "talking and language all play into literacy," and that it is "understanding and being able to communicate, comprehension as well as decoding, developing the understanding that symbols have

meaning, telling stories, and listening.” Overall, the teachers defined literacy as the students being able to understand and use spoken or written language.

Defining early literacy as skill acquisition. Another focus of question 1 was to examine within teachers’ general definitions of early literacy, how they defined early literacy in terms of necessary skills. This category of early literacy skill acquisition yielded a theme that echoed and connected with the participant teachers’ definitions of literacy. The teachers were expecting children to demonstrate three types of readiness skills prior to coming to school: preacademic skills, social/self-monitoring skills, and oral language skills. These were the skills they felt would be best addressed with parents during home and community experiences prior to the child entering the school setting. The teachers also felt these skills were the foundation for the other literacy learning objectives that are encompassed in the kindergarten curriculum. These three types of skills will be discussed in the following sections.

Preacademic skills. The preacademic skills described as desirable by the teachers interviewed appeared to be congruent with the three primary early literacy skills listed by Lonigan (2006b): oral language skills, phonological awareness, and print knowledge, which included recognition of alphabet letters and writing. In addition, social and self-monitoring skills were mentioned as important skills for being ready for literacy learning. One teacher described the complexity and preparation for building literacy by saying, “So much foundation has to be laid before children can actually start reading,” and another teacher expressed the hope that these foundational elements are developed prior to starting school by noting that, “These are things that actually we just kind of expect

kindergarteners to come in knowing.” Some of the skills identified by the participants included exposure to print, number and letter recognition, naming colors, the ability to write one’s name, and having some understanding of a sense of story. One teacher participant stated, “I would love for them just to have a lot of language, to be able to name things,” while another noted, “I would really like to have them exposed and incorporated into print more before they come here.” A teacher explained her wish for exposure to print by saying that, “You can’t learn to recognize print until you realize that that squiggle on the paper is a letter, it carries meaning, it communicates something.”

Recognition of alphabet letters was important for all eight teachers, while recognizing letters in a student’s name was discussed by five teachers. Understanding of letter sounds was only mentioned by four teachers. In fact, one teacher stated, “I don’t think they have to have all of their sounds, because that’s something we work on, but just to have an understanding of letters.” Others talked about phonological awareness in terms of recognizing rhymes. It was felt by the participants that students who were able to recognize sounds had an advantage in learning to read and write over those who did not, based on comments such as, “If they already have that [the ability to recognize sounds], they are really going, I mean they’re going to hit the ground,” and “He knew his letters and sounds, for him he is head and shoulders above those who came in with nothing.” Another teacher remarked, “They already know their letters...how to write their name...they can jump right in.”

Writing was also addressed by seven of the teachers in the interviews as an important pre-academic skill. Statements from these teachers, photographs of actual pre-

assessments used at schools, and written copies of the assessments showed that early writing was generally measured in terms of drawing. Of the schools that had an assessment prior to kindergarten, each school used either the measure of drawing a person or drawing shapes as a pre-writing assessment. In addition, being able to write one's name was mentioned repeatedly as a common measure of pre-writing ability. One teacher discussed early writing assessment as a complex task, saying, "We do everything from just writing samples, which at the beginning is draw me a picture and then we just write down, we do a dictation and write down what they say, we do a letter id, name writing." In general, preacademic skills, like drawing and alphabet knowledge, were considered to be the most important skills expected by teachers, but how do teachers gather baseline data regarding these skills in such young students?

To better understand their students' baseline pre-academic skills in the area of literacy, all of the teacher participants described using informal assessment measures. According to the data, teachers have established expectations for what they feel is appropriate and necessary for children to be ready for literacy learning that are based on a variety of factors including their own experiences as beginning readers, their experiences in the field, and information from their coursework and training. These expectations, along with district curriculum and policy, seem to drive the informal assessments that teachers use with students both prior to attending school and as students progress through the kindergarten year. The theme of assessment broke down the use of assessment into formal and informal categories and their uses, allowing for a more in-depth view of the purposes.

According to the teacher interviews, informal assessment at kindergarten registration was used to gain a baseline of student knowledge for classroom planning and for developing class groups. One teacher stated, “They actually do an evaluation before school starts for class, more for class placement. It allows the teacher to have some sense of where they are at.” The six teachers at schools who used informal pre-assessment measures at kindergarten registration endorsed the practice saying that it helped form manageable classes and prevented one teacher from having all of the students with limited skills. One teacher commented on the importance of establishing a screening process, “That way we have a little bit better baseline because this year we had no idea and when we separated the kids as they came in, I had five non-speakers.” Another noted, “Mostly they do that for placement...they try to break up the children so that...not one teacher has the lowest group. They try to divide the children so that we’re evenly spread.” Teachers at the two schools not currently using a pre-assessment said that they had recommended starting a program to the administration, saying, “I’ve advocated to no avail that we actually take a day before school starts, like a week or so before and ask parents to come in to assess them,” and “The school has not done that in the past but I have recommended it to the principal.” One teacher at a school with no pre-assessment screening noted she made home visits saying, “I just came by and gave them a quick assessment just to get an idea of where they are at.” The teacher reported that “I would make home visits so that I could see, so that I could be ready to go with them and also so I could tell parents what they needed to start doing.” Because of this interaction with the

parents, she noted that, “I saw that a lot of kids came after school started with more knowledge...than I originally saw when I went to their house.”

In addition to informal work with the children, parent questionnaires were considered a useful tool for teacher’s gathering of baseline data about children’s literacy experiences. “Prior to coming to school we give them a survey of what they have done at home and in the preschool environment, what the parents have done,” stated one teacher. Another teacher reported, “I send home a questionnaire...asking what’s your child’s experience, how often do you read to your child, how often do you visit the library, do you have a library card.” These questionnaires, along with the informal assessment of preacademic skills, provided teachers with information that allowed them to begin planning the literacy curriculum prior to the beginning of the school year.

Social and self-monitoring skills. The interview data revealed that teachers referred less often to social and self-monitoring skills of students prior to entrance to kindergarten than to preacademic skills; however, they still noted the importance of these skills. Teachers acknowledged that they felt it was important for their students to know how to work with other children, complete self-care activities, and to be able to sit for a short period during activities. “There’s a certain period of time you have to spend teaching them independent skills, putting on their own coats, cleaning up after themselves when they’ve finished their work,” said a teacher participant. Photographs of classroom materials such as work stations and charts for jobs in the classroom supported the importance of students learning to monitor their own behavior. One teacher noted, “Those skills I think are helpful for them also not just for academics but it is also

maturity level.” Finally, “sitting quietly on the carpet, listening to a story,” and “interacting cooperatively with other children,” were other social and self-monitoring skills described in the interviews as beneficial to helping children be ready for literacy learning.

Oral language skills. In the literature, oral language skills have been found to be strongly related to a child’s readiness for literacy learning (Collins, 2005; Lonigan, 2006a; Lonigan, 2006b; Sayeski et al., 2001; Senechal, 2006; Senechal & LeFevre, 2002; Weigel et al., 2005). The teachers interviewed agreed with the findings from the literature and have demonstrated the importance of oral language skills by spending a large portion of the school day engaged in activities to build them. For example, a teacher stated that, “All day, every day...we’re always working on oral language, always working on vocabulary building.” One teacher said, “A student can never write or read something that they can’t say,” while another noted, “All the basics like the letters and learning to count and shapes...they’re not going to be able to get that if they don’t have the language.” Comments provided during the interviews showed that teachers were favorable to the vocabulary being in any language spoken by the child. One teacher stated, “Literacy in one language, those skills translate to a second language. If you have it in one language, it’s going to transfer to the second language without that much difficulty.” Another teacher agreed with the importance of having well developed oral language skills in any language, noting, “If they don’t have it in their own language then it’s hard to make the connection in English because you don’t have an experience in your own language.”

Teacher participants felt that oral language could be built at home in a variety of ways, such as reading stories, talking to children, and reading environmental print. One teacher stated,

Children in kindergarten are so eager to learn if they have been talked to, read to, and if they have been like singing little songs, and have phonemic awareness and that type of thing. It doesn't matter if they know those letters and sounds. If they have not had any language at all...nobody's done anything with them and they haven't been talked to, haven't been read to, not even in their own language...those children are very disadvantaged, they're very, very far behind and that's harder to make up. They have to have to language to be able to participate.

Another teacher shared the importance of having oral language skills in any language, noting, "If I pull out a picture of an elephant and they can't even tell me in Spanish, that's frustrating." Based on comments by the teachers, oral language skills need to be developed prior to a student attending school for them to be ready for early literacy instruction.

Prerequisite skills. How do teachers expect students to have developed preacademic, social and self-monitoring, and oral language skills prior to coming to kindergarten? Two main ways were discussed as part of the theme of early readiness skills by the teachers interviewed in this project: preschool attendance and parent-child interactions. Preschool attendance, a third area examined under the early literacy theme was felt to play a role in a child's preparation for the school setting, although most

teachers noted that the majority of their students did not attend preschool. They felt the lack of preschool attendance was due to a variety of reasons, including lack of programs in schools, waiting lists for programs, and financial constraints. In the schools of the teachers interviewed, only two had Head Start programs within the school. The teachers indicated that some students attended a private preschool or a daycare that included a minor educational focus. According to the teachers, the major barrier to children attending preschool was a lack of programs that were accessible to the families in their schools. “The kids that went to preschool most likely because they could afford to do that and the ones with preschool, they’re academically blossoming.” It is interesting to note, that half of the parents surveyed reported that their children had attended a preschool program; however, this group was only a small cross-section of the whole student body.

Interactions between parents and their children made up the other factor described in the early literacy theme as a way for students to acquire skills before attending kindergarten. Talking to children was mentioned by all of the teachers as an important skill building activity that parents could use to promote vocabulary learning. As noted earlier, for students who speak English as a second language, the teachers encouraged this family conversation to occur either in English or in the home language, since both are equally effective at building vocabulary skills. A pre-kindergarten packet from one of the participants demonstrated the expectation of parents working with their children to learn coloring, cutting, and drawing skills prior to starting school. The packet also provided sheets for the parents to practice letters, numbers, and shapes with their children. One teacher commented that she expected parents to have exposed their children to books and

included a student's ability to orient a book correctly and locate the first page in her pre-assessment of literacy skills. Each of the teachers discussed the expectation that parents will have begun early literacy instruction, either through stories and letter recognition activities, or through more interactive activities such as learning to cut and color.

Summary. Question 1 documented the teachers' definition of literacy as children's ability to understand and use spoken and/or written language. The question addressed the pre-academic skills described by teachers as the most relevant to being ready for literacy learning. These skills included alphabet recognition, using basic writing skills, and having well-developed oral language skills. Social and self-monitoring skills were also reported to be important in determining a student's readiness for literacy learning. The teachers discussed the use of informal assessments to gather baseline data on student skills prior to their entrance to kindergarten. Finally, the participants described preschool attendance and interactions with parents as ways that children could develop pre-academic skills before attending public school.

After reviewing the final themes in regard to question 1, the researcher reviewed the final concepts generated for question 2, while still considering and integrating the themes that emerged in regard to question 1. That is, in a hermeneutic fashion and in accordance with the process of grounded theory, the data were continuously analyzed.

Question 2

Question 2 explored how teachers' perceptions of school readiness skills impacted the way that they approach teaching early literacy. Teachers' approach to teaching early literacy was examined with a focus on their incorporation of a funds of knowledge

approach and related strategies. The following section discusses teacher perceptions for using a funds of knowledge approach to help students make connections to the curriculum as well as the continued use of informal and formal assessment measures to gauge student progress. This chapter describes four types of strategies teachers used, literacy, oral language, multimodal, and funds of knowledge, to enhance early literacy learning, before ending with a discussion of how teachers' own funds of knowledge may impact their practice.

Teacher perceptions. Perceptions are based on the lens with which individuals view their world and are considered part of our funds of knowledge. Funds of knowledge are described as “the essential cultural practices and bodies of knowledge and information that houses [people] use to survive, to get ahead, or to thrive” (Moll, 1992, p.21). In helping children become ready for literacy learning, it is important for teachers to be able to identify the knowledge and practices that children have attained prior to beginning schooling to make connections with their school curriculum. Identification of these practices can be challenging, given the variety of backgrounds children are exposed to before coming to school, especially in the area of early literacy skills. “We have such a wide range of development in here. We have children who are reading and we have children who only know a few letters and sounds,” said one teacher. Another teacher articulated the impact of background knowledge by saying,

You just have to look for strengths elsewhere...you have to look at things and look for things that may reflect talent and build off of those. You have to be consciously aware of their contributions because I believe everybody comes in

with strengths. What they may be may not be obvious to me. Those are children you have to work a little bit harder to see in them...because the child may have been, may not have been exposed to the same sort of things that we value...just means that we need to look more carefully for what gifts they do have.

Although all the teachers interviewed discussed using assessment prior to the student's beginning school, once children started school, informal and formal assessment measures provided data for teachers to help them map out strategies that would use children's funds of knowledge and help them be successful with building basic literacy skills.

Using assessment as a teaching strategy. In the area of assessment, teachers described informal assessments as an important part of the ongoing classroom structure. "We do informals every day for the entire year," stated one teacher. Another described informal assessment of alphabet skills by, "You can informally, the first day, come in circle time and go through your ABC charts." Other skills that were informally assessed included ability to understand stories and make predictions, name writing, knowledge of colors, and recognizing numbers. For example, one teacher stated, "So usually within the first two weeks of school I try to do a check for letters, sounds, can you write your name, do you know your name, do you know your numbers." Another teacher reported using drawing and dictation to capture student ideas to measure pre-writing, "We do everything from just writing samples, which at the beginning is draw me a picture and then we just write down, we do a dictation and write down what they say." In addition, an informal assessment for writing was described by another teacher as, "Are they just drawing pictures, can they label anything, do they write some other things, sometimes kids will

know how to spell mom.” According to all eight teacher participants, informal measures were helpful by providing continuous information regarding student progress in learning early literacy skills.

In addition to informal measures, each of the teachers interviewed discussed the use of formal school-wide assessment measures. The PALS program, Phonological Awareness Literacy Screening, developed by the University of Virginia, was a commonly used measure in the school district (Invernizzi, Swank, & Juel, 2007). For kindergarten students, PALS is administered in the fall and spring to determine letter identification, concepts of print, and word recognition. One teacher noted, “We screen them...we do the fall PALS, that’s probably the first real screening we have.” This screening was completed by the all the teachers’ schools in September or October. Based on the comments of six of the teachers, the PALS was perceived to provide important information for planning and one teacher described it as “a wonderful assessment.”

Another frequently used formal assessment used by all of the teachers was the DRA-2 or Developmental Reading Assessment, Second Edition (Beaver & Carter, 2009). This measure was used most often to determine student placement in daily reading groups for skills practice. One teacher reported that “we do a DRA, usually we don’t get there until October or November.” Using the information from the informal and formal assessments, the teachers then adjusted their instruction by using strategies to help the children gain in their literacy learning. The teaching strategies that teachers used were broken down into four main categories: literacy strategies, oral language strategies, multimodal strategies, and funds of knowledge strategies.

Using literacy strategies. The theme of literacy strategies was categorized during the data analysis as activities that directly related to practicing skills during language arts instruction time. These activities focused on building two of the literacy readiness skills discussed in the literature: phonological awareness and print knowledge (Lonigan, 2006b). Several strategies for increasing student awareness of literacy readiness skills that were evident across the classrooms of all of the teacher participants included posting an alphabet chart and/or a word wall, reading big books, reading picture books, and engaging in small reading groups divided by student performance levels. One teacher noted that, “There’s such a wide range so that’s why the guided reading group, the center time where there’s individual opportunities to work with them in small groups is so important.” All of the teachers interviewed reported using collections of books divided into different levels for students to read independently and during small group instruction. One teacher said, “Different children have different books because you know they’re all on different levels,” while another indicated, “Go into their reading boxes... they each have their own reading box that’s full of things they can read at their own level.” Materials such as flash cards, alphabet books, and vocabulary journals were discussed by all teachers as strategies designed to practice skills such as phonological awareness, alphabet knowledge, and letter-sound correspondence. One example of a vocabulary journal provided by a teacher that demonstrated practice of beginning sounds was, “it’s a word book where it’s got all the letters and one page has here for W, they just color this in but then they have to come up with 4 words on their own.” Literacy strategies provided practice for phonological awareness skills and print knowledge;

however, the third skill discussed by Lonigan (2006b) as essential to readiness of literacy learning, oral language, revealed a separate group of strategies.

Using oral language strategies. The data revealed that the teachers' beliefs in the importance of oral language to building early literacy skills also played a significant role in the way that they developed classroom activities and curriculum. Knowing that oral language is integral to developing literacy, the teachers interviewed indicated that they took special care to devote a large portion of the school day to reinforcing these skills. "A student can never read or write something they can't say," stated one participant. All of the kindergarten teachers interviewed described using a circle time where they practiced building oral language through discussions of the days of the week, calendar skills, singing, and telling stories. For example, teachers described how they modeled the skills and then provided students with opportunities to improve their own oral language by participating in the activities. Often these experiences gave the students a chance to incorporate their funds of knowledge through telling stories and by engaging in activities designed to help them make connections between the curriculum and their daily life. Some examples documented in the data were student of the week, where a student is invited to share his/her interests with the class, the writing podium, where students read aloud their written work to their classmates, and story time. All of the teachers interviewed used questioning, naming pictures, group work, public speaking, and story repetition to help expand the students' vocabulary skills. One teacher shared, "We do a lot of questioning, lots of opportunities for them to share if they know something." Another teacher added, "They can retell the story...hear them say the refrains."

Building social conversation was another oral language skill seen as important to the teacher participants. Providing opportunities to build vocabulary through conversation was considered especially important for English as a second language (ESL) students and frequent talking in the classrooms was encouraged. “If you walk into a classroom in a school with an ESL population and it’s quiet, I’d be wondering what’s going on,” said one teacher. Another stated, “We’re always working on oral language, always working on vocabulary building,” while another participant reported, “We try to build a lot of opportunities during the day for a lot of talk. It gives them a chance to talk to each other and experience life experience where they’re conversing and pretending.” Other strategies mentioned by the teachers to build social conversation skills were providing time for social interaction at recess and giving the students opportunities during class to share stories of their experiences.

It should also be noted that each of the eight teachers strongly felt that listening activities were an excellent way to build oral language skills, and that they provided many opportunities such as reading books, participating in listening centers, and using computers to help children learn to recognize and build their vocabulary. One teacher described the use of listening centers, “I pick a book I know the text is going to be read aloud to so they put the headphones on and don’t have to worry about reading the story, they can do the comprehension piece of it.” Another teacher talked about using oral reading in the classroom as a motivator, “Even if they can’t read and I’m up there reading and they’re having a blast...they see that it’s fun,” and another stated, “I make a point to write in my lesson plan book the book I’m going to read at least one book that day.”

Whether listening to a teacher read, practicing social conversation skills, or working on using oral language skills to explain academics, oral language skills were considered by the teachers to be one of the most important pre-literacy skills that a student could have before coming into kindergarten.

Using multimodal strategies. The next category of strategies discussed by all of the teacher participants to build early literacy understanding was labeled “multimodal strategies” by the researcher. Multimodal strategies support literacy learning by using a variety of methods, including singing, dancing, and crafts, and are beneficial to students who may not have a well-developed oral vocabulary or who may have entered kindergarten without the pre-literacy skills outlined by Lonigan (2006b). Multimodal strategies engage the sensory experiences through auditory, visual, or kinesthetic and tactile stimulation and can be used in combination to reach all types of learners. These strategies can also be used across curriculum subjects to enhance literacy learning throughout the day. One teacher described the differences in student learning styles saying, “Some that are going to be visual learners, [and] there’s some that are going to be doing things with their hands, learning things through song, so I try to do different activities that let them experience things.” The interviewed teachers described a wide array of multimodal strategies they have used in their classrooms and embraced the chance to incorporate multiple modalities in kindergarten, with one teacher noting, “The great thing about kindergarten is you explore and you get to do so many things where they have these hands-on experiences and they can talk to each other and they can find out about things in their world.” Another teacher said, “To use all the modalities and

things, that's really what kind of drew me to kindergarten." This sentiment was echoed by yet another teacher who said, "[I] love experimenting and touching things and just investigating and that's what's so fun about kindergarten."

During data analysis, themes related to the multimodal strategies used by the participants were divided into four categories: auditory, visual, kinesthetic/tactile, and across curriculum. Auditory strategies attempt to maximize on the ability to hear and understand information. An example of an auditory strategy that was described as effective by the teachers was teaching through song and rhyme. "We do lots of songs with rhyming, with beginning sounds, with sight words," said one teacher. Visual strategies help to reinforce literacy skills by providing a visual cue for students to remember. Visual strategies used by the teachers included using pictures of objects to match with letter sounds, puzzles, and taking a "picture walk" in a new book. One teacher coupled a picture word wall with a stuffed animal to gain the students' attention. The teacher reported, "We put up a phonics wall where we put up pictures as we go, our bear has pictures in his backpack to pull out for each letter so we try to make it concrete." Kinesthetic and tactile strategies allow students to experience literacy skills through body movement and touch. Examples of these types of strategies included engaging in body movement activities, exercising or dancing to songs, miming new vocabulary words, using play dough to form letters, building with blocks, and writing in oatmeal or sand.

Often multimodal strategies combine sensory skills. For example, clapping out syllables was noted to be an effective way to teach parts of words through both an auditory and tactile manner. Finger painting and tracing letters and names combined

visual and kinesthetic/tactile. One teacher stated, “Working with letters, you start with the letters in their name and you’re tracing them and saying them, and going over and over again with the dry erase marker, in the sand.” Another teacher remarked on a strategy used to help a student recognize his name, “One of them couldn’t write his name so...I had him fingerprint his name...once this is laminated he’s going to practice tracing over it.” According to two of the teachers, dramatic play areas such as housekeeping centers allowed children to use all their sensory modalities while providing opportunities to build social conversation and vocabulary skills. A teacher described these interactive play areas, “Like the dramatic play center, puppets...have the kids using language. They have a block center, housekeeping center, a game and puzzles area, an art center, and science center.”

The fourth area where multimodal strategies were discussed by the teacher participants was incorporating them into subject areas other than reading to enhance literacy skills. The teachers talked about using reading and writing during math, science, and social studies to help children make connections. One teacher shared a kinesthetic strategy, “If we’re talking about shapes we might do a shape story and then we launch into you know a shape hunt in the room.” Another stated, “We write...writing story problems...writing in science and social studies, making predictions.” Another teacher shared that her class is “always working on integrating reading and writing into whatever we’re doing, integrating math into our reading and writing, and social studies gets integrated all the way through. Science is the same.” Finally, one of the teachers talked about using the auditory aspect of stories in other academic areas, saying, “In math we

use stories...and science and social studies is almost all reading stories in kindergarten.”

Based on information from the teacher interviews, multimodal strategies using visual, auditory, and kinesthetic senses have been effective in assisting students with developing pre-literacy skills by making connections to the kindergarten curriculum.

Using funds of knowledge strategies. Multimodal strategies provide one way to encourage student learning for students through sensory connections. However, another important aspect of learning is helping children make connections between what they already know and what they are beginning to understand. “We have to tie to something they already know,” said one teacher. Teachers interviewed noted that making the connections between what children know from home and what they learn in the school curriculum is one of the most difficult parts of working with all students. A teacher stated, “To make real life connections is going to be hard for them because they are not that advanced. They don’t work that way, especially when they are struggling.”

Alternatively, another teacher stated she enjoyed the challenge of helping students connect with learning literacy skills, saying, “I really like kindergarten because it has to be fun or exciting or else they’re not really going to connect with it and they have to make a connection.”

The data indicated that all of the teachers interviewed attempted to make connections to the curriculum using a funds of knowledge approach to early literacy as identified in the literature (Moll, 1992). For example, a common subject for initial classroom projects was families. One teacher asked her students to develop a family picture while another had students complete a “family through the years” poster to share

with their class. Another teacher made a bulletin board of family pictures and then used circle time activities to help children discover the similarities and differences between their families. Other activities related to families that were mentioned included activities using family names, describing where you live, and drawing and telling stories about family activities. A teacher described the use of prewriting and oral language skills by stating, “They’re drawing about their families and telling us like how they went to Mexico.” Another shared, “We do writer’s workshop...they each have their own personal folders and they write about life experiences.”

Other funds of knowledge strategies consisted of using books in Spanish, labeling classroom objects in Spanish, connecting letters to words, and reading cultural storybooks. One teacher reported using a strategy called the surprise box to help children connect to each other. Her description noted that,

It’s called a surprise box and the children take it home...and they bring it back and they have to write out clues and they can read the clues to the other students and the students can guess what’s in their surprise.

Another teacher talked about using an artist of the day to help children share their funds of knowledge with the class. “We have an artist of the day and if someone shares their art it goes out there.” Another teacher described using class-made versions of storybooks to help children learn each others’ names. She said,

We did *Brown Bear, Brown Bear*, we went back and we did children, we put the names in. We took their pictures and we put in the book so they can go back and track the words and read and learn their friends’ names.

Finally, one teacher talked about using peer instruction to help children make connections, stating, “Other students can be really helpful in helping my students like that. They can explain something maybe in a way I can’t, even translate.”

Teachers linked curriculum information to the students’ home and community experiences to help make connections between home and school. Each of the teachers shared in their interviews that they used a variety of methods to help children realize that they may know more than they think. For example, one teacher talked about using information from the daily environment, stating “Environmental print is hugely important,” providing the example that “Children recognize the golden arches from McDonalds, they recognize those things.” Teachers felt that students had a wealth of knowledge from their out of school experiences that could be connected. “A lot of times they have experiences but they don’t even realize,” said one participant. Another teacher shared the example that “A lot of them don’t know what the escalator is, but if I say there’s one at the mall... and I show them the picture,” they were able to draw the connections to better understand the story being read. For learning basic literacy skills like letters and letter sounds, one teacher said, “Did they specifically talk about like rings, so in their pictures, just learning their name, I might pull specific pictures.” This use of connecting familiar information from students’ funds of knowledge documented in the teacher interviews and in photographs of classroom materials provided concrete examples for children to draw connections to the curriculum and to make comparisons with each other.

Teacher's funds of knowledge. Students' funds of knowledge are not the only background information that drives the way teachers develop strategies. Data from the teacher interviews demonstrated that their funds of knowledge, including their perceptions on collaboration with other teachers, their own education-related life experiences (Samaras, 2011), their experiences with their own children, and lessons learned from continuing education, play an important role in how they address working with students who may require *out of the box* strategies to learn literacy skills. One of the funds of knowledge that can impact the way teachers interact with students during learning is the way the school culture views and supports students that may not come to school with literacy readiness skills like phonological awareness or print knowledge. One teacher described his experience as, "I'd say as far as this school in general we focus...it's not my kid, it's our kid....We have great support staff that helps communicate." Collaboration with other professionals was seen as an important part of developing strategies. For instance, every teacher interviewed had an English as a second language teacher assigned to their classroom. Amounts of time and support varied by school, but one teacher noted that "She comes to our class every day for about an hour for reading groups." Another teacher commented that the ESL teacher was very good at helping the children make connections and with working with getting their parents involved with literacy learning. Having this school-based support appeared from comments in the interviews to help teachers feel less overwhelmed with attempting to develop strategies to reach all of the literacy needs of the kindergarteners on their own.

Personal experiences during their own schooling also impacted the funds of knowledge of teachers working with students who enter school with limited pre-literacy skills. Three of the teachers in the project shared their experiences with reading difficulties as children. One teacher noted he was described as having a learning disability in the area of reading which made school very hard for him. “I was labeled LD [learning disabled] in 3rd grade, dyslexia, I’m sure I would have been ADHD [attention deficit hyperactivity disorder], so I struggled to read.” This teacher was helped by a learning disabilities teacher that taught him some of the same strategies that he employs now with his students. He stated that,

I had a teacher later...my LD teacher who helped me understand what I needed to do to overcome my issues, that meant a lot to me.... That’s kind of what I try to apply down here to the ESL kids.... I try to give them coping skills to keep them on the path.

This teacher felt that his experience gave valuable insight into what it is like for other students who have difficulty learning to read. Another teacher was required to work with the reading specialist for a period of time to boost skills when she had problems learning to read. She indicated that, “I really struggled with reading...just a lot of struggle with learning how to read...I was pulled until 6th grade by the reading specialist and worked with weekly.” She added, “I can sympathize. It actually has been such a great asset to have because when I have children that are struggling I feel more, I just feel this huge sense of responsibility just to help them.” Yet another teacher who was a second

language learner was described as mentally retarded when assessed because she could not understand what was going on in the classroom around her. She shared,

I suspect the reason I don't remember a lot is school wasn't really a positive thing for me.... When I was gathering up my materials, thinking I could go to a four-year college...reviewing all my records, they had done an assessment of me in elementary school where they put down...basically they thought I was retarded.”

This teacher reported that this was one of the reasons she has a strong interest in preparing children for literacy with home activities prior to them attending school.

Three of the teachers described attempts to build their funds of knowledge through interactions with their children at home and through continuing education classes. One teacher reported,

It was a great way to experience a lot of the same things along with my children at home.... I was teaching and working with my own children at home, I was doing the same things in the classroom. I could really see okay this is working here or I might work on something here and I'm thinking why didn't they process that, why didn't they get it.

Two other participants described attending continuing education courses focused not only on learning strategies to help build literacy skills, but also classes designed to help teachers learn more about the language and culture of their students. One teacher said, “I learned how to implement centers and do guided reading...I took SPOT class through the county.” Another remarked, “I recently started taking Spanish. I'm taking steps forward to try to learn myself about the Spanish language; the Spanish culture has made a bigger

impact on my teaching.” Based on the information provided in the teacher interviews, teachers’ background experiences have an impact on the way that they engage in instruction and in how they seek to improve their teaching practice.

Summary. Question 2 examined how teachers’ perceptions of school readiness skills have impacted their teaching practices. Data from the teacher interviews, work samples, and photographs of classroom materials showed that both formal and informal assessment provided teachers with information about student skill levels that helped them develop strategies to assist with student learning. These strategies were divided into the four categories of literacy, oral language, multimodal, and funds of knowledge strategies, and examples were provided of each type. Finally, data from the teacher interviews showed that the teachers’ own experiences with literacy learning at school, or their funds of knowledge, impact the way they interact with their students.

Question 3

Question 3 examined teachers’ perspectives regarding the role of connections between the home and school in building children’s literacy learning. This section includes a discussion of the impact of teachers’ funds of knowledge on expectations, as well as data regarding their perceptions on parental involvement at home and school. A discussion of strategies to encourage parental involvement, including materials sent home and school-based activities, is also included.

Teacher experiences. It is suggested by the findings in question 2 that teachers’ funds of knowledge, or the background information they use to view learning and teaching, unfold as a result of a combination of personal experiences such as home

experiences, school literacy learning, knowledge learned in instructional classes, and experiences with methods in the actual classroom setting. Because of their own home literacy experiences, teachers may or may not have expectations that all parents should be working with their children on literacy activities at home. Six of the teacher participants interviewed discussed memories of reading with a parent at home and engaging in activities like helping with home lists. One teacher noted, “My mom used to sit and read with us and play games, and write and draw pictures.” Another said, “We always had a story every night,” while another talked about engaging in literacy activities with extended family members, “Reading to my grandparents and pretending like we were in a play and orally reading out loud or in a skit...or even songs, traveling somewhere and singing songs and telling stories.” While the experiences of these teachers may have increased their expectations for parent involvement at home, one teacher had a very different experience that has given her an alternative view of what literacy learning at home could be like for some students. “My parents were illiterate and they were migrant workers so no, my parents didn’t play much of a role,” said the teacher. She went on to discuss how her parents wanted to learn to read to help their children but were unable to at the time because of family responsibilities. The teacher felt this alternative fund of knowledge helped her to relate to possible family challenges her students may be facing. Based on information from the teacher interviews, teachers’ home experiences helped them use their funds of knowledge and set standards for what they felt was expected of parental participation in literacy learning at home.

Perceptions of parent involvement. Working with parents is a critical piece in maximizing funds of knowledge strategies for increasing literacy learning for young children. To foster the connections between home and school that enhance children's learning, teachers can use parents as a resource for gaining information about the student and their home literacy activities (Armstutz, 2000; Auerbach, 1997; Billings, 2009; Carter et al., 2009; Compton-Lilly, 2009; Dudley-Marling, 2009; Kennedy, 2010; Newman, 2009; Nistler & Maiers, 1999; Swick, 2009). Information about these home activities helps teachers understand the types of family involvement in their classrooms. "I think it's [family involvement in reading] paramount," said one teacher. Another teacher described, "Being able to communicate with the parents and finding what they [the students] like, what they enjoy, what they do at home, what their situation is, and then connect it to what we're doing here" as one way to engage parents in the learning process. Another teacher agreed with this approach saying, "This is what you really want.... It's a partnership, we're a team; we're working together." Two other participants echoed these statements making comments such as, "I really have a philosophy implemented into me that it's really a team effort from the teacher and parents," and "It's important to keep parents involved."

Three teachers addressed what they considered to be misconceptions regarding the involvement of parents at their schools. "People think schools like mine; they don't have a lot of parent involvement because they don't care. That's not the issue," said a teacher. One teacher acknowledged the challenges parents were facing and were encouraged that parents were still eager to become involved saying, "The longer I spend

working...the more I appreciate what each of these parents is doing and how hard it is for them.” Another remarked, “Parents are so appreciative of when you take the time to do that with them that they really try. That at least has been my experience.” A third teacher noted, “They are interested parents. They care. Just a lot of them don’t know.” One teacher highlighted the importance of helping parents to feel empowered as a part of the educational process. “It’s really important to make it clear to the parents that they need to do it, they need to not feel that they can’t.” Working in a smaller school where he had daily contact with many of the parents was a positive way to get them involved according to one participant. He stated, “The fact that I can see them and that I can talk to them...anything I need to communicate I can communicate right there.” Overall, the teachers interviewed seemed to have a positive view regarding parents wanting to be involved in their children’s school experience.

According to four teachers, siblings played a role in helping parents work with younger children at home. Siblings may have the ability to translate for parents to help them understand the curriculum and can often work with the younger children on activities at home. A teacher stated, “Brothers and sisters are the ones really taking on the role.... They’ll read the calendar and turn it in and help the brothers and sisters in my class.” Another teacher noted, “I can make these suggestions to parents...or siblings because we have a lot of siblings that pick up the kids.” Two others described using siblings to open lines of communication with families, saying, “I send information through his sister sometimes,” and “I am trying to explain to siblings who could maybe translate.”

In addition to partnering with parents and siblings to help make connections to the literacy curriculum for young students, teachers noted that they support a funds of knowledge approach in the classroom by encouraging students to share items from home. Displaying work that children have completed at home was one way that the data found in the interviews and classroom photographs demonstrated that the participants supported home-based learning. One teacher stated, “I have a whole bunch of stuff that the kids have made at home. I always try to display it because I think it reinforces them to do these things at home.” Another said, “A lot of children that are very language rich at home you can see that they have a lot of that in their writing.” All of the eight teachers discussed allowing students to verbally share their experiences by asking them to bring in objects or books to share with each other as strategies that can be used to build connections between home and school. By looking at data from the teacher interviews, it appears that the teachers in the study had a positive view about building connections between home and school for young learners. The teachers not only felt that parent involvement was important to student learning, but also that parents wanted to participate. Although the teachers described circumstances that might limit parent involvement, they discussed interacting with siblings and displaying items the students had brought from home as ways to make connections for all students.

Cultural awareness. In addition to viewing parents as partners, positive connections can also be made between home and school when teachers gain awareness of the cultural backgrounds of their students. Understanding the differences between cultures, especially those that speak a common language, can help teachers appreciate the

diversity of families in their classrooms (Gay, 2000; Gonzalez, Moll, & Amanti, 2005). One teacher said, “It’s not like you can put them all, like hey this is what they all believe.” Some strategies documented by two teachers to help raise cultural awareness in their classrooms to build connections include increasing personal knowledge, “I’m learning more about their culture and their families. That’s making it easier to make those connections...it was always difficult for me,” and inviting parents in to the class because as one teacher stated, “I honestly think it’s important for those parents to come in to see that their culture is important too.” Being cognizant of cultural awareness can help teachers make connections for students and can help the teachers define the expectations that they have for the type of literacy activities students will complete at home (Gay, 2000; Gonzalez, Moll, & Amanti, 2005).

Home expectations. Based on a number of factors, the teachers interviewed had expectations regarding what they thought parents should be doing at home to support their children’s literacy learning. These expectations may have come from their personal childhood experiences, working with their own children, or from what they have learned regarding education practices. All of the teachers reported they had an awareness that they could not control what happened at home with students; however, they remained diligent in offering suggestions to parents about how they could build the connections between home and school for their children. These suggestions ranged from, “We give them a packet of ideas of things they could do at home and even encourage them to get the play dough out,” and “Please read with your child for ten minutes every night...it doesn’t matter if it is in Spanish or English,” to “Get out that newspaper, get out that

recipe book, read aloud...draw with me...they need to be an active participant.” In addition, teachers stressed the importance of parents engaging their children in conversation at home. One teacher said, “They [parents] need to sit down just a short time, have a conversation with their child. Talk about their day, whether it be good or bad...our children need to develop conversation, even how to problem solve.”

Three teachers also discussed the importance of community-based learning to building home and school connections. One teacher described how parents could use literacy strategies on typical family outings, by sharing, “I tell them when you go to the grocery store and you take your child with you, let them help you find the cereal, we’re looking for Fruit Loops, it’s going to have an F on the box.” Two other teachers encouraged their students to share their experiences with organized community activities, remarking, “Church they talk a lot about,” and “They talk about Brownies and Girl Scouts.” Five teachers discussed attempts to help parents gain access to community resources like the public library and one teacher sponsored a reading program like the “Book it program” where students earn prizes from a local restaurant for reading a certain number of books at home. One teacher talked about sharing awareness of the public library, saying, “We have a library day in the spring where they get the information and they can sign up. Try to keep the connection open. There’s not a lot of our students who go to the library.” The teachers interviewed shared that they expected some type of literacy learning to occur at home and even incorporated community activities into this.

Materials provided from the classroom. The connection between home and school learning was strengthened by teachers sharing materials with parents. All of the

teacher participants described the importance of providing parents with materials to support literacy learning. One teacher noted the importance of sharing materials, saying, “Educating parents and providing them with a, handing them a resource because I think it’s one thing to say you could do this and this and this but if they have the actual resource,” the resource material provides a model for what they need to do at home. While one teacher said, “I’ll send home whatever the child particularly needs,” most of the materials described by teachers fell into the categories of books and early alphabet activities. Seven of the teachers frequently sent home books to encourage home literacy practice. “We send books home and things. We try to make sure that we’ve got something for them...so they have something to hook into,” said one teacher. According to the teacher interviews and photographic data, books were sent home in a variety of fashions including a read and return program, sending home books in home languages, and sending home baggy books where the children had a plastic baggie of two books for two weeks and then brought them back to class to exchange for new ones. In addition, four teachers described sending homemade or paper books to help build the students’ home libraries. “They’re just paper books that we copy and they can take home, keep, and read to their parents,” said one of the teachers. “They each have their own set of these [homemade books],” and “The idea is I don’t know how many books they have at home but this will be something that they made, so I try to do a book a week so that it builds up their home library,” said another teacher. Two teachers reported sending home copies of short stories called “Refrigerator Stories” weekly. One of the teachers explained, “Refrigerator stories are the stories on my big chart and so we practice reading

those all week and then they take them home, they take a small version and post it on their refrigerator and practice reading.” One participant even reported that, “We send materials home that they can use and they have magic wands, little reading wands that they have to point to the words to practice one to one match [on the refrigerator stories].” Three teachers also noted that their schools participated in the Reading is Fundamental (RIF) program where books are donated to the school by organizations for the children to take home and keep. “We do RIF,” said one teacher, “That’s a great opportunity for them to take home a book.”

In addition to sending home books, all of the teachers interviewed reported sending home materials for parents to use with their children to practice letter and sight word recognition skills. Some examples of materials included white boards, dry erase markers, high frequency word lists, paper letter tiles, and worksheets. “I give them an alphabet book...I teach the parents to do “a,” “a,” apple,” said one teacher. “I tell them to buy magnetic letters and if you don’t want to I can make paper ones,” reported another. Simple games with using flashcards were also commonly provided to the parents. “If the child is struggling with number identification or letter identification, I’ll send home flashcards and a list of different games and instructions in Spanish and English so they can play,” said a teacher. Overall, teacher participants found that sending home materials such as books, whiteboards, and word lists was an effective way to build home and school connections by providing parents with the items they needed to work with their children at home.

School-based events. Every teacher interviewed described school-based events as an effective way to build home and school connections and to help parents feel integrated into the school system. Conferences, parent nights, and kindergarten orientations were commonly discussed strategies used by all eight teachers to inform parents about literacy expectations and to provide instruction. All but one of the teachers interviewed reported that they had close to one hundred percent participation at the fall parent-teacher conferences. “They really want to know...they want to come see the classroom,” said one teacher. Conferences were felt to be an excellent time to talk with parents about expectations for home learning and were used to provide parents with instruction in some of the activities that they could use with the materials sent home. For example, one teacher stated, “I do a lot of parent training at conference time.” Another teacher talked about providing parents with access to phone conferences but noted, “I will do the phone conference but I really like to get them in here you know because I like to meet them face to face.” Teachers also described parent nights and orientations as effective ways to increase family participation for kindergarten students. One teacher said, “Having a parent night is a great way to involve families.” Two other teachers described using a kindergarten information night or kindergarten orientation to inform parents about expectations regarding instruction during the kindergarten year.

All of the teachers interviewed were eager to have parents visit and participate in literacy activities in the classroom during the school day. “Any parent who wants to help out can help out,” stated one teacher. Another reported,

I tell parents at the beginning of the year at open house, if you can come in just come...you don't even have to tell me. I try to tell the Spanish speakers don't not come because you can't speak, I'll find an activity for you that won't require that. One teacher described a school wide volunteer program that "Allows them to come visit and work in the classrooms, work in the library, work in the whole school." Another teacher opened the doors to her classroom for parents not just to volunteer but also to see learning strategies in action. She described, "Whenever I've had children struggling with something, I invite the parent in and show them, give them the stuff so they can go home and practice it." One teacher stated, "I have parties once a month to celebrate their writing and sometimes the parents can come in...then they'll understand what we're doing in the classroom." Another shared that, "We do this VIP...on Tuesday they can either send in a book or their parent can read a book in the class to the class...I try to encourage the parents to come in and do that." Having parents in the classroom was reported to be a positive experience, and one teacher noted, "Children are so happy and proud when their parents come."

In addition to orientations, conferences, and classroom visits, all the teacher participants reported during their interviews that their schools sponsored other popular literacy and multicultural events to encourage parent participation. One teacher said, "Last year we had a big multicultural activity where families cooked something from their culture." Another described her schools' "literacy around the world" program where, "We dressed up for different cultures for the story we were going to read." Additional school activities reported by the teachers that had strong parent attendance

were Read Across America Day, the Parents as Educational Partners (PEP) program, and classroom-based activities like Thanksgiving feasts. One teacher noted, “We’ve done literature nights and we’ve done little mini rotations and we have a packet of things to share with them.” Another teacher shared that, “Some of them like it so much they want to come back for everything that we have. And that’s what they do.” Based on information provided in the participant interviews, school-based events appear to provide parents with opportunities to become part of the literacy process by involving them in the larger school community.

Teacher perceived reasons for limitation in involvement. Despite the attempts to build home and school connections, all of the teachers interviewed shared concerns about limited parent involvement in the educational process. All eight teachers seemed to understand the demands placed on the parents of their students, making comments such as, “There are some parents who just aren’t going to because they’re so overwhelmed with their own issues that they can’t help their children as well as you’d like to see them,” and “Some of these parents are just trying to survive.” One teacher shared,

A lot of the families really want to be involved but they don’t know how to or they don’t have the resources to do it. They’re strapped.... They don’t have a car. They work a night job. They don’t have daycare for their children.... They don’t have family and friends who can watch them. They’re intimidated by school.

Coming here is a scary prospect.

Financial constraints were discussed by all the teachers as a significant difficulty for finding times to get parents into the school building. “It’s hard to get the parents who

most need to come to come.... These parents are working two jobs, they're making ends meet.... They can't get here," noted one teacher. Another said, "Can't get them here during the day. It's hard for us to get here at night," as a reason for limited parent interactions with the school. Three teachers described societal difficulties as having an impact on parental willingness to participate in school activities. "You have parents that just feel as though they're not part of the school system," stated a teacher. "I think for our population, because they have to fill out an application [for a library card] they're a bit resistant to give more information.... Some of them don't have public transportation and it causes them not to go," reported another. Yet another teacher referred to recent immigration policy as a reason for lack of involvement noting, "We're dealing with all this illegal stuff and it's scary and they stopped coming. They're starting to work their way out of it, understand, but a lot of them don't get it, they don't understand it."

Issues perceived by all eight teachers to limit parent involvement in connecting the home and school were concerns dealing with the second language acquisition skills of the parents. Three teachers said that they were unsure about the basic literacy skills of many parents even in their home language. "They're too embarrassed or too prideful to say, 'I can't read, I can't help,' said one teacher. "We get a lot of notices that go home that never got looked at because mom and dad can't read them," reported another. One teacher felt that sending home translated forms was not always effective because, "The Spanish speaking population, a lot of them I think haven't had the exposure to education in their primary language."

In addition to the parents' possible illiteracy, teachers reported in their interviews that parents had voiced concerns that their lack of English skills either made them unable to help or caused them to be afraid that they would confuse their children with instruction given in another language. For example, one teacher shared, "A lot of parents have told me before they don't want to confuse them if they teach it to them in Spanish." Another reported, "At conferences a lot of times when I talk to the Spanish speakers they will say, 'It's hard for me to teach them because I can't speak the English, I can't help.'" One teacher reported, "The most important thing is that we make sure the parents know it's not going to confuse them and they should make the effort to try and help them at home." The data indicated that providing parents with information that encourages them to participate in the child's education in any language is one way kindergarten teachers can help parents feel a connection to their child's learning.

Summary. Question 3 examined the teachers' views regarding building connections between home and school. Data from the teacher interviews showed that the teachers' own education-related life experiences with literacy learning at home may impact their expectations for parental involvement with their students. During the interviews, teachers also discussed the fact that although they had concerns about why parents were unable to participate in their children's learning, they were generally positive in their attitudes toward parents and most had an open door policy for families to visit the classroom and school. Providing families with materials to use at home was reported as a common way that teachers worked to involve parents in literacy activities with their children at home.

Question 4

Questions 4 and 5 moved from looking at views of the teacher participants to examining how parent participants felt about literacy learning. These sections will examine the data collected from a written parent survey that was sent home with all of the students in the participants' classrooms. Thirty parents completed the survey and an informed consent form. The reported data is based on their responses. Research question 4 was based on information gathered from survey items three through eight and research question 5 focused on the data from items nine through fourteen of the parent survey located in Appendix D. Since the survey provided limited opportunities for expansion on answers and follow-up interviews were not possible because of the confidential nature of the responses, considerably less data was collected for these questions than for the first three.

Parents' funds of knowledge. Question 4 moved from looking at the teacher perspective on using funds of knowledge to examining parent perspectives about the home and school connection and what skills they feel are needed for a child to be successful in school. To understand parent perspectives, the first piece of information collected regarding early literacy skills was the age at which parents felt it was appropriate to begin formal reading instruction. According to 73% of the parents who completed the paper survey, children should begin to learn to read between the ages of four and six. One parent remarked that reading instruction should begin with "exposure to books and picture reading from three months and letters when they show interest," while two parents stated they felt the older age of seven was most appropriate to begin literacy

instruction. This input showed that the majority of parents who completed the survey felt that their children were at the appropriate age to be taught reading skills.

Next, information was collected regarding parents' funds of knowledge in the area of reading, including who taught them to read and when, and their reading habits as adults. As with the teacher participants, these experiences could possibly play a role in the types of literacy-based activities they engaged in with their children and in how parents viewed the teacher as a literacy instructor. The parents who responded were about evenly split between having been taught by a family member or by a teacher; three parents or 10 % recalled the involvement of both. In terms of daily use of literacy as part of a home routine, parents were questioned about their own literacy practices to determine the type of modeling they provided for their children. A high number of the parents who completed the survey, 87%, responded that they read or write for pleasure, implying that at least some of the students in the teachers' classrooms are exposed to a parent engaging in literacy activities regularly in the home setting.

Parent views of pre-literacy skills and home-based activities. Parents were asked to list the pre-literacy skills they felt were most important for their children before attending kindergarten. The responses of the parents were coded like those of the teachers into the categories of academic or social/self-discipline skills. Academic skills noted by the parents as important were similar to those of teachers and included recognizing letters, writing their name, counting and number recognition, knowing colors and shapes, knowing how to read and write, and understanding English. Social and self-discipline skills discussed by the parents, however, were more specifically defined in the survey

responses than in the teacher participant data. Fourteen of the parents surveyed reported that they wanted their children to develop social skills, to be able to share, and to know how to act in a school environment. Other individual parents placed importance on their children showing patience, being able to listen and follow directions, being truthful, having manners, knowing how to play with others, and realizing that they [the students] cannot have their own way all of the time. Parents felt that these skills were critical to helping their children be ready to attend school and begin literacy instruction.

In terms of working to develop early literacy skills at home, all 30 parents surveyed reported that they read to their child, with 50% noting they did so daily. In addition, parents were asked about the activities they engaged in with their child at home that build pre-literacy readiness. These activities, like the strategies described by the teacher participants, were coded for the type of multimodal interaction they engaged in: visual, auditory, or kinesthetic. Overall, watching TV shows together, singing songs, watching movies, cooking with recipes, dancing, and telling stories were multimodal items indicated by 66% or more of the parents who completed the survey. In addition, visual strategies that parents said they used with their children included playing video games, photography, coloring, playing card games, and building with Legos. Auditory strategies included listening to music. Additional kinesthetic strategies described by the parent responders included activities such as Tae Kwan Do, arts and crafts, playing outside, hiking, cleaning, folding clothes, going shopping, coloring, playing sports, swimming, picking things from the shelves when grocery shopping, playing board games, and attending activities like family reunions, and going to Girl Scouts. Finally 53% of the

parents surveyed reported that they regularly go to the public library and 46% said they regularly attend a religious service with their children, showing that home-based skills can be supported by community resources.

Summary. Question 4 investigated parental perspectives on the skills they felt are necessary to practice at home to support building pre-literacy skills when students go to kindergarten. The results of the surveys showed the types of activities parents thought would foster these skills in the home and community setting were consistent with skills reported by the teacher participants during their interviews. The parents who were interviewed reported that they modeled reading and writing at home and described activities that they used with their children to build pre-literacy skills. The next question will discuss how parents engage in literacy-based interactions with their child's school once their child has begun kindergarten.

Question 5

Question 5 examined how school interactions have helped parents become part of the early literacy process. Parents were questioned about their knowledge of and participation in school events, as well as their familiarity with materials that were sent home to promote literacy learning. Parents were also given the opportunity to share feedback regarding their perceptions of their child's teacher and classroom.

Parent participation in school-based activities. Helping parents feel welcome in schools has been documented in family literacy research as one way to increase parental participation in the learning process (Crawford & Zygouris-Coe, 2006; Edwards, 2004; Smith, 2001). To help parents become involved as a partner in teaching their children

early literacy skills once they have entered school, it is important for teachers to have open communication with parents and to provide them with instruction and materials that they can use in the home setting. The teacher participants described a number of opportunities provided in their schools for parents to meet their child's teacher and to become involved in activities at the school. The parents who responded to the written survey confirmed their invitation to participate in these activities. On the survey, 93% of the parents who responded said that they had met their child's teacher. In addition, 93% of the parents surveyed reported that they had received information inviting them to a program, meeting, open house, or other activity at the school. Of these parent respondents, 63% of the parents said they had attended the program. Four parents, or 13%, noted that they had attended parent conferences and PTA meetings, while 16% of the parents reported they came to back to school night and open house at the schools. Six percent of the parents stated that they attended "all of the activities" at the school. Other activities listed by individual parent respondents included kindergarten orientation, math family night, and social activities like the Santa breakfast and the Thanksgiving lunch. Additionally, in her interview, one of the teacher participants described an example of a parent who volunteered in the classroom and how the parent had shared with her that she felt this was a positive experience, saying, "She came everyday...she said, 'you know I'm watching you and I'm learning to teach my own child.'" Overall, the parents who completed the survey reported that they participated in the multiple opportunities to attend educational programs at their child's school.

Using school materials at home. Using materials that are sent home with children is another way that parents can become involved with their child's learning. The parents surveyed reported that they had been sent home a number of resources from the teachers including books in English, books in Spanish, homework, refrigerator stories, and worksheets. They also said they had received magazines, materials to make sight word flash cards, letters, numbers, website references, and reading materials. One teacher participant even remarked during her interview that a parent had shared about her son,

He comes home, I know that it doesn't seem like he's doing well but I can tell he's making progress because at home he comes and he sings all these little songs that you teach and he knows all the words.

This parent indirectly highlighted the importance of building skills at home by encouraging children to recite and share things they have learned during the school day. The information from the survey was consistent with the examples provided by the teacher participants regarding the materials they sent home with students. Although the teacher participants were unsure about parents' comfort level with using the materials, 100% of the parents surveyed stated that they felt comfortable using these materials to help their children build literacy skills.

Parent perceptions of the classroom environment. Based on their interactions with their child's teacher and with the school, parents were asked to describe what they liked most about their child's teacher or classroom environment. Answers from the parents who responded to the survey were broad, but mentioned some of the funds of knowledge approaches used by the teachers. Several parents mentioned the use of

multimodal strategies as positive. Parents talked about liking the teacher and commented on the fact that their children liked coming to school. One parent mentioned liking “how involved the teachers are in my child’s life as an individual,” while another felt that the school environment, “is a very warm place to be.” Another parent mentioned the inclusive nature of the kindergarten setting, specifically noting in one of the classrooms “for circle time a rug big enough for all students to sit on it, no one is left out.” In terms of academics, one parent reported that she liked that “everyday they learn songs and games,” and another said she liked the way the teacher “used rhymes and music to learn numbers, letters, and shapes.” Another parent reported that it appealed to her that the teacher posted student papers “showing her work on the outside hallway and inside.” Other aspects mentioned by individual parents were the “high expectations” of the teacher for student learning, the fact that students are “happy and comfortable in the learning environment,” and that the teacher is “open to parent involvement.”

Finally, since it is commonly believed that parental involvement in literacy activities both at home and school will increase student learning, the last question on the survey asked parents about their knowledge of reading assessment. Ninety-six percent of the parents who completed the survey answered this item. Of these parents, 72% reported that they knew how their children were assessed in reading and eight stated that they were unfamiliar with the process.

Summary. Question 5 addressed parent perspectives on participation in home and school literacy activities. Most of the 30 parents who completed the written survey reported that they had met their child’s teacher and had attended some school-based

activity, whether it was an open house or a Thanksgiving dinner. The parents surveyed also commented that a number of materials had been sent home for them to use when working with their children on literacy skills and 100% of the parents surveyed said they felt comfortable using these materials. Finally, the parents shared what they liked about their children's classrooms and the strategies used by their child's teacher, which included using multimodal strategies for literacy instruction.

Summary of Chapter 4

Chapter 4 examined the data that was compiled from the eight teacher participant interviews and from the 30 surveys that were returned from the parents of students in their classes. The data were presented in terms of the five research questions. The first question looked at how teachers defined school readiness in terms of literacy skills. Teachers shared the pre-academic and social and self-monitoring skills that they felt were needed for students to be ready for literacy learning and described how they felt students could be exposed to these skills prior to attending school. They also discussed the importance of having strong oral language skills to early literacy learning. Question 2 examined the strategies that the participants used in the classroom to build early literacy skills, especially for students who were English language learners. In addition, the question addressed the assessment of student literacy knowledge and looked at how teachers' funds of knowledge from their own education-related life experiences as literacy learners may have impacted how they interact with their students. Question 3 focused on the teachers' views of parental involvement in early literacy learning and discussed misconceptions about parental participation in minority and/or low income

schools. The question also addressed the kinds of materials sent home with students to practice literacy skills and the types of programs provided by the schools to involve parents in their children's learning process. Questions 4 and 5 used information from the parent surveys to discuss the parental perspective on these issues. Question 4 highlighted parental views on the skills needed for literacy learning and how these skills are modeled at home. Strategies used by the parents were also discussed. Question 5 discussed parental perspectives regarding home and school involvement, including the types of programs that parents had attended and examples of what parents felt were positive aspects about the teaching strategies used by their child's teacher. Chapter 5 will synthesize the findings by discussing the implications of the data analysis and how the results may be applied to further research and practice.

5: Discussion

The goal of this study was to investigate teacher and parent perspectives of early literacy learning to begin to document practices that teach literacy to culturally and/or economically diverse kindergarten students who may have limited traditional school readiness skills. Through individual interviews, kindergarten teachers were offered an opportunity to share practices that they believed were beneficial in helping some of the youngest school children learn and use emergent literacy skills. Visits to kindergarten teachers' classrooms enabled the researcher to collect observational and artifact data related to their practices. The parents of children in the participating teachers' classes voluntarily completed a written survey that gave them an opportunity to share their perspectives on early literacy learning, their connections with the school and teacher, and what home activities they believe have been and are most important to help their children to be ready for school-based literacy learning. This chapter discusses relevant findings from this study, its limitations, and implications for future research and practice.

Research Findings

A number of important findings emerged from the analyzed data. First, both parents and teachers described preschool attendance and interactions with family at home as the main opportunities for children to gain school readiness skills prior to attending kindergarten. Second, parents and teachers in the study were consistent in describing skills they felt were important for children to be ready to begin literacy learning at school.

These skills included phonological awareness, print knowledge, social skills, and oral language. The third finding focused on changes in the way that teachers assess literacy skills prior to children starting school as well as how they assess literacy progress during the school year. The importance of teachers and parents understanding their own funds of knowledge to help students access their background knowledge and to help build education partnerships was a fourth finding. This finding included highlighting strategies, such as dramatic play, to help students connect to the literacy curriculum. Finally, a fifth finding was that both teachers and parents described similar expectations for building home and school connections to support student learning. An in-depth discussion of each of the major findings is provided below.

Literacy acquisition prior to kindergarten The data from the teacher interviews indicated that the participants believed that literacy skills acquisition for children prior to attending kindergarten primarily came from two sources: preschool attendance and parental interactions with children. In the research, Lonigan (2006b) advocated preschool attendance as a way to increase emergent literacy skills in young children. In addition, it has been shown that students who attended preschool had stronger language and reading skills than those who did not attend (AERA, 2005). Most teacher and parent participants indicated that preschool attendance was a positive experience for students in helping them to understand early literacy skills; however, almost all of the teacher participants noted that the majority of their students did not attend preschool. This finding was in contrast to reports from the 30 parents surveyed who reported that half of their children attended a formal preschool program. It should be noted, however, that the number of

survey respondents was a small portion of the parents of students in the classrooms, which may account for the differences between teacher and parents reports. The teachers interviewed thought that the lack of preschool attendance could be because of a number of factors including limited numbers of programs in schools, waiting lists for programs, and financial constraints.

Interestingly, six out of eight teachers interviewed did not have preschool programs at their schools. The finding of limited accessibility to preschool programs supports documentation in the literature that affordable preschool programs are limited, even in schools that are located in high areas of need (Barnett, 2005; Gormley, 2005; Neidell & Waldfogel, 2009).

In addition to preschool attendance, interactions between parents and their children were described as another way for students to acquire skills before entering kindergarten. Each of the teacher participants discussed some type of expectation that parents will have begun early literacy instruction, either through stories and letter recognition activities, or through more interactive activities, such as learning to cut and color. Parent survey data indicated that the parent participants reported that they were engaging in these types of activities with their children at home. For example, parent participants described singing, coloring, watching TV, reading books, cooking with recipes, and playing card games as ways they began to incorporate early literacy learning into their home activities with their children. Maternal interactions with children, including storybook reading and even watching television, have been shown to be effective with increasing children's print knowledge. Engaging children in other activities

like singing, rhyming, and coloring, can also help develop their phonological awareness skills and encourage emergent writing skills (Clay, 1975; Hisrich & Blanchard, 2009; Reese, Sparks, & Leyva, 2010; Whitehurst & Lonigan, 2001).

Teacher and parent agreement on school readiness skills. In terms of school readiness and early literacy learning, the teachers and parents described what they believed to be the necessary skills in early literacy that included: phonological awareness and print knowledge, social skills, and oral language. These components for early literacy learning are similar to those that have been documented in emergent literacy research (Lonigan, 2006b; Snow et al., 1998; Whitehurst & Lonigan, 2001). Analysis of the data from teacher interviews and parent surveys showed that teachers and parents seemed to have an understanding of the developmental ranges of kindergarten students' literacy. Additionally, the data supported the contention that teachers and parents acknowledge and understand that children in the kindergarten classroom vary considerably in their early literacy skills. This contention aligns with the International Reading Association and the National Association for the Education of Young Children statement on developmentally appropriate practices for teaching young children to read and write (Neuman, Coople, & Bredekamp, 1998). Specific school readiness skills, such as phonological awareness, print knowledge, oral language, and social skills emerged from the analysis of the data on school readiness by both teacher and parent participants. These skills will be discussed individually in the following sections.

Phonological awareness and print knowledge. Emergent literacy skills, such as identifying letters, numbers, and sounds, were cited by both the teacher and parent

participants as important skills for children to have to be ready for kindergarten. Teachers reported the importance of students coming to school with well-developed oral language skills, noting that oral language is the primary building block for all early literacy skills. This finding supports the literature that described oral language as the most important skill needed for a child to be ready to learn to read (Snow et al., 1998). Recognition of alphabet letters, pre-writing skills such as drawing a person, and recognizing rhymes were examples reported by the teacher participants as readiness skills they would like their students to have acquired prior to coming to kindergarten. Early literacy skills noted by the parents as important were similar to those of the teachers and included recognizing letters, writing their name, recognizing and counting numbers, knowing colors and shapes, knowing how to read and write, and understanding English. These findings show that both teachers and parents have targeted the same school readiness skills that researchers have found to be essential for students entering kindergarten (Aram & Biron, 2004; Clay, 1975; Lonigan, 2006a; Sulzby, 1989; Torgeson & Davis, 1996; Saint-Laurent & Giasson, 2005; Weigel et al., 2005; Whitehurst et al., 1994).

Social skills. In addition to early literacy skills, the teacher and parent participants concurred that social and self-monitoring skills are needed for students to be ready for literacy learning in the classroom (Emig, 2000). While the teachers interviewed placed less importance on the social and self-monitoring aspect than on early literacy skills, they discussed the significance of students' knowing how to work with other children, completing self-care activities, and sitting and listening for short periods. Data from the

parent surveys indicated that these respondents were more specific than the teachers when describing specific social and self-monitoring skills they thought were necessary for students to have before attending school. For example, 46 % of the parents surveyed reported that they wanted their children to demonstrate social skills, to be able to share, and to know how to act in a school environment. Other individual parents placed importance on their children showing patience, being able to listen and follow directions, being truthful, having manners, knowing how to play with others, and realizing that the students cannot have their own way all of the time.

Oral language. The literature has documented that oral language skills are directly related to children's readiness for literacy learning (Collins, 2006; Lonigan, 2006a, 2006b; Sayeski et al., 2001; Senechal, 2006; Senechal & LeFevre, 2002; Weigal et al., 2005). Data gathered from the teacher and parent data show that the participants support these findings with their practices. The teacher participants reported spending a large amount of time during the kindergarten year building their students' oral language skills, which includes both expressive and receptive skills. Teacher participants noted their hope that students would begin the school year with a strong vocabulary in either English or their home language, indicating that they understood language acquisition principles for English language learners. Data from the parent surveys indicated that the parent participants mentioned reading and speaking as important skills to be fostered at home prior to children attending school, and stated the importance of reading and speaking with their child regularly. All of the parents surveyed reported that they regularly read orally with their children, an activity that has been shown to be influential

in building children's oral language skills (Aram & Levin, 2002; Aram et al., 2006; Deckner, Adamson, & Bakeman, 2006; Senechal & LeFevre, 2002; Whitehurst et al., 1994).

In addition to using oral language strategies, teacher participants discussed using a number of strategies in the classroom that were directly related to early literacy learning. Strategies that were used across the classrooms of all participants included posting an alphabet chart and/or a word wall, reading big books, reading picture books, and engaging in small reading groups organized by student performance levels. In addition, all of the participants reported using collections of books divided into different levels for students to read independently and during small group instruction. Materials like flash cards, alphabet books, and vocabulary journals were also mentioned as ways for students to practice skills, such as phonological awareness, alphabet knowledge, and letter-sound correspondence, both at home and at school.

Assessment of literacy skills before and during kindergarten. All of the eight teacher participants discussed the use of informal assessment of school readiness skills with in-coming students. Six of the participants described their use of a brief informal assessment of early literacy skills, such as recognizing letters, shapes, and colors, writing one's name, and drawing a person, at kindergarten registration. Two of the participants described using parent surveys as a means for learning more about student skill levels, as well as for learning about student literacy activities in the home and community setting. One of the teacher participants, whose school did not use an informal assessment at registration, reported visiting students' homes to conduct an assessment prior to the start

of the school year. Additionally, the two participants whose schools did not use an assessment at registration both stated that they had advocated with the school administration to adopt the use of this type of assessment with future students. While the assessments seemed to be primarily based on traditional notions of kindergarten readiness and did not provide an opportunity for students to share their funds of knowledge, the information was seen as vital to teachers for designing classroom activities and determining class placement to ensure that teachers had an equal number of readers at each reading level. This data from the participants is consistent with reports in the literature of ways teachers use information from assessments for instructional planning. These data, however, did not support practices described in the literature, such as using assessments to deny children access to kindergarten programs because of their lack of performance on standardized assessment measures (Aiona, 2005).

The teacher participants described the continued use of informal assessments after students had begun the school year. Skills that were informally assessed included the ability to understand stories and make predictions, name writing, knowledge of colors, and number recognition. Drawing and taking dictation were described as informal measures of pre-writing skill development. In addition to informal measures, all of the participants interviewed discussed the use of formal standardized school wide assessment measures including the Phonological Awareness Literacy Screening (PALS) and the Developmental Reading Assessment, Second Edition (DRA-2). These measures were described as helpful for determining student placement in daily reading groups for skills practice and for providing information about student progress in relation to state and

district literacy standards. While the standardized measures did not directly allow students to share their funds of knowledge, it was hoped by the teacher participants that the strategies used by parents and teachers would build the skills the students were being assessed for on these tests. Teacher participants also noted that they used these measures to focus on individual student achievement and to track state standards.

Although teachers did not specifically describe sharing standardized reading tests with parents, 21 of the parents who completed the survey reported that they knew how their children were assessed in reading. This finding shows that the schools that participated in the study were making an effort to help parents understand the use of both informal and formal assessment measures. If parents begin to understand the types of skills that are measured, they may be more likely to engage in those types of activities at home with their children and the literature has shown that parent involvement can have a direct impact on raising the test scores of children (Aram & Biron, 2004; Blewitt et al., 2009; Caspe, 2009; Saint-Laurent & Giasson, 2005; Weigel et al., 2005; Whitehurst, Arnold et al., 1994). Raising test scores of children is important because as noted in Chapter 2, the achievement gap is primarily defined by a gap in the standardized test scores of students (Lee & Burkham, 2002; Slavin & Madden, 2002) and increasing test performance could help to decrease the achievement differences.

Teacher and parent understanding of funds of knowledge. When helping students become ready for literacy learning, it is important for both teachers and parents to understand their own funds of knowledge and the funds of knowledge of their children (Delpit, 2006; Gay, 2000; Gonzalez, Moll, & Amanti, 2005; Ladson-Billings, 2001;

Nieto, 2004). Understanding funds of knowledge, the cultural practices and knowledge that people use to navigate daily life, can be accomplished by using culturally-responsive teaching methods in the classroom (Gay, 2000; Moll, 1992). Culturally-responsive teaching methods help students relate the curriculum to their background knowledge from out of school (Gay, 2000). Teachers' funds of knowledge can impact the way they view themselves as educators and how they present material to students. Funds of knowledge may also affect the way that teachers interact with parents, such as how they feel about parent volunteers or the types of activities that they expect parents to engage in with their children at home. Data from the teacher participant interviews demonstrated that the funds of knowledge of teachers, including their perceptions on collaboration with other teachers, their own experiences in school, their experiences with their own children, and lessons learned from continuing education, played an important role in how they taught their students. Additionally, data from the teacher and parent interviews and observations of classrooms as well as artifacts showed that funds of knowledge strategies were being used both in the participants' classrooms and in the students' homes. Understanding their own funds of knowledge helps teachers and parents identify expectations they have for children's learning and for their role in facilitating literacy skill development.

Teacher and parent funds of knowledge. The background experiences and beliefs of both teachers and parents have a direct impact on the way that they engage in helping children learn literacy skills. In fact, educators' views on culture, student ability, and what they have experienced themselves as learners, form the techniques and

expectations they have for their own students (Gay, 2000). All of the teacher participants had positive home experiences with education. Three participants had parents in the education field; while seven of the participants had parents who practiced reading with them at night. One participant, a first generation immigrant, reported that her parents were illiterate but described the high value that they placed on her educational experience. Data from the teacher interviews revealed that almost half of the participants experienced difficulties with academics or problems within the school setting that caused them to dislike reading. In fact, one of the participants even reported that he still does not enjoy reading or writing for pleasure. However, instead of allowing these experiences to give them a negative impression of learning, the teacher participants reported that their difficulties have helped them better understand the struggles some of their students may face when learning to read.

Additionally, the teacher participants reported that they frequently engaged in self-examination of their teaching practices. This examination included considering the need for increased cultural awareness when working with their students, critical evaluation of classroom environments, critiquing past strategies used in the classroom, and even evaluating new methods by trying them with their own children at home. Participants reported that they attended professional development workshops and classes to enhance their knowledge of reading and three participants participated in teaching abroad and learning a second language.

Data from the parent surveys demonstrated that parental funds of knowledge also impacted the way parents viewed early literacy learning and their role in helping their

children. For instance, 73% of the parent participants reported that they thought children should learn to read between the ages of four and six, showing that these parents felt their children were in the relevant age range to learn these skills. In addition, 87% of the parent participants reported that they engaged in reading or writing at home for pleasure. This is a particularly important finding because research has shown that parent modeling is essential for helping students develop literacy skills and may indirectly influence motivation for students to participate in literacy activities. For instance, engaging in positive literacy activities like storybook reading with parents or watching parents engage in modeled behaviors, like reading books for pleasure, was found to have a positive impact on children's reading (Baker et al., 2001; Baker & Scher, 2002; Compton-Lilly, 2007, 2009; Morgan, 2005; Hammer et al., 2005; Weigel et al., 2005). Parent participants were evenly divided on whether they were taught to read by a family member or a teacher at school and some recalled the influence of both on their early literacy experiences. These data indicate that the parents surveyed had experiences that supported both home and school as places of literacy learning.

The analyzed data from both teacher and parent participants confirmed findings from previous research that funds of knowledge do play an important role in both teachers' and parents' views regarding early literacy learning (Delpit, 2006; Ladson-Billings, 2001; Nieto, 2004). Whether it was their own encounters with difficulties in learning to read or the fact that the teacher participants could recall their own interactions with teachers, each of the participants' personal experiences influenced the way they viewed working with their own students and/or children. For instance, during the

interviews, almost all of the teacher participants shared that they had read at home with their parents. Because of these types of experiences, teacher participants may have an expectation that all families should read at home. In addition, the parents surveyed talked about how they had learned to read around the age of five or six, which may have influenced when they expected their own children to start reading. The next section will summarize strategies that teachers use in school and parents use at home to help students use their funds of knowledge to connect to the school literacy curriculum.

Funds of knowledge and teaching practices. Incorporating funds of knowledge into teaching practices allows teachers to engage in culturally responsive teaching that views students as *whole* children and not just *in-school* learners, while also embracing Freire's (1970) theory that teachers must respect the cultural views of their students for learning to be effective (Gay, 2000). When teachers tap into their students' funds of knowledge, it reinforces connections to the curriculum and helps even the playing field for students in classrooms with a variety of skill levels. Both the teacher and parent participants in the study described using a variety of strategies to facilitate students' use of background knowledge to help foster their literacy learning skills. These strategies are discussed below.

Funds of knowledge strategies. All of the teacher participants interviewed attempted to make connections to the curriculum using emergent literacy strategies based on funds of knowledge to enhance learning (Moll, 1992). Teachers described using families as a topic for classroom projects as one of the most common ways to help students begin to share their experiences with other students. Participants also provided

books in the classroom in students' home languages, read storybooks from the students' home cultures in class, and labeled classroom items with words from students' home languages to help them build vocabulary. In addition, participants discussed displaying student art in class, choosing a student of the week, and using examples of environmental print to help students make connections with each other and with the curriculum. These strategies are consistent with examples of strategies that have been recommended in the literature as ways to help teachers discover information about student funds of knowledge (Baskwill & Harkins, 2009; Compton-Lilly, 2006; Duke & Purcell-Gates, 2003; Leland et al., 2005; Longwell-Grice & McIntyre, 2006; Reese et al. 2006; Riojas-Cortez, 2001).

Oral language strategies. In addition to using strategies to build literacy skills like phonological awareness, participants described a variety of classroom strategies designed to use children's funds of knowledge to promote their oral language skills. For example, all of the kindergarten teachers interviewed described using a circle time where they practiced building oral language through discussions of the days of the week, calendar skills, singing, and telling stories. Circle time activities gave the students a chance to incorporate their funds of knowledge through storytelling and by engaging in activities designed to help them make connections between the curriculum and their daily life. All of the teachers interviewed also used questioning, naming pictures, group work, public speaking, and story repetition to help expand the students' vocabulary skills. In addition, providing opportunities to build vocabulary through social conversation was considered especially important for ESL students and frequent talking in the classrooms was encouraged. Finally, the eight teacher participants strongly believed that listening

activities were an effective way to build oral language skills, and they provided many opportunities such as reading books, participating in listening centers, and using computers to help children learn to build their vocabulary. The use of activities like these to build oral language is also supported in the emergent literacy literature (Blewitt et al., 2009; Collins, 2005; Senechal, 2006; Senechal & LeFevre, 2002; Snow et al., 1998; Weigel et al., 2005; Whitehurst et al., 1994.)

Multimodal strategies. The teachers interviewed discussed using a variety of strategies that used multiple sensory experiences to help students connect to literacy skills. These multimodal strategies presented information using auditory, visual, or kinesthetic and tactile stimulation or combinations of these to help information be accessible to all types of learners. Teachers also described using multimodal strategies across curriculum subjects to enhance literacy learning throughout the day. Examples of multimodal strategies included using pictures of objects to match with letter sounds, engaging in body movement activities, using play dough to form letters, or clapping out syllables in words. Descriptions in the interviews of the dramatic play areas, like housekeeping centers, indicated that these experiences allowed children to use all their sensory modalities while providing opportunities to use their funds of knowledge to build social conversation and vocabulary skills. For instance, children playing in the kitchen area could pretend to cook a food item native to their family culture while also acting out their perceived roles of family members. This type of activity allows students to share their funds of knowledge with each other in the classroom, helping students to see the similarities and differences between their home experiences.

Home and school connections. Research has shown that building connections between parents and schools can help clarify readiness expectations and promote achievement from students (Goldenberg, 2001; Kraft-Sayre & Pianta, 2001; O’Conner & McCartney, 2007). Schools can promote development of home and school relationships by providing parents with opportunities to become involved in the school setting through activities, such as training them to volunteer in classrooms or offering afterschool times for parents to meet and communicate with staff during conferences, open houses, or literacy nights. Data collected from the participant teacher interviews and parent surveys found that interactive school-based activities were being used to foster parent participation in literacy learning in the schools where the teacher participants practiced. Through a combination of providing parents with materials and offering school-based opportunities for parent involvement, teachers were found to be partnering with parents for their students’ success. This finding supports research by Weinstein (1998) and Taylor and Whittaker (2009) that describes the positive effect that including parents in school-based literacy programs can have on their involvement with their children’s learning.

Parental involvement in schools. Each of the teacher participants in the study articulated expectations for parent participation in student’s literacy learning. These expectations ranged from sending materials back to school to volunteering in the classroom. Teachers’ funds of knowledge from their own experiences with their families may impact what they expect from parents in terms of engagement with their children’s literacy learning. For example, the majority of the teacher participants interviewed

discussed memories of reading, doing activities like homework, and helping with home lists with a parent or family member. One teacher participant, however, discussed the fact that her parents were unable to help her with home assignments because of a language barrier, but thought this alternative fund of knowledge helped her to relate to possible family challenges her students may be facing.

Teacher participants in the study shared a variety of ways that they were establishing connections with parents. All of the participants interviewed indicated that they were eager to have parents visit and participate in literacy activities in the classroom during the school day. Based on reports from all of the teacher participants that described limited contact with the parents of their students, it seemed that parent-teacher conferences would have limited attendance. An interesting finding, however, was that all but one of the participants reported high attendance at parent-teacher conferences. In addition, seven of the eight teacher participants reported that they used conference time to meet parents, share expectations, provide materials, and in some cases even provide instruction in how to engage in literacy activities with their children. Classroom-based activities like Thanksgiving feasts and seasonal celebrations were also described as having high parent attendance. One teacher who reported low parental attendance at school functions noted that he was able to talk with most of the parents on a daily basis when they came to pick up their children at the small neighborhood school because they did not have buses to transport the children to and from school. He also reported that the parents were very willing to send in materials for the classroom. In addition to conferences, teacher participants described the availability of school wide volunteer

programs, literacy and multicultural events, and programs such as the Parents as Educational Partners (PEP) program, a program in which parents who speak English as a second language are provided with information about the educational system.

The parents who responded to the written survey confirmed their invitation to participate in school-based activities. In addition, 93% of the parents surveyed reported that they had received information inviting them to a program, meeting, open house, or other activity at the school and that they had met their child's teacher. Parents reported that they had also attended PTA meetings, back to school nights, and open houses at the schools, indicating that they had reached Hoover-Dempsey and Whitaker's (2010) highest level of parent involvement in the schools. The parents who responded to the survey noted that they liked the atmosphere of their children's classrooms, for example, the sense of high expectations for students and the displays of student work in the classroom and hallways. One parent commented that she appreciated that the teacher was "open to parent involvement." Although only a small subgroup of parents were surveyed, these comments are in contrast to Lee's (2005) findings that many parents may not feel comfortable communicating with teachers and participating in school functions because of cultural norms.

Home expectations. Each of the teacher participants discussed expectations that parents engage in some literacy-based activities at home on a regular basis with their children. While all of the participants indicated awareness that they could not control what happened at home with their students, they offered suggestions to parents about how they could build the connections between home and school for their children. All of the

teacher participants stressed the importance of parents reading at home daily with their children in any language and engaging them in active conversation. Several participants discussed attempts to help parents access community resources such as the public library.

Each teacher participant interviewed described the importance of providing parents with materials to support literacy learning at home. Participants frequently sent home books to encourage home literacy practice. In addition, all of the participants interviewed reported sending home materials for parents to use with their children to practice letter and sight word recognition skills. The parents surveyed confirmed that they had been sent home a number of resources from the teachers including books in English and Spanish, homework, refrigerator stories, and worksheets. One hundred percent of the parents surveyed stated that they felt comfortable using these materials to help their children build literacy skills. The parents surveyed also described using a number of multimodal strategies at home to help students gain pre-literacy skills. Many of the parents engaged in these activities with their children prior to their attending school. Overall, watching TV shows together, singing songs, watching movies, cooking with recipes, dancing, and telling stories were multimodal items endorsed by 66% or more of the parents who completed the survey. Additional strategies reported by parents included playing video games, photography, coloring, playing card games, building with Legos, and playing outside. Parents stated that their children engaged in a number of home activities, such as cleaning, folding clothes, going shopping, and choosing items from the shelves when grocery shopping that exposed them to opportunities to practice pre-literacy skills. The parents surveyed also described involvement in community activities, such as

going to Girl Scouts, going to the public library, and attending religious services with their children.

Perceived limitations in parental involvement. Misunderstandings regarding cultural traditions, language barriers, and family obligations may lead teachers to believe that parents are not invested in their children's education because of their lack of involvement in the school setting or with homework assignments (Arnold et al., 2008). The data from this study confirmed that the teacher participants also believed that the parents had limited involvement with their children's education. The participants described a number of reasons they believed kept the parents from participating, including financial constraints, immigration policies, and difficulties with limited English skills. It should be noted, however, that while the teacher participants reported that they understood the factors that were impacting families, they still responded with negative statements regarding the amount of family involvement in educational activities.

Additional information provided by the teacher participants during the interviews contradicted the belief that parents were not involved in school activities. All but one of the teachers reported significant participation in parent conferences and many of the teachers interviewed reported that parents had attended programs within the school. The parents who responded to the surveys also stated that they had attended school functions. Based on these statements, there appears to be a discrepancy between what teachers say they expect from parents and how they interpret parent participation. The teacher participants may have a preconceived notion of what parent participation looks like, for instance, parents volunteering in the classroom. In Hoover-Dempsey and Whitaker's

(2010) model, volunteering falls in the fourth level of parent participation. Activities such as helping with homework and encouraging children to participate in skill building activities at home falls in the first and second levels of participation and may be less visible to the teacher. Teachers may also be expecting more continuous participation from parents, such as working with children nightly on homework or with volunteering in the classroom weekly, in addition to attending activities that occur infrequently like parent conferences.

Summary of Discussion

In summary, data from this study have shown that the teachers interviewed are engaging in culturally-responsive teaching practices that capitalize on their students' funds of knowledge to build early literacy learning. First, teachers and parents reported preschool attendance and interactions with family members at home as the main opportunities for children to gain school readiness skills prior to attending kindergarten. Next, both teachers and parents had similar responses regarding the skills they believed were important for children to have in order to be ready for literacy learning, and these skills were aligned with the existing literature. Third, the data showed that teachers have changed the way they assess literacy skills both before and during kindergarten, focusing using the background knowledge of students as building blocks for literacy learning. Fourth, the data indicated that the funds of knowledge that teachers and parents have from their own experiences have impacted the way that they view literacy learning. Notably, three of the eight teachers interviewed in this study did not have positive experiences themselves when learning to read; however, they viewed their experience as

another piece of background knowledge that helped them connect with their students. Parents' funds of knowledge also played a role in the types of activities they engaged in with their children at home and with their views on when and how children should begin literacy learning. Finally, both teachers and parents described similar expectations in regard to building home and school connections to support literacy learning for kindergarten students.

Implications for Policy and Practice

The findings from this research study have significant implications for education policy and for practice in the schools. Teachers interviewed are using a funds of knowledge approach to help children access the curriculum, which according to the literature improves student performance in literacy in kindergarten. Both teachers and parents reported family involvement with literacy education, including engaging in literacy-based activities prior to attending school, reading at home, and engaging in homework activities to build literacy skills. These findings, however, pose some questions when looking at revising education policy and practice, especially in the areas of family and preschool programs, literacy curriculum and assessment, and in teacher education and professional development.

Family and preschool programs. In 2009, the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act earmarked five billion dollars for improving and increasing Head Start and Early Head Start programs in the United States. This money was intended to increase the availability of preschool programs and to improve instruction in existing ones. The data from the study revealed that despite the fact that all of the participating schools had a

high number of children coming from low socioeconomic backgrounds, only two of the schools had preschool programs in their buildings. Since participants cited lack of access to preschool programs as the major reason many of their students had not attended a program prior to attending kindergarten, funding for additional programs appears to be warranted. Lee and Burkham (2002) and Nieto (2010) have documented that gaps in achievement between Caucasian and minority and low-income children's performance on standardized measures of school readiness are present from kindergarten. Therefore, it is vital that programs be developed or expanded in areas where minority and/or low income children live. It is equally important to note that increasing the quantity of programs is only beneficial if the quality of both existing and new programs is preserved and increased. Quality preschool programs need to be staffed by teachers who understand learning theory. The teachers should be willing to use strategies similar to the multimodal strategies described by the participants, to foster learning opportunities for building pre-literacy skills. Quality preschool programs should include areas for dramatic play, and materials such as puppets and storybooks, to provide children with opportunities to build their oral language skills. As financial shortages continue in most school divisions in the country, delivering preschool instruction to all children who want to access it will continue to be a challenge for many administrators; however, in order to continue to address the achievement gap, quality instruction for the youngest students must be a priority (AERA, 2005; Ladson-Billings, 2006; Nieto, 2010; Ramey & Ramey, 2004).

Literacy curriculum and assessment. While research demonstrates that some teachers are utilizing a funds of knowledge approach to help their students access the

curriculum, it is clear that the practice of using a funds of knowledge approach is still evolving. For example, the use of parent interviews as part of initial kindergarten assessment shows the beginning of a shift from teachers using only school-based assessment to teachers reaching out to parents to try to determine additional information about the home knowledge of their students. Regardless of parental input, children in kindergarten continue to be assessed, even by the teacher participants in the study, on traditional school readiness skills before attending school and may quickly fall behind in the curriculum if they do not perform adequately. While funds of knowledge practices traditionally concentrate on what children bring to school, can educators reconcile the gap between this knowledge and standardized assessments that place students at instructional levels for reading, by building students' knowledge funds during the school day? One possible way to address this issue that has been documented recently in the literature and is advocated by several of the teachers in the study is using dramatic play as a curriculum strategy (Graue, 2010; Gupta, 2009; Lysaker et al., 2010; Roskos et al., 2010). During play, kindergarten students are able to talk about and act out knowledge in a non-threatening manner. Students can learn and build knowledge by sharing with one another, and teachers can learn more about their students' funds of knowledge by carefully observing students during the play time.

Teachers may then have a better understanding of both students' oral language skills and home activities that can be used to help them connect to the general literacy curriculum. Organized play centers, which can build oral literacy and allow students to work within their zone of proximal development, were described by two of the

participants in this study. These play centers can provide teachers with the opportunity to observe specific skills or knowledge during the play episodes without the students feeling as though they are being assessed. This is especially important because children at this age, especially second language learners, often have difficulty verbalizing connections. Dramatic play allows students to show the teachers what they know. This strategy would be an easy way for teachers to obtain information about their students' funds of knowledge in a naturalistic setting that does not require a standardized measure that schools would need to purchase. In addition, dramatic play provides opportunities for extensive data collection during short periods of time in the classroom. These data can be used immediately to make adjustments in how material is presented to students.

Teacher education and professional development. For teachers to use a funds of knowledge approach with students, they must be shown ways that they can assess and measure skills of children who may not demonstrate their knowledge of traditional readiness skills using standardized methods. Providing pre-service teachers with more opportunities to work with students and their families can be a stepping stone for these teachers to build these connections when they have their own classrooms. In addition, requiring coursework in culturally-responsive teaching may promote awareness for pre-service teachers to learn about the wealth of information they can learn from their future students and from their own learning experiences and narratives. In terms of professional development for current teachers, professional learning communities, where teachers share with each other how they are working with students who do not have traditional readiness skills, could be effective in helping teachers learn to incorporate funds of

knowledge practices into their classrooms. Because the teachers participants remarked that collaboration was a major reason they were able to implement funds of knowledge strategies in their classrooms, providing time for collaboration during the school day could expand the use of these techniques. Finally, it is important for teachers to be provided with opportunities to study the sources of their own funds of knowledge in professional development programs. Engaging in activities, such as courses looking at the self-study of teaching or action research, would provide teachers with the opportunity to explore their own education-related life experiences and how they impact their expectations of parents and students in terms of literacy education (Samaras & Freese, 2006).

Limitations of Research

When discussing any research it is important to address the limitations of the study, including any concerns with validity. Participation by teachers and parents and the data collection techniques in this study present limitations. First, interviewing teachers that I did not know posed challenges to the research. For example, although the teachers may have been willing to participate, they may have been uncomfortable with sharing information with someone they did not know or my visiting their classroom. In addition, because the teachers voluntarily participated in the study, they may have been individuals who were already interested in research and new practices and more open-minded regarding theories such as funds of knowledge. These teachers may have had more training in multicultural practices and building home and school connections than individuals who elected not to participate, which may have influenced the results.

Similar concerns relate to the parent participants. Surveys were presented in English and Spanish to parents; however, some families may not have had either of these as a primary language or may not be literate in either language. Parents may have been unable to read the surveys, felt uncomfortable with sending them back to the teacher, or may not have received them because they were not sent home with students. In addition, the parents who volunteered to complete the survey may have been more likely to participate in literacy activities with their children at home and at school than parents who did not respond.

There may also have been limitations to the method of the study. Charmaz (2006) suggests that multiple interviews should be conducted with participants to clarify and expand on information presented in the first interview. Because of the scope of this study, these additional interviews were not conducted, which may have led to limited sharing of information from the teachers. Another limitation included the ability to generalize the findings because of the small sample size and non-random sampling methods. Finally, one of the main limitations to validity was my own bias as a researcher, teacher, and literacy expert/specialist. Because I am looking for positive strategies that allow teachers to incorporate cultural differences of families into the literacy learning process, I may have preconceived notions from my own teaching of what I believe is effective. Despite these possible limitations, the study provides findings regarding teaching practices and parent beliefs that may be relative to other educators working with similar populations of students.

Implications for Research

The information gathered during this research lends itself to several possible directions for future research. One promising direction would be to increase the number of teachers interviewed and to interview teachers longitudinally. Observing the interviewed teachers could increase the strength of the validity of the grounded theory model. Longitudinal studies could also monitor changes in teaching practice as students move through the kindergarten literacy curriculum. Including classroom observations may highlight strategies that teachers are implementing but may not verbally report.

Another possible area for research would be to conduct interviews with parents instead of written surveys. Prior research conducted with parents regarding home-based activities that promote early literacy development has been in a survey form (Nebrig, 2007); however, researchers may be able to gather more knowledge of family practices from interviews or home visits with families. In addition, interviewing students about their experiences and how they perceive literacy learning could provide direct insight into developing new strategies to help students access their funds of knowledge, although this may be difficult with young children. Finally, two additional areas for potential study identified by the research findings could include investigating if siblings can serve as a bridge between funds of knowledge from home and school curriculum because they have already experienced the transition. In the area of assessment, there are several areas that could be considered for future research. For example, researchers could comprehensively look at preschool programs to determine if they are providing students with background knowledge required to meet state standards in the area of literacy. Studies could also re-

examine the use of informal classroom measures, such as work samples or participation in activities, as a means to measure student progress. These informal measures could then be used concurrently with standardized measures to gather a more holistic view of a student's learning.

Summary

This research examined teacher practices and family perspectives on using funds of knowledge strategies with kindergarten literacy learners. The data, gathered through teacher interviews, observations of classrooms and artifacts, and parent surveys, indicated that the teacher participants were using funds of knowledge strategies in their classrooms to enhance literacy learning for all students. Using a variety of methods, including informal assessments, a multimodal approach to literacy, and incorporating parents into the learning process, teachers were able to scaffold their students' emergent literacy skills needed to be successful learners in kindergarten and future grades. Parents who were surveyed reported engaging in literacy activities at home and school with their children and provided corroborating evidence to support information provided by the teacher participants. This study contributes support to the literature for providing a funds of knowledge approach that can support kindergarten students who are considered to be behind in their literacy skills based on traditional assessment measures, make connections to the school curriculum. This study shows that while traditional assessments were still used by the teacher participants, they have articulated their understanding of the importance of knowing a child's background knowledge and have incorporated a number of strategies into the school day to allow children to share this information with their

teachers and classmates. In addition, while the teacher participants expressed interest in having increased parent participation in student literacy learning both at home and school, they reported strong attendance from all of the parents in their classrooms at teacher conferences. This finding suggests the importance of using parent conference time as an opportunity for both teachers and parents to share information about activities the student is engaging in to promote literacy learning. This study also indicates that teachers are using funds of knowledge strategies in their classrooms and are working to build home and school connections. The fact that parents and teachers in the study were aligned on what was considered important for literacy learning is a new idea that has not previously been explored in family literacy research. The idea that parents and teachers are aligned may suggest that families increasingly understand the importance of literacy learning to their children's education and that parents and teachers are embracing their roles as partners in the educational process.

Appendix A

Informed Consent Form for Incorporating Funds of Knowledge of Early Literacy Learners into the Kindergarten Classroom: A Qualitative Study of Teacher Practices and Family Perspectives

RESEARCH PROCEDURES

As a kindergarten teacher in Prince William County, you are invited to participate in a research study for a doctoral dissertation. This research is being conducted to document the practices that kindergarten teachers are using to connect the background knowledge of students to school-based curriculum, especially with students who speak English as a second language and/or may be from economically or culturally diverse backgrounds. If you agree to participate, you will be asked to participate in the following activities:

1. An individual face-to-face interview- Teachers will be interviewed between the months of October and December. The interviews will be audiotaped and transcribed. Interviews will be held at the participant's school site and will last for approximately one hour.
2. Classroom visit- The student researcher will visit the teacher's classroom when no students are present in order to view classroom materials that are used to help students make connections to literacy. Permission to photograph materials is asked of teachers in order to help the researcher remember and describe practices; however, it is not required in order for you to participate in the study.
3. Examination of materials sent home to parents, i.e., letters, storybook bags, etc. that are used to help promote literacy learning at both home and school.

RISKS

There are no risks involved with participation in this study. Participant numbers and pseudonyms will be used during the interviews and in the transcription of the audiotapes. Audiotapes will be erased after transcription.

BENEFITS

There are no benefits to you as a participant other than to further research in the area of kindergarten literacy practices.

CONFIDENTIALITY

The data in this study will be confidential: (1) your name will not be included on the

audiotapes, data collection, or in the findings report; (2) a participant number and pseudonym will be used during your interview and on all other collected data; (3) through

the use of an identification key, the researcher will be able to link this information to your identity; and (4) only the researchers will have access to the identification key.

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 or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. There are no costs to you or any other party. If you withdraw from the study at any time, your data will be destroyed. As a token of our appreciation, you will be given the opportunity to be entered in a random drawing to receive a \$50 gift card to a local bookstore to buy materials for your classroom.

CONTACT

This research is being conducted by Jennifer Magaha O’Looney under the direction of Dr. Steve White, Professor in the Graduate School of Education Studies at George Mason University. Jennifer Magaha O’Looney may be reached at 703-303-0371 for questions or to report a research-related problem. Dr. Steve White may be reached at 703-993-2031 for questions or to report a research-related problem. You may contact the George Mason University Office of Research Subject Protections 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.

Name

Date of Signature

Version date: 6/24/09

Appendix B

Parent Cover Letter for A Qualitative Study of Teacher Practices and Family Perspectives on Incorporating Funds of Knowledge in Early Literacy Learning

Dear Parents,

In a few days a letter will be sent home with your child describing an opportunity for you to participate in a research project about kindergarten literacy. This project is part of a doctoral dissertation and your ideas are greatly valued. Please review the letter and survey that will be sent to you and complete them if you would like to participate in this project. The project has been approved by Prince William County Schools and George Mason University.

Thank you,

Jennifer Magaha O’Looney

School Psychologist

Prince William County Schools

Doctoral Candidate in Education

George Mason University

Appendix C

Informed Consent Form for A Qualitative Study of Teacher Practices and Family Perspectives on Incorporating Funds of Knowledge in Early Literacy Learning

RESEARCH PROCEDURES

Your child's kindergarten teacher is currently participating in a research study for a doctoral dissertation looking at teaching practices that help students connect their background knowledge to the school-based curriculum. As a parent of a kindergarten student in a participating teacher's class, you are also invited to share your ideas. If you agree to participate, you will be asked to participate in the following activity:

Completion of a paper survey about your home literacy activities and experiences. The survey will take approximately 10 minutes to complete.

RISKS

There are no risks involved with participation in this study. No names will be collected on the survey. Two optional survey items will ask about your gender and ethnic background. Your survey will be assigned a random participant number. Separate unmarked envelopes will be provided for you to return your consent form and the survey so that they will not be connected to each other.

BENEFITS

There are no benefits to you as a participant other than to extend research in the area of kindergarten literacy practices.

CONFIDENTIALITY

The data in this study will be confidential: (1) your name will not be included on the survey; (2) a participant number will be assigned to your returned survey (3) separate envelopes will be provided for you to return your consent form and survey form so they cannot be linked together; (4) you will be given the option to return the sealed envelopes to your child's teacher, to the school front office, or by mail.

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 or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. There are no costs to you or any other party. If you withdraw from the study at any time, your data will be

destroyed. As a token of our appreciation, you will be given the opportunity to be entered in a random drawing to receive a \$25 gift card to a local bookstore to buy materials for

your classroom. In order to provide this award, anonymous participant numbers will be used to determine the winner of the drawing.

CONTACT

This research is being conducted by Jennifer Magaha O’Looney under the direction of Dr. Steve White, Professor in the Graduate School of Education Studies at George Mason University. Jennifer Magaha O’Looney may be reached at 703-303-0371 for questions or to report a research-related problem. Dr. Steve White may be reached at 703-993-2031 for questions or to report a research-related problem. You may contact the George Mason University Office of Research Subject Protections 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.

Name

Date of Signature

Version date: 6/24/09

Appendix D

Parent Take-Home Survey

1. Is kindergarten your child's first experience with formal school? If not, what program did they attend prior to this?
2. Is English your first language? If not, please list your primary language and any other languages you may speak.
3. What skills do you think are most important for your child to have before they come to school?
4. At what age do you feel it is appropriate to teach children to read?

Who taught you to read and when?

Do you read or write for pleasure?

Do you read to your child? How often?

Do you and your child participate in any of the following activities:

Going to a religious service

Cooking with recipes

Writing grocery lists

Writing stories

Telling stories

Going to the library

Singing songs

Reading magazines

Watching TV shows together

Watching movies

Dancing

List additional activities:

5. Have you met your child's teacher?

6. What kinds of materials have been sent home with your child to practice reading?
7. Do you feel comfortable with helping your child with these activities?
8. Have you received information inviting you to any type of program, meeting, open house, etc. at the school? Did you attend? Which ones?
9. What things do you like the most about your child's classroom or teacher?
10. Do you know how your child is assessed in reading?

Appendix E

Interview Guide- Teacher

1. Tell me a little about your teaching experience.
2. Describe your definition of literacy.
3. Talk about your memories of when you began to experience literacy like reading or writing. What role did your family play in your exposure? What role did your kindergarten teacher play?
4. Describe what skills you think are most important for your students to have in order to be ready for literacy learning.
5. Children come from diverse backgrounds. Talk about how this impacts your work in early literacy.
6. For children who may not have skills you would expect, discuss how you are able to find strengths from their background knowledge that may help them connect to the curriculum.
7. What are your thoughts about the involvement of family in early reading instruction?
8. Describe the materials you send home with students to involve families in early literacy skill building. What accommodations do you provide for families who may not speak English as a first language?

9. In what ways do children in your class use their background knowledge to make links between literacy activities at home and in school?
10. Discuss techniques that you feel have been effective in involving families in children's reading instruction.
11. Is there anything else you would like to share?

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