Parental Perceptions of Preschool-Age Children’s Literacy Development in a Rural Appalachian Community

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Parental Perceptions of Preschool-Age Children’s Literacy Development in a Rural Appalachian Community

A dissertation

presented to

the faculty of the Department of Early Childhood Education

East Tennessee State University

In partial fulfillment

of the requirements for the degree

Doctor of Philosophy in Early Childhood Education

by

Kimberly Sanders Austin

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ABSTRACT

Parental Perceptions of Preschool-Age Children’s Literacy Development in a Rural Appalachian Community

by

Kimberly Sanders Austin

Early Childhood educators agree on the significant influence of a parent on a child’s literacy development. The environment a parent provides, in addition to the opportunities a child has in the early years, have a major influence on a child’s literacy development. This study sought to determine how parents in a low-income socioeconomic group perceived literacy development and how their preschool-age children performed on an emergent literacy assessment. The 64 study participants were recruited from a Head Start program in the central Appalachian Mountains. An overwhelming majority of participants were mother/child dyads, every participant spoke English as a primary language, and the majority of the participants identified their race as white. Participants were asked to complete a demographic survey and a questionnaire. The questionnaire was used to identify parents as either having a more emergent or more traditional perception of literacy development. This data was used to determine if identifying characteristics, such as education level or caregiver role, have an influence on a parent’s perceptions (emergent or traditional) of literacy development. Additionally, parents were asked to document the 5 most important things they are doing to help their child become a successful reader.
It was concluded that no significant relationship exists between the parental perceptions and the child’s emergent literacy skills. The significance of this finding is two-fold. First, parent trainings in literacy development must focus on specific skills or methods that parents need to encourage literacy development, instead of the theoretical approach behind literacy development. Additionally, the sample overwhelmingly reported “reading to their child” as something they value; therefore, parent trainings should focus on how to share stories with a child, instead of simply asserting the necessity of reading to a child.
DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to those who have supported me during the process. Special thanks to my husband, Chris and to my sister, Vanessa. Without both of you this would not have been a possibility.
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Research has emphasized the influential role of parental beliefs in children’s literacy development (e.g., DeBaryshe, 1995; Weigel, Martin, & Bennett, 2005). We assume parents make choices for their children based upon their own perceptions of what is important or what they value (Goodnow & Collins, 1990; Miller, 1988). Parents’ beliefs guide caregiving activities, and their beliefs are shaped by a parents’ history, culture, standards, and the interaction between the parent and child (Rodriguez, Hammer, & Lawrence, 2009). Research findings have demonstrated a strong link between high-quality learning experiences in the home and a child’s later academic success, specifically in reading. (Marvin & Mirenda, 1993, National Early Literacy Panel, 2008; Payne, Whitehurst, & Angell, 1994; Weinberger, 1996). Parents who value reading tend to communicate frequently with their child and provide a home environment that includes book sharing, singing, word play and rhymes (Bennett, Weigel, & Martin, 2002; Debaryshe, 1993; National Early Literacy Panel, 2008; Neuman & Roskos, 2005; Payne et al., 1994). These activities promote early literacy skills include phonological awareness, vocabulary development, concept development, oral language, knowledge of print, and alphabetic knowledge (Arnold, Longian, Whitehurst, & Epstein, 1994; Cunningham & Stanovich, 1991; Senechal, LeFevre, Thomas, & Daley, 1998,) and a child’s mastery of these skills develops along a continuum, beginning at birth and continuing until a child becomes a proficient reader (Sulzby & Teale, 1991;Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998, 2002). Sonnenschein (2002) documented a positive relation between positive parental perceptions of literacy and children’s early literacy scores.

Research findings also support the assumption that a lack of high-quality literacy experiences in the home and the absence of opportunities to learn early literacy skills can
negatively influence a child’s future academic success (Hart & Risley, 2003). Additionally, research informs us of the impact of poverty on families (Brooks-Gunn & Duncan, 1997). Children from low socioeconomic homes tend to lag behind their peers of middle class socioeconomic homes in regards to school readiness and emergent literacy skills (Barnett, 1995; McLoyd, 1998). Stress factors may cause families to place little value on activities that seem non-essential, such as, reading, singing songs, pointing out environmental print and other activities that facilitate emergent literacy development (www.developingchild.harvard.edu). The work of Ruby Payne (2013) sheds light on the culture of poverty and its implication for educators working with families. Payne (2013) documents achievement data gathered by the federal government. This data demonstrates a clear disadvantage between economically suppressed children and their more advantaged peers. Hence, investigating the perceptions and beliefs of low socioeconomic families regarding literacy development allows researchers and future practitioners to effectively provide interventions and education programs (Neuman, 2014; Spiegel, Fitzgerald, & Cunningham, 1993).

**Purpose of the Research**

The purpose of this study was to investigate the relationship between parental beliefs and perceptions of literacy development and their child’s performance on a preschool literacy skill measure. The target population included parents/caregivers of preschool-age children enrolled in a Head Start program in Central Appalachia, a region characterized by generational poverty and economic oppression. Challenges in the region include unemployment, incarceration, poor educational attainment, limited child care, lack of access to affordable and quality healthcare, drug addiction, and a lack of systematic transportation.
The findings of this study will potentially help professionals determine how to engage parents in the work of promoting language and literacy in the home, among the low socioeconomic families in rural areas. Kannapel, Flory, Cramer, and Carr (2015) analyzed over 200 studies relevant to education in the Appalachian region. They concluded the population of the Appalachian region to be poorer, less ethnically diverse and have a higher percentage of identified special needs students as compared to the remainder of the United States. The most relevant finding of their study in relation to the present study was the recurrent theme of the Appalachian culture and its perceived attitudes towards education.

Rodriguez et al. (2009) documents the gap that currently exist between family and school in relation to literacy and expectations. Children and families are unique, and each have strengths or resources; these often are not apparent to practitioners as children enter formal school situations (Payne, 2013). Often, a family’s culture does not match the traditional school culture, therefore causing intimidation and a lack of engagement from the family. Rodriguez et al. (2009) recommend bridging the gap by learning about families’ beliefs and tailoring early literacy programs accordingly. Anderson (1995) contends the way literacy is facilitated and the literacy activities provided in the home are contingent upon the beliefs and values of the parent. Hence, we need to understand the perceptions or beliefs parents’ have in order to support their attempts at helping their children become literate. Results of this study can provide educators and researchers with additional information about Appalachian parents’ perceptions of how literacy develops.
Research Questions

The aim of the study is to investigate the relationships between parents’ perceptions of emergent literacy and their child’s phonological awareness skills. The specific research questions include:

1. Is there a significant relationship between parents’ of four-year-olds currently enrolled in Head Start in a rural, Appalachian community perceptions of emergent literacy as determined by the Parents’ Perceptions of Literacy Learning (PPLL) and their child’s phonological awareness, as determined by the Phonological Awareness Literacy Screening (PALS)?

2. Are there any significant differences as compared by education level of the parents and perceptions of emergent literacy?

3. Are there any significant differences as compared by the parental role (i.e., mother, father, grandparent, foster parent, other) and perception of literacy development?

4. Are there trends or patterns in parents’ self-reported behaviors of the most important things they do to promote literacy?

Limitations

The proposed study has limitations in the area of sampling. The sample consists of parent/child dyads from a single Head Start program in central Appalachia. The sample was obtained using convenience sampling. The mere use of a convenience sample is considered a limitation. Additionally, a self-report survey was completed by parents. The researcher acknowledges individuals often paint themselves in a positive light when answering self-report
questionnaires, thus presenting the possibility of skewed results (Salkind, 2010). It is possible parents did not complete the survey accurately despite research efforts. However, every effort was made to ensure parents could confidentially submit their surveys using a sealed envelope. Additionally, parents were asked to volunteer to participate and received no compensation for participation. However, the self-selected volunteers may be more aware of, and interested in, literacy development. Parental literacy and reading level could also be a limitation of the study. The researcher was available to complete the survey with parents that were hindered by literacy/reading level.

**Definitions of Key Terms**

*Parent/Caregiver* - a Head Start child’s mother or father, other family member who is a primary caregiver, foster parent, guardian or the person with whom the child has been placed for adoption.

*Literacy* - the ability to read, write, speak, listen, view and think (Cooper, 1997), or the ability to communicate through print (Vukelich, Christie, & Enz, 2012).

*Emergent Literacy* - reading and writing behaviors that precede conventional literacy (Sulzby & Teale, 1991) and is a general term that describes specific competencies of young children that are precursors to future reading achievement (National Early Literacy Panel, 2008).

*Traditional Literacy Perspective* - the perspective that literacy development begins with traditional school entry, usually at the kindergarten level.

*Preschool-Age Child* - child that will be eligible to attend kindergarten the following school year.
**Head Start Program** – a preschool program operated by a Head Start grantee or delegate agency, provides services to children in a classroom setting.

**Parental Perceptions or Beliefs** - the terms are used interchangeably in the research; refers to parents ideas about how their children learn and develop (Sonnenschein et al., 1997).

**Home Literacy Environment**- literacy beliefs and practices among family members (Wasik & Herrmann, 2004) and the physical environment of the home that supports literacy, e.g., books, etc. (Baker, Scher, & Mackler, 1997; Stephenson, Parrila, Georgiou, & Kirby, 2008).

**Low Socioeconomic Family** - a family below the federal poverty guidelines and therefore eligible for participation in Head Start.
CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

This review of literature related to children’s emergent literacy skills, specifically phonological awareness and caregiver perceptions, is presented in three sections. The first section investigates emergent literacy, including the theoretical foundation and models of emergent literacy developed as a result of abundant research. The second section investigates home literacy, including the topics of home literacy, caregiver beliefs, and the overall influence of parental literacy levels on literacy behaviors in the home. The final section reviews the influence of socioeconomic status on a child’s development, specifically literacy.

Emergent Literacy

According to Sulzby and Teale (1991), children born into a literate society begin the process of becoming literate at birth. Such an emergent perspective on literacy development underscores development as a continuum beginning at birth and progressing until formal reading and writing occurs. Whitehurst and Lonigan (1998) describe emergent literacy in this way: “Emergent literacy denotes the idea that the acquisition of literacy is best conceptualized as a developmental continuum, with its origins in the early life of the child, rather than an all-or-none phenomenon that begins when children start school” (p. 848).

The lens of the emergent literacy perspective suggests reading and writing occur simultaneously and are interrelated, within experiences that promote meaningful interaction with written and oral language. Teale and Sulzby (1986) explain the term “emergent” was chosen because it insinuates looking forward, making the suggestion there is a direction in which children are progressing. They insist this growth and progress takes place in the contexts of
home and community and without formal teaching. The term “emergent literacy” was first coined by educator Maria Clay in 1966. This term was further defined by Teale and Sulzby (1986) in their publication, *Emergent Literacy: Writing and Reading*. Teale and Sulzby (1986) define emergent literacy as the “skills, knowledge and attitudes that are presumed to be developmental precursors to conventional forms of reading and writing” (p. 6). Thus, emergent literacy is best defined as the groundwork for conventional reading and writing. This idea of a developmental continuum of literacy contrasts with the traditional literacy development perspective which is frequently referred to as “reading readiness.”

The emergent literacy perspective sees no clear distinction between reading and pre-reading but instead values the concurrent development of reading, writing, and oral language skills throughout the first five years of life. Sulzby and Teale (1991) relate the value of the emergent literacy process, “Emergent literacy has expanded the purview of the research from reading to literacy because theories and findings have shown that reading, writing and oral language develop concurrently and interrelatedly in literate environments” (p. 728).

There is ample research to support the emergent literacy perspective (Storch & Whitehurst, 2002). Building on the work of Clay (1966) and Sulzby and Teale (1986), Whitehurst and Lonigan (1998) define emergent literacy by noting the skills associated; this includes; knowledge of letters, linguistic awareness, conventions of print, phoneme-grapheme correspondence, and print motivation. Skill competency in these areas has been linked to success in later literacy development (Evans, Shaw, & Bell, 2000, Justice, 2006; Lonigan & Shanahan, 2008; Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998, 2002) and reading proficiency in elementary school (NELP, 2008). More recently, Neuman, Copple, and Bredekamp (2000) defined emergent literacy as “the view that literacy learning begins at birth and is encouraged through participation with
adults in meaningful activities” (p. 123). This definition links emergent literacy development to the home literacy environment. Research has since demonstrated the variation in home literacy environments (Burgess & Lonigan, 1998; Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998; Stobart & Alant, 2008) and associated a strong link between the quality of the home literacy environment, including the amount of reading materials in the home and the parents’ value of literacy. (Fernald & Weisleder, 2011; Weigel et al., 2005). Additionally, research demonstrates a relationship between parents’ literacy level and the quality of the home literacy environment (Lynch, Anderson, Anderson, & Shapiro, 2006). Research has spanned across the field of social sciences and includes foundational studies focusing on description in naturalistic environments, research detailing the important role of the adult in a child’s construction of literacy, and studies focusing on the impact of emergent literacy on reading achievement.

**Theoretical Framework**

A number of theoretical perspectives lay the foundation for emergent literacy and the need to investigate the influence of parental perceptions and beliefs on emergent literacy development including well known social behavior theorists Urie Bronfenbrenner, Jean Piaget, and Lev Vygotsky. Urie Bronfenbrenner touted that human development occurs through regularly occurring proximal processes that include the individual and the environment. The processes vary based upon the characteristics of the developing person, the environment, and the nature of the developmental outcomes. Bronfenbrenner’s ecological theory makes two propositions that relate directly to the developmental perspective of emergent literacy. First, Bronfenbrenner asserted that the primary context of a child’s life allows a child to observe and participate in activities under the guidance of the individual with whom he/she has a strong emotional relationship. The first condition supports the importance of the role of the parent as a
teacher in the realm of emergent literacy. For example the parent may read to the child and explain unfamiliar words. Secondly, Bronfenbrenner’s theory emphasized the need for opportunities, resources, and encouragement to engage in order for humans to reach optimal development. With regard to early literacy, the focus on the parent, home and values would be significant. In the second condition the parent may have books in the house or provide opportunities to visit the library (Bronfenbrenner, 1986).

Similar to the ecological model’s emphasis on the environment as a factor in development, the work of Jean Piaget focused on cognitive development. Piaget (1969) focused on the development of cognition and proposed a stage theory of cognitive development. His theory emphasizes that individuals grow and change in the direction of improvement, and cognitive development was a unidirectional progression through stages of increasing complexity. Piaget’s work was grounded in the child’s active construction of knowledge, including literacy, using the environment (Sulzby & Teale, 1991). Piaget theorized the development of human language is structured by logic. In his view, children construct rules related to language prior to reading and writing. Piaget was interested in how children constructed knowledge, and how they understood what they know; for this reason, he sought to determine how children develop cognitive skills and logical thinking. Piaget (1969) provides the example of collective monologues to make this determination. This occurs when a preschool-age child makes at least two remarks together without a listener present in the conversation. Piaget attributes the collective monologue to the egocentric nature of the young child. He contends the child is not trying to communicate but instead attempting to reinforce the action. He says the adult will provide responses, regardless of the fact the child does not anticipate it, and this will lead to socialized language. This exemplifies Piaget’s purpose in researching the ways children achieve
qualitative shifts in their perspective. Piaget’s (1969) theory of language is not to be considered as a source of logic, but instead structured by logic. Children construct rules related to language prior to reading or writing. This is evident when a child begins to develop schemas; they are organized by thought and language. The perspective of children is much different than that of an adult. As children develop, their perspective is influenced by their surroundings, specifically their environment. The influence of the environment leads to Vygotsky’s social development theory. Vygotsky attributed more value to the role of egocentric speech.

Vygotsky (1962) theorized the primary function of speech is an attempt to communicate. He contended that even very early forms of speech have a social foundation; because of this he debated the role of egocentric speech in a social and cultural climate. Vygotsky was concerned with children’s development of knowledge using culturally developed tools. His finding focused on the ways adults and peers performed on acceptable tools to participate in society, specifically to communicate. His theory emphasizes shared understanding and meaning. He contended all speech is a result of the need for communication. Vygotsky’s theory moves from speech as a social pattern to egocentric speech and finally to inner speech. Vygotsky reiterated the social influence of speech. His term scaffolding is relevant to the development of language as well. Vygotsky determined children learn by social experience specifically with someone more knowledgeable. Vygotsky’s (1962) theory affirms the idea that children acquire literacy through conversations and intentional literacy engagements with an adult, usually a parent.

A commonality of all research investigating emergent literacy is the theoretical foundation. Since all three theoretical perspectives are relevant and purposeful, for research related to emergent literacy researchers utilize components of each theory to provide a thorough theoretical foundation. Specifically, for the proposed research, each theory supports the role of
the home environment and the adults the child interacts with as crucial components in the development of literacy.

Models of Emergent Literacy

Development of various models of emergent literacy by researchers attempt to explain the trajectory of literacy development in young children. The models commonly highlight the link between language and literacy development. There is a difference in the views on the critical components of emergent literacy development by researchers. The premise of the difference lies in the role of language as a component of emergent literacy and has evolved over time as a result of research.

In 2002, Whitehurst and Lonigan proposed that emergent literacy consists of two distinct domains: inside-out skills and outside-in skills. Outside-in skills are sources of information from outside the printed word that support children’s understanding of the meaning of print. An example of this is language (vocabulary), knowledge about conventions of print, emergent reading, and narrative knowledge. Inside-out skills are within the printed word. These skills support a child’s ability to translate print to sound. This includes phonological awareness, emergent writing, alphabetic knowledge and letter-sound knowledge (Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998). Both skill sets are necessary to develop successful reading and comprehension skills. Whitehurst and Lonigan (2002) give the following example: computer software is available to render speech into print, however a computer is not able to understand the print. This highlights the need for both skill sets. Additionally, Whitehurst and Lonigan (1998) label other significant factors in emergent literacy including phonological memory, or short-term memory for phonologically coded information; rapid naming, or the ability to quickly say aloud a list of
letters, numbers and colors; and print motivation, or interest in reading and writing (Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998).

Ten years later, Senechal, LeFevre, Smith-Chant, and Colten (2001) proposed a similar, yet different model of emergent literacy. This group of researchers divided the concept of emergent literacy into two categories: emergent conceptual knowledge, or knowing why, and emergent procedural knowledge, or knowing how. Emergent conceptual knowledge includes knowledge about the acts of reading and writing, knowledge about the functions of literacy, self-perception of learning to read, and emergent reading. Emergent procedural knowledge includes preconventional spelling, letter knowledge, letter-sound knowledge and word reading. Unlike Whitehurst and Lonigan (2002), the authors designate language and metalinguistic skills as distinct from emergent literacy. Language includes narrative knowledge, vocabulary and listening comprehension. Metalinguistic skills include phonological awareness and syntactic awareness (Senechal et al., 2001).

Purcell-Gates (2001), challenged Senechal et al.’s model and contended that language cannot be separated from the construct of emergent literacy. Purcell-Gates (2001) details her argument by stating “Emergent literacy is the development of the ability to read and write written texts, and written texts are constituted by written language. Thus, it makes no sense to take the language out of the emergent part of literacy” (p. 8). Purcell-Gates (2001) based her thoughts on her research and experiences as well as the seminal study by Loban in 1963 that focused on 338 children and detailed a scientific method for language analysis concluding that spoken language is the basis for reading and writing.

In 1995, Gunn, Simmons and Kameenui sought to synthesize the research related to emergent literacy. The authors suggested emergent literacy is comprised of areas of literacy
experiences and areas of literacy knowledge. They noted various frameworks for categorizing literacy knowledge in the past. The authors ascertained the significant finding of common literacy knowledge areas across all emergent literacy literature. They summarized literacy knowledge into five areas: awareness of print, relationship of print to speech, text structure, phonological awareness, and letter naming and writing. Areas of literacy experiences includes cultural communication patterns, home and community literacy experiences and the influence of storybook reading. Whitehurst and Lonigan (1998) also include the role of language in literacy acquisition.

**Emergent Literacy: Precursor to Reading Achievement**

A significant line of research concerning emergent literacy matured beyond naturalistic observations and sought to determine which emergent literacy skills serve as precursors to successful reading achievement. This research is well documented and reviewed in The National Early Literacy Panel (NELP) report. From 2002 until 2006 lead researchers in the field of emergent literacy worked to summarize the evidence in the area of early literacy development, and the influence of the home and family on literacy development. This project was commissioned by congress and led by Timothy Shanahan. They were charged with determining what works for children from birth to age five to impact reading success. The National Early Literacy Panel (NELP) reviewed 7,313 articles that were relevant to the proposed research questions.

The questions NELP sought to answer included a) what are the skills and abilities of young children that predict later reading, writing or spelling outcomes; b) which programs, interventions or instructional practices have contributed to or inhibited gains in children’s skills and abilities that are linked to later outcomes in reading, spelling and writing; c) what
environments and settings have contributed to or inhibited gains; and d) what child characteristics have contributed to or inhibited gains in skills and abilities linked to later outcomes.

Of the 7,313 articles analyzed only 685 were determined to be useful based on the criteria. The number of articles reviewed in comparison with the articles found to be useful, clearly demonstrates the need for more rigorous research in the field of early childhood literacy. The NELP report identified six variables representing early literacy skills that demonstrated predictive relationships with later literacy development. These variables included: alphabet knowledge, phonological awareness, rapid automatic naming of letters or digits, writing or writing name, and phonological memory.

An additional 5 variables were determined to have a moderate correlation with at least one variable related to later literacy success. While these variables did not have as significant of an influence, they did demonstrate a moderate correlation. The researchers determined they were significant enough to note and consider. These variables include: concepts about print, defined as knowledge of print conventions and print knowledge; a combination of elements of alphabet knowledge; and concepts about print and early decoding; reading readiness, defined as a combination of alphabet knowledge, concepts of print, vocabulary memory and phonological awareness; and finally oral language, the ability to produce or comprehend spoken language, including vocabulary and grammar, and visual processing or the ability to match or discriminate visually presented symbols (National Early Literacy Panel, 2008).

The NELP report provided an overall summary of emergent literacy skills serving as precursors to successful reading and writing upon formal school entry. Knowledge and research of emergent literacy has drastically increased since its conception by Clay in 1966 (Erickson &
The NELP report provided an extensive synthesis of current research related to emergent literacy. The report recommended future research should consider the emergent literacy skills of groups of children who struggle with literacy, including children living in poverty. It is impossible to discuss emergent literacy without documenting the variables that influence the development of emergent literacy. The home literacy environment and parental perceptions regarding literacy development are two of the most evident variables (Lonigan, 2004; Roberts, Jurgens, & Burchinel, 2005; Saracho, 2002). Both of these variables will now be further investigated.

**Home Environment and Parent/Caregiver Perceptions**

Since Clay’s (1966) introduction of the construct emergent literacy, a generous amount of research has been conducted (Senechal et al., 2001; Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998) and much of the research has focused on the home literacy environment. Components of the home literacy environment include the physical environment, the experiences the child has with literacy materials, parent-child interactive literacy experiences, parental perceptions and beliefs of how literacy and reading develops as well as a parent’s own individual reading practices (Zeece & Wallace, 2009). In this section, these components will be reviewed.

**Home Environment**

The focus of the initial studies in emergent literacy sought to learn about the role of the family/home environment in literacy development. These studies sufficiently document the association between the home literacy environment and the development of letter knowledge, oral language, interest in literacy and phonological awareness (Burgess, Hecht, & Lonigan, 2002). More recently, Burgess (2011) further examined the influence of home literacy environments provided to very young children. He determined the findings of previous research
are relevant with very young children, as well. Whitehurst et al. (1999) expanded the definition of emergent literacy to include environments that support the development of skills, knowledge and attitudes that serve as precursors to conventional reading and writing. A well-documented line of research has been conducted in relation to home literacy environments and literacy intervention programs (Raikes et al., 2006). The home literacy environment contains a variety of resources and opportunities provided to children as well as the parental abilities, dispositions, and resources that determine the provision of these opportunities (Burgess, 2011). Roberts et al. (2005) define a positive home environment as one where parents are “responsive, sensitive and accepting of a child’s behavior” (p. 347). Research on home environments relates positive cognitive outcomes where children have ample opportunities, responsive caregivers, and age-appropriate materials to interact with and manipulate (Hart & Risley, 1992). The home learning environment is a dynamic, influential component from very early in a child’s life (DeBaryshe, Binder, & Buele, 2000; Green, Lilly, & Barrett, 2002; Lonigan & Shanahan, 2008).

Research supports the conclusion that significant variability in a child’s literacy experiences emerge before formal schooling occurs (Burgess & Lonigan, 1998; Farver, Xu, Eppe, & Lonigan, 2006; Snow et al., 1998; Stobbart & Alant, 2008). Children enter school with varying levels of literacy knowledge and skills. These differences account for, and are highly predictive of, reading attainment or failure in elementary school (Burgess, 2011; Justice, 2006; Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998, 2002). Snow et al. (1998) concluded children whose homes provide less stimulating environments and experiences are at greater risk for reading difficulties than children who are exposed to stimulating, literature-rich environments. Additional research assures us most parents strongly value being involved in their child’s learning and development.
(Drummond & Stipek, 2004). These parents engage their children in conversation, games, finger plays, storybook reading, nursery rhymes and songs (Baker et al., 1997).

A quantitative assessment of the home environment is very difficult to determine because the home environment is very complex; there is an abundance of variability in the home, as influenced by the socioeconomic status of the family, parental education level and parental perceptions about the value of literacy development. Additionally, the home environment is not solely the physical surroundings of the home but also the emotional climate of the individuals and their interactions. Families with highly-rated homes on the Home Observation for Measurement of the Environment (HOME) (Caldwell, 2003) have been shown to have children with higher language skills (Roberts et al., 2005). Whitehurst and Lonigan (1998) refer to social interactions and environmental considerations as emergent literacy environments. Early shared storybook reading is given special consideration as a component of home literacy. This includes experiences that may affect the developmental of emergent literacy. The amount and quality of language spoken in the home is a viable component of the home literacy environment.

Makin (2006) sought to investigate shared reading interactions between 10 parent-infant dyads. They represented various socioeconomic statuses. The study examined linguistic and paralinguistic characteristics. The findings demonstrated when parents engaged in paralinguistic strategies, such as mothers pointing to pictures, encouraging the child to turn the pages, and engaging their children in the book, the children exhibited literacy behaviors. This study confirms the important influence of early literacy learning as a necessary foundation for fluent reading.

More recently, Edwards (2014) investigated a similar group of parent/child dyads. However, the participants were all from middle and upper socioeconomic classes. The study
sought to describe the features of the home literacy environment that may foster emergent literacy skills in toddlers. All families in the study scored in the high range on the Home Observation for Measurement of the Environment Inventory (HOME) (Caldwell & Bradley, 2003), indicating positive home environments. The HOME is a checklist that provides a general characteristic of the home environment. It addresses sensitivity, behavior, responsiveness, and toys and materials. The mothers in the sample all valued literacy experiences for their children. The homes were rich in literacy materials. This finding confirms the work of Roberts et al. (2005). Roberts et al. (2005) studied the home literacy practices of African-American mothers and their children. The families were all from low socioeconomic situations. Roberts examined four home literacy practices: shared book reading, maternal reading strategies, maternal sensitivity and child’s enjoyment of reading. Roberts utilized the HOME measurement as well. The findings concluded the best predictor of later reading development to be the quality of the home environment.

Consequently, research supports the notion of the value of the home environment in spite of socioeconomic status as influential; however a strong literacy environment and higher socioeconomic status is correlated with higher literacy skills for young children (Burgess et al., 2002). The home environment and socioeconomic status appear to be concurrent variables in research related to literacy and parental perceptions and activities.

The home learning environment provides opportunities and experiences that are important in different ways. They can be of direct benefit or serve as a foundation for experiences to continue (Burgess, 2011). For example, taking a young child to the library on a regular basis has the potential to influence later library attendance. A model for conceptualizing the home literacy environment was developed by Burgess (2011); it consisted of a variety of
resources and opportunities, as well as parental skills, abilities, perceptions, and resources. The home literacy environment lays the foundation for children’s emerging interest in literacy and subsequent development and maintenance. This consideration addresses the role of the adult and focuses on the interactions between adult and children related to literacy development. This research focused on literacy interactions, including literacy activities, such as storybook reading; and experiences, such as visits to the library, provided by parents. Research has consistently determined a positive link between shared book reading and child outcomes (Raikes et al., 2006), specifically the role of dialogic reading, which is discussed in detail below.

In 2001, a national study was conducted by the Administration for Children and Families gathering data from 17 Head Start programs at the onset of the Early Head Start expansion funding. This data was later used by Raikes et al. (2006) to determine the relationship between mother-child book reading in low-income families, considering the home literacy environment and child outcomes. The focus of the research was to determine the relationship between book reading and language development, the reciprocal effects of maternal book reading and child verbal ability, and the role of Early Head Start combined with maternal book reading. These questions were studied in relation to children’s language and cognitive development.

The participants in this study were 2,581 mothers with children enrolled in the Early Head Start program. The Early Head Start program serves children from birth to three years of age. The study utilized data to compile demographic information including, maternal education level, marital status, race, language, employment status, and gender. The study determined that for English-speaking children, concurrent reading daily at 14 months of age consistently related to language, vocabulary, and comprehension. At 24 months of age, a correlation was determined between book reading and vocabulary. However, at 36 months of age there was not a correlation
between daily reading and vocabulary. The study concluded that even when considering demographic factors, shared book reading is associated with improved child language. Findings reiterated the belief that maternal book reading during the first three years of development builds a strong foundation for further language development. This foundation sets into motion the processes necessary, especially for low-income children, to become successful readers and writers (Raikes et al., 2006).

Research demonstrates the amount of play and interaction in the home environment influences language development. Tamis-LeMonda, Shannon, Cabera, and Lamb (2004) sought to determine the relationship between parental engagement and children’s outcomes. They conducted a study utilizing participants from the National Early Head Start evaluation study. The study hypothesized the engagement of fathers and mothers would directly relate to children’s cognitive and language outcomes, specifically focusing on the role of the father. The unusual factor involved in this study was the addition of the father’s role in the development of the child. This is an under-researched component in early childhood research.

The study observed home visits when children were 24 and 36 months of age, and the parent-child interactions were videotaped for later coding. For this study, parents were asked to sit on a mat with their child and interact with the child doing whatever was most natural. The parents had access to three bags of toys and were instructed to introduce them in order. Interviews were also conducted, and the children were assessed with various measures. The study was limited due to the lack of paternal participation and specific demographic information concerning the fathers. For example, the fathers involved in the study were more educated, more likely to be employed, and were most likely married.
The results indicated a distinct correlation between cognitive and language development and the positive aspects of parental engagements. In addition education level, income, and marital status demonstrated relations in language development. The most significant finding was the impact of parent support and the parents’ education level. The study determined that maternal education level influenced positive interactions, provided increased cognitive stimulation, and mothers who were less intrusive towards their children. The monumental impact of this study was the valuable information gained regarding low-income fathers in relation to their families and children. It provides this area of research with a protocol for intervention regarding low-income fathers, in an attempt to support them in facilitating positive child outcomes (Tamis-LeMonda et al., 2004).

Research indicates children who are read to on a regular basis become readers and are naturally interested in books (Bus & van Ijzendoorn, 1995). Dialogic reading is the most common method used to teach caregivers how to share a story with a child in an interactive way. Dialogic reading is an evidence-based approach to shared book reading. Dialogic reading and related shared storybook interventions have resulted in significant gains for children with risk factors for reading failure including low socioeconomic status, low maternal education, language delays, and broad developmental delays. However, without instruction, most adults do not share stories with children using dialogic reading techniques such as using open-ended questions, modeling, or prompting and repetition. Dialogic reading has been described and documented by Zevenbergen and Whitehurst (2003). Dialogic reading involves the adults’ use of simple strategies to actively engage the child during the story. The main goal of dialogic reading is for the child to become the story teller. The adult facilitates, expands, and responds to the child, all while encouraging further language. The parent encourages the child to talk about the
illustrations, characters, and plot. The child is the center of the experience, and the book is used as a prop. Adults are instructed to ask open-ended questions, such as “what” or “why” as opposed to simple “yes/no” questions.

Dialogic reading has positive practical implications for accelerating children’s language development. Whitehurst et al. (1988) states,

“In this context, variables that are shown to be sufficient to produce appreciable individual differences in language acquisition are also variables that can be conceptualized as necessary to explain the full range of language acquisition. How parents read to their children is one of those set of variables” (p. 558).

Dialogic reading strategies are sometimes taught to parents using a videotape method (Blom-Hoffman, O’Neil-Pirozzi, & Cutting, 2006). Parents are taught two acronyms to help them recall the dialogic reading prompts. CROWD is the first prompt; this represents completion prompts, recall prompts, open-ended prompts, “Wh” prompts, and distancing prompts. PEER is the second prompt; this reminds the parent to prompt, evaluate, expand and repeat. Parents are encouraged to use one or two prompts per page and to reread books with their child, each time encouraging the child to expand more and give more detailed responses. Each shared-book reading session is intended to last 10-15 minutes. Implementation of these strategies is not intended to be stressful but instead to make the shared book reading experience more meaningful for the child (Morgan & Meier, 2008).

Whitehurst first documented the term “dialogic reading” in 1988. Prior to this, Wells (1985) made the significant assessment that listening to stories between the ages of 1 and 5 has a positive impact on oral language skills. Whitehurst (1988) hypothesized the positive effect of maternal picture book reading on the rate of the child’s oral language acquisition. He contended
a positive result would demonstrate a causal relation between early literacy-related home
activities and the child’s language development. Additionally, he deemed that according to the
magnitude of the effects of the picture book reading, practical implications are possible for
fostering accelerated language development.

Ten years later, Whitehurst and Lonigan (1998) implemented a study including 114
children from low-income families. Twenty-three families left the program prior to the posttest,
therefore 91 children remained. The children were between the ages of 33 and 60 months.
Subjects were divided into three groups: children who were read to at school in small group,
children who were read to at home by their parents and at school in small group, and children
who were read to at home only. All parents and caregivers were trained to use dialogic reading
strategies using a videotape format. Additionally, the study employed a control group receiving
no training or intervention. The children were pre and post-tested using the Peabody Picture
Vocabulary Test and the Expressive One-Word Picture Vocabulary Test. Other tests were used
to determine specific speech-related topics. The study concluded both parents and teachers can
produce significant changes in the development of oral language using a dialogic reading
intervention. This study has relevant implications concerning the effectiveness of dialogic
reading on oral language development in a variety of intervention techniques. The data suggests
the most effective implementation of dialogic reading strategies include parental implementation.

The research presented above indicates a clear relationship between the home literacy
environment and children’s literacy skills (Burgess et al., 2002). Parents have the opportunity
and responsibility of providing literacy-rich home environments. Additionally, the way parents
present books is influential. The most common parent training for shared book reading, dialogic
reading, was documented and analyzed. This information is important as parent training
programs are developed in the area of early literacy. Collectively, the research demonstrates a strong association between parents’ beliefs and actions. Research concerning parents’ beliefs will be presented next.

Parents’ Perceptions

Parents or primary caregivers are the key influence in their children’s development of literacy skills (DeBaryse, 1995; Weigel et al., 2005). Parents have the ability to provide experiences, direction and model literacy practices. Sonnenschein, Baker, Serpell, and Schmidt (2000) found children’s literacy skills to be directly influenced by their parents’ attitudes and beliefs. Parents have the opportunity to provide children with direction and surroundings to support the development of literacy. However, not all parents perceive their own role as important in developing a child’s early literacy skills. Fitzgerald, Spiegel, and Cunningham (1991) define parental perceptions as parental dispositions or parental views. They state, “Parental dispositions to cultivate a nurturing environment must be one of the pivotal factors in the creation of such a home setting. Yet virtually nothing is known about parental perceptions of literacy development in the early childhood years” (p. 192). This marked the first question by researchers in relation to opportunities and experiences parents provide, in regards to literacy instruction and the home literacy environment. The researchers hypothesized the correlation between parental perceptions, or values related to literacy and parental literacy level. This examination of parental perceptions of young children’s literacy development was intended to help practitioners improve or design more suitable literacy interventions. They also sought to explore the relationship between parental literacy levels and perceptions of the importance of literacy materials and activities.
The researchers interviewed 108 parents of kindergarten eligible children and asked why some children learn to read and write well in school and other children do not; and what can parents of two- to four-year-old’s do help a child learn to read and write when they begin school. Additionally, a literacy assessment was conducted with each parent to determine parental literacy levels.

Following the interviews, parents rated terms by importance of later reading success including lists of various materials (books, pencils, etc.), child and adult-centered literacy activities (playing school or pseudo-reading), parent-child interactions in the home, and adult-centered activities (adults reading books, magazines, or newspapers, or having a library card)

The researchers concluded parents were positive about the idea that literacy learning begins early in a child’s life. Fitzgerald et al. (1991) noted five important findings. First, literacy artifacts and events during the preschool years were viewed as important. However, what is done with artifacts was seen as more important than simply having the artifacts themselves. In fact, when asked to talk openly about literacy development in the early years, the notion of simply having literacy artifacts in the environment was rarely mentioned. Regarding artifacts, simple literacy materials, such as books, pencils and paper were the most important kinds of materials to have in the home for nurturing literacy. And regarding events, natural interactions with books was viewed to be the most important kind. Parents perceived the most central features of early literacy development to be literacy events that involved the child as well as the child’s own aptitude or disposition towards literacy learning. Further, the child’s participation in an event was seen as more important than seeing adults doing a literacy activity. Finally, early literacy development was characterized more as learning about reading than writing.
Fitzgerald et al. (1991) found a significant relationship between parents’ literacy level and their perceptions of the importance of literacy artifacts and events. Interestingly, parents with lower literacy levels valued literacy artifacts in the home more than those identified as having high literacy levels. High-literacy parents valued natural artifacts and activities but not skill-oriented materials and activities. Low-literacy parents tended to value all artifacts and events, natural or instructional and skill-oriented. The low-literacy parents felt adult role modeling was important, but less important than child-focused activities. High-literacy parents perceived adult-focused activities as equivalent. When asked to talk about their opinions, the low-literacy parents had fewer ideas related to why some children do well in school and others don’t and what parents can do to help.

Fitzgerald et al. (1991) found parents believe literacy can be facilitated without expensive toys and materials. This finding suggests that all parents and families can bolster literacy skills regardless of socioeconomic status or parental literacy level. Additionally, Fitzgerald et al. (1991) found parents grouped as low literacy tended to place more importance on early literacy artifacts and events than parents identified as high literacy. This finding is substantial for the current research. The authors contend literacy development is not surprisingly more important for low-literacy families. They attribute this to societal difficulties associated with experiencing a lifestyle of low literacy. Parents identified as high literacy have not experienced the same struggles, therefore they make the assumption literacy development will occur naturally. The high-literacy parents saw literacy development as a cultural practice. They determined literacy develops by being immersed in a culture of literacy (Fitzgerald et al., 1991).

In addition to examining parental perceptions about children’s literacy development, it is also important to determine if parental beliefs are consistent with the emergent literacy model, or
the belief that literacy develops from birth along a continuum. Historically, many adults have contended literacy begins at school entry and yet, teachers and researchers acknowledge that parental beliefs are a strong influence on a child’s literacy development. Anderson (1995) investigated the influence of parental beliefs on literacy development in a study involving 25 parents of 3 and 4-year-old children in a child study center on the campus of the University of British Columbia. Using the Parents Beliefs About Literacy Learning survey, a tool developed and validated, Anderson (1995) found that parents were supportive of emergent literacy as opposed to traditional literacy development, or the idea that literacy development begins at school entry by 88%. This finding further verified the work of Fitzgerald et al. (1991), however, parents participating in Anderson’s (1995) research study did not reject the idea of skill-based materials and the role of the adult in literacy development through modeling; this was contrary to the findings of Fitzgerald et al. (1991). Anderson (1995) found parents to be supportive of emergent literacy, however they continued to also see a need for skill-based instruction prior to school entry.

Ultimately, Anderson (1995) determined that parents agree with some aspects of emergent literacy but have difficulty accepting it as a whole. While parents may value some components of emergent literacy, they continue to see a need for skill-based instruction and materials and tend to lean towards the traditional approach to reading development in relation to activities, such as the use of flashcards for memorization. The results of this study also suggested the researcher should take caution in categorizing parental beliefs of literacy on the basis of their level of education. In this study, highly literate parents had the tendency to support the traditional view of literacy development.
The research of Anderson (1995) serves as the basis for the current research study. The aim of this study is to determine if there is a significant difference in parental beliefs about literacy development related to their education level, and are parental perceptions of emergent literacy related to their child’s skills in the area of phonological awareness. The attention to a parent’s education level and socioeconomic status are relevant for practitioners who provide parent training. Understanding the relationship between parental beliefs of literacy development and their own education level has the potential to influence how teachers and researchers approach and support parents in their attempts to promote early literacy. Anderson’s (1995) research determines the way literacy is mediated, the value placed upon literacy, and the literacy activities engaged in being contingent upon the beliefs and values held by the parents. This verifies the value of determining parental beliefs. The knowledge of what parents believe has the potential to influence the way we support parents in their attempts at promoting literacy from a very young age.

In addition to Anderson (1995), other researchers have investigated parental beliefs about emergent literacy including Edwards (2007) and Metsala (1996). Edwards (2007) investigated parental beliefs and practices of emergent literacy with parents of toddlers. The results demonstrated that mothers provided high quality stimulating literacy environments for their children. The mothers valued shared reading and were observed sharing a book with their child. During the shared storybook reading they demonstrated emergent literacy behaviors. Parental perspectives of low-income families were examined by Metsala (1996). He determined low-income families had few children participate in print-related activities. The activities they did participate in were more structured, involving rote memorization or flashcards. However, middle-class children were determined to participate in literacy activities that served as a source
of entertainment; this includes joint storybook reading or writing/drawing activities. Most profoundly, Metsala (1996) concluded the experiences parents provide for their children is contingent upon their view of literacy. Parents make decisions daily regarding different issues related to child rearing; their decisions are based on their beliefs. The value of emergent literacy opportunities are no different. This demonstrates the significant relationship between emergent literacy opportunities and the provisions of the home literacy environment. Empirical evidence demonstrates a literacy-rich home literacy environment provides children with a stronger literacy foundation and also enables them to make progress above their peers (Sylva et al., 2011).

The research presented above clearly demonstrates the role of parental perceptions, beliefs, and attitudes in children’s literacy development. There is a research-based relationship between parental beliefs and attitudes related to literacy and children’s literacy skills (Sonnenschein et al., 2000). This research has significant value for programs working with and serving families (Speigel, 1993). Additional research is needed to determine the impact of education level and socioeconomic status as it relates to perceptions concerning literacy development when developing literacy programs that are effective for the population.

**Socioeconomic Status and Culture**

Emergent literacy skills are important precursors of conventional reading (Senechal et al., 2001). The development of emergent literacy skills begins at birth and continues until school entry. These skills emerge through sociocultural experiences. It comes as no surprise that low socioeconomic status preschoolers tend to lag behind in these skills upon school entry when compared to their middle and upper socioeconomic status classmates (Duncan & Seymour, 2000). Low-income families struggle to provide rich sociocultural experiences that positively influence language and literacy skills. Oftentimes, families who lack financial resources cannot
provide enrichment experiences such as travel and extracurricular involvement, literacy tools, such as books and magazines, and lack the time to encourage the child to engage in literacy activities. This lack of opportunity leads to a line of research that connects low socioeconomic status with less academic success.

Lonigan’s (2004) contribution to the Handbook for Family Literacy describes the relationship between oral language and emergent literacy stating, “children who have larger vocabularies and greater understanding of spoken language have an easier time with reading” (p.118). This proven relationship has served as the foundation for numerous research studies regarding the influence of socioeconomic status on a child’s language and literacy development.

Hart and Risley (1992) conducted one of the earliest studies considering socioeconomic status in relation to language and the implications for all preschool-age children. They concurred that the amount of parenting per hour was strongly associated with the existing socioeconomic status. They found that the children from low socioeconomic status households receive less time and effort from their parents, resulting in lower outcomes. In addition, they studied the nature of the interactions between high and low socioeconomic families. They concluded that children from low socioeconomic families experience a substantial amount of “negative” vocabulary or discouraging words. The parents of lower socioeconomic status tended to use language only to prohibit activities, give instruction, or direction. Whereas children from higher socioeconomic status households rarely experienced “negative” vocabulary; instead the interaction consisted of questions, more frequent interactions, and elaboration of their ideas. Creative language was encouraged, and negative language was not standard in the higher socioeconomic status households.
Illiteracy among members of poor communities is common and has a detrimental and generational effect on the future of the community. Intergenerational illiteracy is common in poverty-stricken communities. In order to be successful and independent in our current society, the ability to read is essential. Fish and Pinkerman (2003) found that low-socioeconomic status rural Appalachian children had low language skills that could be identified at age four. This study concluded the delay does not affect the child socially or in the community, however the delay affects the child’s school performance. Standard language is emphasized in the school setting and necessary for success in school. The researchers concluded the delay occurs between 15 months and four years of age (Fish & Pinkerman, 2003).

The language skills of children from low socioeconomic status backgrounds are poor compared to those of children from average socioeconomic backgrounds (McIntosh, & Dodd, 2008). In addition, social disadvantage has been proven to delay children’s development of spoken language (Locke, Ginsborg, & Peers, 2002). Locke et al. (2002) also noted that children from low socioeconomic status homes and average socioeconomic status homes display comparable cognitive ability, however, the low socioeconomic children have delayed spoken language abilities in preschool.

The Handbook of Early Literacy Research addresses the relationship between lagging early language and literacy skills and school failure:

“Children from diverse backgrounds, ethnicity and culture begin public schools in the United States at age 5 or 6 with the expectation of success in the school environment. Unfortunately, too many of our children who live in poverty have difficulty in the early years of schooling, primarily because of failure to learn to read” (p. 192).
The idea exists that culture and language differences may be equally responsible for a lack of emergent literacy experiences for young children (Vernon-Feagans, Hammer, Miccio, & Manlove, 2001). Three reasons are evident as explanation for reading failure among low socioeconomic class children. Health is the most obvious explanation. Poor families do not have access to quality health care. This includes poor nutrition, lack of immunizations and exposure to lead. Each of these factors influences a child’s development. The environment is the second factor that can be linked to lack of reading achievement (Zigler & Muenchow, 1992). This conclusion was the foundational argument for the creation of programs such as Head Start. The assumption exist that poor families are not always able to provide rich, stimulating literacy experiences for their children. The third and final reason can be attributed to discrimination. Heath (1983) was a pioneer in the demonstration of the relationship between language use in relation to written materials in the home as a sociocultural issue. The study documents three different communities in relation to socioeconomic status. It was determined that each community had a unique orientation towards literacy and literacy activities for children. Our school systems operate with the middle-class values and assumptions. These values guide policies, initiatives and programs, therefore discriminating against the low socioeconomic class.

The National Center for Children in Poverty reports 22% of children nationwide reside in a home classified as at or below the poverty guidelines. The Weldon Cooper Center of the University of Virginia reports 38% of children in Southwest Virginia currently live in poverty (http://www.coopercenter.org). Research demonstrates poverty influences a wide array of child outcomes. Health outcomes, cognitive outcomes, school achievement outcomes, and emotional and behavior outcomes are the most obvious (Brooks-Gunn & Duncan, 1997). Poverty causes
immediate consequences such as inadequate nutrition, anxiety, and emotional impairments directly impacting the daily lives of children.

Research demonstrates the negative impact of low socioeconomic status on children’s development, including literacy development (Barnett, 1995; McLoyd, 1998; Snow et al., 1998). Access to resources that encourage or promote literacy are not common in low socioeconomic communities. The home environment and socioeconomic status appear to be concurrent variables in research related to literacy and parental beliefs and activities. Additional research is needed to inform policies, and intervention programs that serve the low socioeconomic populations.

Conclusion

Emergent literacy is the development of language and literacy skills from birth until age five; it assumes knowledge about language, writing, and reading occur before school entry (Morrow, 2012). This encompasses the time from birth until conventional reading and writing is developed. The research presented clearly demonstrates young children gain early literacy skills from a very young age, and numerous researchers have argued children are in the process of becoming literate at birth (Sulzby & Teale, 1991). Considering the theoretical foundation, Vygotsky, Brofenbrenner, and Piaget each emphasize the influence of social interactions and environment on a child’s literacy development. Vygotsky (1962) placed importance on the role of the social environment, including parents and peers. Bronfenbrenner (1986) established the influence of various contexts of the environment on a child’s literacy development. And finally, Piaget (1969) provided a means by which to study language development progression in young children, while also demonstrating the importance of logic and concepts in language development. This combined theoretical foundation justifies the interest in parental perceptions of children’s language development.
The beliefs parents hold in relation to literacy influence their child’s home environment (Sonnenschein et al., 2000), and parents have considerable influence on their child’s literacy development, which is influenced by their own personal beliefs. The current study seeks to determine the parental perceptions of emergent literacy development among young children’s parents in the Appalachian region, specifically Southwest Virginia. Additionally, this study investigated the relation between parental perceptions, parents’ education level and their child’s phonological awareness. It is critical to understand the relationship between parental perceptions of emergent literacy, parents’ education level, and their child’s literacy achievement, if we seek to develop programs and activities for parents and children to improve emergent literacy and language development skills for this underserved and under-researched population.

**Research Questions and Null Hypotheses**

Research Question 1: Is there a significant difference between parents’ of four-year-olds currently enrolled in Head Start in a rural, Appalachian community perceptions of emergent literacy as determined by the Parents’ Perceptions of Literacy Learning (PPLL) and their child’s phonological awareness, as determined by the Phonological Awareness Literacy Screening (PALS)?

Hypothesis: Research supports the conclusion that parents have a significant influence on their child’s literacy experiences and development. Therefore, it is expected a difference will be found between parental perceptions of literacy development and children’s phonological awareness skills.
H₀₁: There is not a significant difference between parents’ of four-year-olds currently enrolled in Head Start in a rural, Appalachian community perceptions of emergent literacy as determined by the Parents’ Perceptions of Literacy Learning (PPLL) and their child’s phonological awareness, as determined by the Phonological Awareness Literacy Screening (PALS)?

Research Question 2: Are there any significant differences as compared by education level of the parents and perceptions of emergent literacy?

Hypothesis: There is expected to be a significant difference in parental perceptions of emergent literacy based on parental education level.

H₀₂: There is no significant relationship between parents’ (or caregivers’) perceptions of emergent literacy and their education level.

Research Question 3: Are there any significant differences as compared by the parental role (i.e., mother, father, grandparent, foster parent, other) and perception of literacy development?

Hypothesis: Previous research does not provide a hypothesis for this question.

H₀₃: There is no significant differences as compared by the parental role (i.e., mother, father, grandparent, foster parent, other) and perception of emergent literacy.

Research Question 4: Are there trends or patterns in parents’ self-reported behaviors of the most important things they do to promote literacy?
CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

The study sought to investigate the perceptions and beliefs about emergent literacy and determine if relationships exist between perceptions and caregiver role or student achievement among caregivers of preschoolers enrolled in Head Start residing within three localities of central Appalachia. Using a survey developed and validated by Anderson (1995), the researcher assessed caregiver (e.g. parents, grandparents, guardians) perceptions about early literacy development and compared this assessment to their child’s academic achievement, as determined by a standardly used phonological assessment tool. The caregiver/child dyads were recruited from central Appalachia, a historically oppressed region of generational poverty in the United States.

Participants

In order to further knowledge about the relationship between parents’ education level among low-income parents, and their beliefs and practices related to early literacy development, recruitment of participants for this study took place at a single Head Start program in central Appalachia. Eligibility for enrollment in Head Start is based on income, and this center-based program served approximately 100 low-income families with a 4-year-old child. Participation in this study was completely voluntary, and no compensation was provided for participation. Recruitment letters were distributed by hand to every eligible family enrolled in the Head Start program by their respective teacher. Families that agreed to participate comprised the convenience sample. The convenience sample was comprised of 64 caregiver/child dyads. The caregiver respondent information is provided in Table 1.
Table 1

*Caregiver Respondent Information*

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<th>Response Item</th>
<th>Number</th>
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<td>Total Questionnaires Returned</td>
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<td><strong>Total number of Questionnaires</strong></td>
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<td><strong>83.75</strong></td>
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The demographics of the convenience sample were as follows:

Table 2

*Participant Demographic Information*

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<td>Male</td>
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<td>Sex of Child</td>
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<tr>
<td>Male</td>
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### Ethnicity of Child

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### Education of Caregiver

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<td>Associates Degree</td>
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<tr>
<td>Bachelor’s Degree or Higher</td>
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### Relationship to Child

<table>
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<td>Mother</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Father</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step-Parent</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grandparent/Other Relative</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foster Parent</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Primary Language Spoken in the Home

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Language</th>
<th>Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>English</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spanish</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
For data analysis purposes, the following modifications were made to the demographic information: The relationship to child category was condensed into “mother” and “other,” and the education level was condensed into “high school diploma or less” and “some college or more.”

The researcher is unable to account for sampling errors and/or biases, which is a limitation to this study and interpretation should be cautioned. The demographic data reported is consistent with demographic information from the Head Start agency and regional population. Appendix A provides a thorough description of the families and the service area of the Head Start program. Each participant was currently enrolled in the Head Start program, which serves families at or below the poverty level. Because of this identifying characteristic of the program, the researcher did not gather socioeconomic information from each participant; it can be assumed all participants would identify as low socioeconomic status as determined by the federal poverty standards. Participation in the Head Start programs requires a family be below 100% of the guideline.

**Instrumentation**

The demographic survey includes parent/caregiver and child name, education level of parent/caregiver, and the role of the person completing the survey, sex of the child, and language spoken at home. The PPLL was developed by Anderson (1995) and utilized in his research studies (Anderson, 1995; Lynch et al., 2006;). The researcher obtained permission from Anderson to utilize the instrument via email. The PPLL was developed to determine if a parent views literacy development as traditional or emergent. Anderson (1995) ensured face validity of the survey by having it reviewed by two university professors with expertise in emergent literacy. Additionally, he administered the assessment to 40 undergraduate students with
knowledge of emergent literacy. One half were encouraged to answer from a traditional view and the remaining half from an emergent view. The instrument was found to have 95% reliability (Anderson, 1995). For the purposes of this study, a mean was determined based upon the survey results and used to group participants as traditional or emergent.

The Phonological Awareness Literacy Screening Pre-K (PALS-PK) assessment was created in response to the popularity of the PALS-K, which was developed for kindergarten classrooms and out of need for early prevention of reading problems. The primary goal of the tool is to assess emergent literacy factors shown by research to predict later reading achievement. The Commonwealth of Virginia provided funds to the Curry School of Education at The University of Virginia for its creation. It is currently used by 99% of public schools in Virginia. The tasks presented in PALS-PK are a representative sample of tasks found in other emergent literacy tools. The tool was piloted in the spring of 2000 and then revised based upon the findings. Each section of the test was compared to past research and other emergent literacy instruments to obtain reliability and validity. The tool was examined for inter-rater reliability and internal consistency. Finally, the tool was reviewed by an advisory board for difficulty, bias, clarity and consistency. The tool is divided into 6 categories: name writing, alphabet knowledge, beginning sound awareness, print and word awareness, rhyme awareness, and nursery rhyme awareness (www.palsvirginia.edu). The test is administered in a one-on-one format between the teacher and each child during the fall semester of the school year. The information is used for assessment data and instructional grouping. Each category has an identified developmental range.

For the purposes of this study, the PALS-PK was used to determine either mastery or non-mastery in each subset, and a final score was also calculated using the total from each
subset. Mastery was determined if the child’s score in each category fell within the
developmental benchmark. A total score was calculated by adding the subset scores together. A
sample PALS score sheet is provided in Appendix B.

Data Collection

Volunteer participants were recruited from the above described Head Start program. Only children eligible for kindergarten the following school year were recruited, in order to ensure that each child had taken the Phonological Awareness Literacy Screening (PALS-PK) assessment, a requirement of 4-year-old’s attending Head Start programs in Virginia. Recruitment letters/cover letters were distributed to each of the 12 Head Start centers in the service area (Appendix C). Participation was voluntary, and no incentive for participation was provided. Participants received the informed consent document containing contact information for the researcher. Parents were invited to attend an informational meeting hosted by the researcher. During the meeting, they were presented a brief overview of the study and given an opportunity to ask questions or voice concerns. The researcher was also available via phone or email throughout the entirety of the study. Parents in agreement of participation were asked to sign a permission slip for the reviewer to obtain the child’s PALS-PK summary report from the fall assessment from the Head Start program. Additionally, parents/caregivers were given the Parents Perceptions of Literacy Learning (PPLL) survey and the demographic survey (Appendix D), along with an envelope, and asked to complete and return to their teacher.

Survey results were built into a data set for analysis using procedures specific to the identified research questions.
The following process was employed at each Head Start Center to eliminate any internal threats of data collection:

The researcher hand delivered the research packets to each center. The packet included a recruitment letter, a cover letter, consent form, demographic survey, permission slip to obtain PALS-PK information and the PPLU. The researcher described the study to the Head Start teacher and answered any questions. The researcher asked for packets of those willing to participate be returned within 2 weeks. The researcher scheduled a time to return to the center (in two weeks) at which time she picked up the surveys. The recruitment letter/survey cover letter (Appendix C) explained the research study to the parents and included a blank envelope for parents to return the surveys to the Head Start teacher at their respective center.

Once participants were identified, had granted permission to participate and had completed the surveys, the researcher met with the Head Start Director. The director provided the researcher with PALS-PK summary reports (Appendix B) for each participating child. The data was compiled into a data set and used for analysis. The data set does not include any identifiable information.

Chapter Summary

This chapter has detailed the design of the research study and how the researcher executed the study. The research questions and null hypotheses were reported. Additionally, the research population was determined. The instrumentation utilized in the research was described, and data analysis collection and analysis procedures were noted.
CHAPTER 4

RESULTS

Preliminary Analysis

The researcher, along with the committee chair, coded each questions in the PPLL as either traditional (1), emergent (2) or not sure (0). Each survey was totaled, and a score was obtained. The data was compiled, and a mean of 1.56 was determined with a standard deviation of .16883. Each participant below the mean was identified as more traditional, and each participant above the mean was identified as more emergent. To ensure inter-rater reliability, the researcher, along with a master’s degree teacher, categorized each of the self-reported behaviors into the categories previously determined by Lynch et al. (2006).

The PALS-PK instrument was used to simply categorize participants in one of two categories in regards to phonological awareness: mastery or non-mastery.

Data Analysis

An independent samples t-test was used to evaluate the difference between the means of two independent groups. The two independent groups were the PALS-PK score and the Parent/Caregiver Perception of Literacy Development score (emergent or traditional). The parent/caregiver perception was identified as the grouping variable, and the PALS score served as the test variable. The t-test was used to evaluate whether the mean value of the test variable for one group (emergent or traditional) differs significantly from the mean value of the test variable (PALS-PK score).

A two-way contingency table was utilized to evaluate if a statistically significant relationship exists between variables. The variables were qualitative and categorical. The
variables were identified as education level of parent/caregiver and perception of emergent literacy. Additionally, the role of the caregiver (mother or other) was identified as a variable. All statistical analyses were conducted at the .05 level of significance.

Frequency tallies were utilized to create a valuable data set based on the qualitative data obtained from the open-ended question in the survey (“What are the five most important things you are doing to help your child learn to read?”) Additionally, the researcher analyzed the results of the open-ended survey question, to determine patterns or themes, based on the work of Lynch et al. (2006).

Table 3

*Categories for Parental Responses*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>RESPONSE ITEM</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Direct teaching activities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a. Teach the alphabet</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. Help child write his/her name and the name of things</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participation in literacy activities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a. Read to them</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. Play letter games with them</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. Write with them</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Encouraging/demonstrating/valuing of literacy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a. Provide books, workbooks, and journals for the child</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. Provide literacy computer games with stories and letters</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
c. Let children see parents reading

Knowledge development

a. Talk to them/answer their questions
b. Draw pictures with them

Go on outings, point things out

The purpose of this study was to investigate the relationships between parents’ perceptions of emergent literacy and their child’s phonological awareness skills. The specific research questions include:

Research Question 1: Is there a significant difference between parents’ of four year-olds currently enrolled in Head Start in a rural, Appalachian community perceptions of emergent literacy as determined by the Parents’ Perceptions of Literacy Learning (PPLL) and their child’s phonological awareness, as determined by the Phonological Awareness Literacy Screening (PALS-PK)?

Hypothesis: Research supports the conclusion that parents have a significant influence on their child’s literacy experiences and development. Therefore, it is expected a difference will be found between parental perceptions of literacy development and children’s phonological awareness skills.

H₀₁: There is not a significant difference between parents’ of four year-olds currently enrolled in Head Start in a rural, Appalachian community perceptions of emergent literacy as determined by the Parents’ Perceptions of Literacy Learning (PPLL) and their child’s phonological awareness, as determined by the Phonological Awareness Literacy Screening (PALS-PK).
An independent-samples t-test was conducted to evaluate whether the PALS-PK score was different based on parents’ perception of emergent literacy, as determined by the PPLL. The PALS-PK score was the test variable, and the grouping variable was parental perceptions (emergent or traditional). The test was not significant, $t(62) = .80$, $p = .427$. Therefore, the researcher failed to reject the null hypothesis. The $\eta$ index was .01, which indicated a small effect size. There was not a significant difference in PALS-PK scores for parents in the traditional group ($M = 44.47$, $SD = 25.64$) and parents in the emergent group ($M = 50.06$, $SD = 30.10$). Hence, the findings demonstrate the caregivers’ perception of literacy development does not influence their child’s emergent literacy skills, as measured by the PALS-PK. The 95% confidence interval for the difference in means was -19.57 to 8.38. Figure 1 shows the distributions for the two groups.

![Figure 1. Distribution of PALS score for emergent and traditional groups](image-url)
Research Question 2: Are there any significant differences as compared by education level of the parents and perceptions of emergent literacy?

Hypothesis: There is expected to be a significant difference in parental perceptions of emergent literacy based on parental education level.

H₀²: There is no significant relationship between parents’ (or caregivers’) perceptions of emergent literacy and their education level.

A two-way contingency table analysis was conducted to evaluate whether the perception of emergent literacy (emergent or traditional) varies depending on the education level of the caregiver. The two variables were perceptions of literacy development, either emergent or traditional, and the parents’ or caregivers’ education level (high school or below or some college or more). The two variables were found to have no significant relationship, therefore the null hypothesis is retained. Pearson \( \chi^2 \) (1, \( N = 64 \)), \( p = .616 \), Cramer’s V = .063. Therefore, in general caregivers’ perceptions of emergent literacy are not significantly related to the caregivers’ education level. Figure 2 displays the proportion of caregiver perceptions compared to the education level of the caregiver.
Research Question 3: Are there any significant differences as compared by the parental role (i.e., mother, father, grandparent, foster parent, other) and perception of literacy development?

Hypothesis: Previous research does not provide a hypothesis for this question.

Figure 2: Perceptions of caregivers and education level
H₀₃: There is no significant differences as compared by the parental role (i.e., mother, father, grandparent, foster parent, other) and perception of emergent literacy.

A two-way contingency table analysis was conducted to evaluate if a significant difference exists between the parental role of the primary caregiver and the caregivers’ perception of literacy development. The two variables were the role of the caregiver (mother or other) and the view of literacy development. The two variables were not found to be significantly related, . Pearson χ² (1, N= 64), p = 0.1 Cramer’s V = 0. Therefore, the null hypothesis is retained. In general, there is no significant relationship between the role of the caregiver and the perception of literacy development. Figure 3 displays the proportion of caregivers and the views of literacy development.

![Figure 3: Parental role (count) and perceptions](image-url)
Research Question 4: Are there trends or patterns in parents’ self-reported behaviors of the most important things they do to promote literacy?

The Parents’ Perceptions of Literacy Learning Questionnaire (Anderson, 1995), concluded with an open-ended question. Caregivers were asked to note the five most important things they are currently doing to help their child learn to read. This data was coded using the categories determined by Lynch et al. (2006). Figure 4 and Figure 5 displays the findings coded into each category. Additionally, Table 4 displays each self-reported behavior as either traditional, emergent or both.

![Frequency of Caregiver Self-Reported Behaviors](image)

*Figure 4. Frequency of caregiver self-reported behavior*
Figure 5. Caregiver self-reported behaviors

Table 4

Caregiver Self-Reported Behaviors Categorized as Traditional, Emergent, or Both

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Traditional</th>
<th>Emergent</th>
<th>Both</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Teach the alphabet 14.3% (n=55)</td>
<td>Play letter games 5.7% (n=14)</td>
<td>Read to them 27% (n=64)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provide books and workbooks for the child 24.3% (n=55)</td>
<td>Write with them 3.2% (n=8)</td>
<td>Teaching a child to write his/her name and the name of things 15% (n=35)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provide literacy computer games with stories and letters 3.5% (n=9)</td>
<td>Go on outings, point out things 4.9% (n=12)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Let children see parents reading 2% (n=5)</td>
<td>Talk to them/ Answer their questions 6.1% (n=15)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Draw pictures with them 1.6% (n=4)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Total 33.3% (n=79) 24.5% (n=58) 42.2% (n=100)

The most common self-reported behavior of the caregivers was “read to them.” This was reported a total of 64 times in the survey data. All (100%) of the caregivers reported “reading” to their child as a way they are currently helping their child learn to read. This finding reveals the value parents place on exposure to literacy, prior to a child’s ability to formally read, which is a critical part of the emergent perspective. However, caregivers reported “help child write his/her name and name of things” a total of 36 times and “teach the alphabet” 35 times. Both of these categories are categorized under direct teaching activities according to Lynch et al. (2006). Direct teaching activities are an example of a traditional view of literacy development.

Figure 6 demonstrates the self-reported behaviors as either traditional or emergent. Parents reported traditionally-inspired behaviors, such as direct instruction using workbooks, 58% of the time. This is similar to the findings from Anderson (1995). His study participants did not reject the idea of skill-based materials. In the current study, caregivers reported, “provide books, workbooks and journals for the child” 35 times. The results of the current study align with the findings of Anderson (1995). While caregivers tend to agree with some aspects of emergent literacy, including the value of the environment and adult modeling, they have difficulty accepting it as a whole. Hence, the use of flashcards and workbooks was a common response. Parents in this study demonstrated a value for emergent literacy, but they also see a need for skill-based instruction. This finding is the same as the findings reported by Anderson (1995) using the same survey.
Figure 6. Behaviors categorized as traditional or emergent
CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION

This study sought to determine if parents’ perceptions of literacy development (emergent or traditional) influenced their child’s literacy skills, as assessed by a standardized and frequently used literacy assessment. Additionally, the study sought to determine if a significant relationship exists between the education level of the parent/caregiver or the role of the caregiver and the caregiver’s perception of literacy development. A questionnaire authored by Anderson (1995) was used to categorize the caregiver as having an emergent or traditional view of literacy development. Finally, parents/caregivers were asked to document the five most important things they are doing to help their child learn to read.

Key Findings

The majority of participants agreed with some aspects of emergent literacy but had trouble accepting the idea as a whole. Even parents labeled as “traditional” still noted “emergent” activities as valuable. Every participant in the study noted “reading to their children” as a way they are helping their child learn to read.

No significant relationship was found between the caregiver perception of literacy development and the child’s emergent literacy skills. Additionally, no significant relationship was found between the role of the caregiver or the education level of the caregiver and their perceptions of literacy development. Finally, parents/caregivers did not place significant value on their child seeing them read as important to encourage literacy development.
Implications

All participants in the study tended to agree with some aspects of emergent literacy. For example, even the parents that were grouped as “traditional” signified the value of allowing the child to “read” familiar words, and they tended to agree with the idea that a child can learn to read before formal schooling begins. However, a majority of parents noted the use of flashcards and workbooks as a way to help their child learn to read. Upon initial impression, these views seem to be contradictory. While caregivers did tend to agree with some aspects of emergent literacy, they do not accept it in its entirety. Anderson (1995) maintained a similar finding in his research using the same questionnaire.

This finding holds several implications for practitioners working with families similar to those in this study. First, it is important to provide parents with a more detailed description of emergent literacy and activities to support literacy development. Unfortunately, most commercially-developed activities support a traditional view of literacy development (workbooks, flashcards). Practitioners should use teaching opportunities to demonstrate appropriate emergent activities when scaffolding parents. It is also valuable to demonstrate literacy activities that are not cost prohibitive for families. For example, pointing out environmental print or allowing a child to make a grocery list are activities that promote emergent literacy development in the typical day of a family.

Every participant noted their commitment to “reading to their child” as a way of ensuring their child becomes a proficient reader. This is a valuable finding for several reasons. First, for the past three years, an organization has implemented a public awareness campaign in this locality encouraging parents to read to their children. The Children’s Reading Foundation implemented the “20 minutes a day” challenge community wide. This public campaign was
geared towards parents that were identified as low socioeconomic and encouraged them to read to their child for at least 20 minutes each day. The materials were distributed in hospitals, pediatricians’ offices, Head Starts and other preschool programs, Department of Social Services and Health Departments. The findings of this study could be used to document the successfulness of the reading campaign, however, because the questionnaires were self-reported, it could also be argued that parents understand the need to read to their children as a result of the public campaign and noted that, but may not actually do so.

The data did not demonstrate a significant relationship between the education level of the caregiver or the role of the caregiver and their perceptions of literacy development. Furthermore, the perceptions of the caregiver did not influence the literacy skills of the child. This finding is encouraging for the Head Start program from which the participants were recruited. One of the main goals of the Head Start program is to educate parents and empower them to be an advocate for their child’s education. Regardless of education level or caregiver role, parents were found to be supportive of their child’s literacy development.

**Recommendations for Further Research**

The current study sought to examine parental perceptions of emergent literacy among Head Start parents and the impact on a child’s early literacy developments as assessed by a standardized test. It is important to understand the relationships between these factors in the development of parents’ training and interventions aimed at improving children’s early literacy development. Results suggested that the sample population valued emergent literacy and perceived it as critical. It would be ideal to perform the same study within the Appalachian mountains with parents of children not enrolled in a preschool program to determine if early programming had an influence on parental perceptions and the relationship to child achievement.
Additionally, the study could be repeated with school system-funded preschool programs as the targeted recruitment area. The findings of this study are encouraging for practitioners and researchers concentrating on the rural Appalachian population.
REFERENCES


doi:10.1007/s10643-009-0325-0


APPENDICES

Appendix A

Description of the Participants/ Participating Organization Service Area

An independent agency provides the Head Start program for this central Appalachian region. The Community Assessment document from the program, describes the service area in this way,

“The service area of Kids Central, Inc. includes Wise County, Dickenson County, and the City of Norton, Virginia – an area of approximately 740 square miles – located in the extreme southwest portion of Virginia, bordering the state of Kentucky. The service area is decidedly rural and mountainous with small towns and communities dotting the landscape with improving, but still challenging, transportation issues between localities. The area has traditionally been dependent upon natural resources – including natural gas, timber, and, most specifically, coal – as its economic base for many generations. However, in keeping with the changes in the global economy as well as anticipated changes in the availability and profitability of resource-based industries, the regional economy is evolving. Despite this progression, the service area is still subject to significant socioeconomic conditions, typical of many resource-based economies, which hinder the ability of many families and households to live self-sufficiently.”

The Appalachian region is generally a depressed community. Wise County, Dickenson County and the city of Norton are located in the heart of the Appalachian region.

The Kids Central Inc. Community Assessment also provides information related to the economic indicators of the service area.
“The Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC), created by Congress in 1965 to promote economic development and improve the quality of life in the Appalachian region, classified Dickenson County as “at-risk” for fiscal year 2014. Wise County and the City of Norton are classified as “transitional” for the same timeframe. By definition, “at-risk” counties are those considered to be “at-risk” of becoming economically “distressed” and rank between the worst 10-25% of all counties in the nation (by economic standards). This classification is one level higher than those counties considered the most economically challenged by the ARC.

Localities characterized as “transitional”, such as Wise County and Norton City, are those believed to be transitioning from a weaker to a stronger economy and are the largest single classification of economic status in the ARC.

The ARC initiated the distressed counties program in the mid-1980s as a means of identifying Appalachian counties in need of financial assistance and intervention. Until recent years, all of the service area was routinely rated as distressed (the lowest level); therefore, the movement of Dickenson County into “at risk” and Wise County and Norton City into the “transitional” category is certainly a signal of measurable progress in the economic sector.”

The current poverty rate in the state of Virginia for children under the age of 5 is 19.3%, in Southwest Virginia the rate is 34.8%. This simple statistic demonstrates the dire situation for young children in this region. A strategic plan for a community organization in the region states, “In Southwest Virginia a Kindergarten teacher can expect every third child to live with a family that cannot afford basic essentials. Such pervasive poverty makes it hard for the child, the family and the teacher to succeed” (Smart Beginnings Strategic Plan, 2016). This is significant because young children are the most vulnerable population in relation to the negative effects of poverty.
The Harvard University’s Center for the Developing Child explains the detrimental impact of poverty for young families in this way:

“Poverty is important because economic disadvantage may have cascading effects on many aspects of family life. It constraints parents’ ability to provide a rich learning opportunities for their children and often forces parents to choose among lower quality child care, which we know can compromise the relationships children need for healthy development. It can mean growing up in a neighborhood that is more dangerous and lacks the kind of community resources to which more affluent families have access. It can mean the burden of overtime work, multiple jobs, or a split-shift job that limits parents’ interaction time with their children. It can lead parents to be one event or one sick child away from losing a job. These kinds of conditions can lead to high levels of stress in families’ everyday environments, and such adversity can affect children’s development”. This statement summarizes the notion that children under the age of 5 are poor because their parents are not gainfully employed. This lack of substantial employment is directly related to the decline of the coal industry in the area where the proposed research will take place.

For many years the economy of this portion of the Appalachian region has depended upon employment in the coal industry. Recently the area has endured a significant decrease in job opportunity as a result of a national focus on the development of clean energy and decreasing the impact on emissions on climate change. As President Obama has endorsed the Clean Power Act 2015, many coal miners across the Appalachian region have lost jobs.

Because the coal industry is the foundation of the economy, all economic avenues have been impacted. The current unemployment rate is 9.4% in Wise County, 7.8% in the city of
Norton and 9.9% in Dickenson County. In addition to the decline in the coal industry other obstacles include poverty, lack of housing and lack of access to medical care.

Wise County is situated in the heart of the Appalachian region. The county is home to two institutes of higher education, The University of Virginia’s College at Wise and Mountain Empire Community College. The median income of Wise county residents is $37,490, as compared to the state average of $62,745. 1.37% of children are retained in grades K-3 and 20.6% of children demonstrated PALS scores below Kindergarten readiness levels. 13% of students in the Wise County school system receive special education services. The lack of access to prenatal care or the lack of emphasis on its importance is also evident in Wise County, only 51.3% of expectant families receive prenatal care form the first trimester. (datacenter.kidscount.org). Exposure to toxic substances is another risk factor for young children. Recently the state of Virginia has experienced a significant increase in the diagnosis of Neonatal Abstinence Syndrome (NAS). The Lenowisco planning district, which includes Wise County, Dickenson County and the City of Norton reports, 20.8 of every 1000 births are diagnosed with NAS. The state average is 3.8, signifying the prevalence of a serious substance abuse problem in the discussed region. This combined data illustrates accurately a community with significant barriers for young children and their families.

The City of Norton is the smallest city in the state of Virginia with a population of 3,958 as reported by the Virginia Employment Commission. Norton is situated in the middle of Wise County. The City operates its own school system, including one elementary/middle school and one high school. The city experiences many of the same struggles as the surrounding county. The median income in the City of Norton is $32,303, this is almost half of the median income for the state of Virginia. 32.9% of children live in poverty, which is the highest among the three
communities targeted by the proposed study and double the state average. In Norton, 3.27% of children are retained in grades k-3 annually and 11.4% are receiving special education services. Additionally, 23.3% of kindergarteners demonstrated below average literacy skills according to the PALS-K.

Dickenson County is situated in the Appalachian regions, as well. The county recently closed high schools in each community and built a combined high school to serve the entire county. This move was a result of a large decline in population. The KCI Community Assessment states, “It seems certain that the population of Dickenson County will continue to decline for the foreseeable future, as it struggles with the greatest economic issues in the service area”. The median household income is at $33,386, significantly below the state average. 27.1% of children in Dickenson County reportedly live in poverty. 10.1% of kindergarten children scored below average on the PALS-K, this statistic is interesting for the current study. The rate is half of the other two communities involved. However, the special education services rate is the highest amongst the three at 14.7%.

A high incidence of drug, alcohol and tobacco use is a staggering risk factor for the communities discussed. Exposure to toxic substances poses a serious risk factor to young children. Recently the state of Virginia has experienced a significant increase in the diagnosis of Neonatal Abstinence Syndrome (NAS). The Lenowisco planning district, which includes Wise County, Dickenson County and the City of Norton reports, 20.8 of every 1000 births are diagnosed with NAS. The state average is 3.8, signifying the prevalence of a serious substance abuse problem in the discussed region. Founded cases of child abuse and neglect are reported at a much higher rate than the state average. In Southwest Virginia there are 18 founded cases per 1000 children, the state average is 5 per 1000 children. Research demonstrates the negative
effects of early trauma and toxic stress on a child’s development. The Center for the Developing Child at Harvard University states,

“The future of any society depends on its ability to foster the healthy development of the next generation. Extensive research on the biology of stress now shows that healthy development can be derailed by excessive or prolonged activation of stress response systems in the body and brain. Such toxic stress can have damaging effects on learning, behavior, and health across a lifespan” (www.developingchild.harvard.edu)

Parent/child dyads in this study reside in one of the poorest communities in the state of Virginia, have a low education level and are economically stressed as a result of the lack of gainful employment opportunities since the decline in the coal industry. This, compiled with a lack of quality childcare, poor access to medical care, and a high incidence of drug, alcohol and tobacco use, create a less than ideal environment for young families.
Appendix B

Sample PALS Child Summary Report

This report lists all scores entered for the child and PreK developmental ranges. Spring developmental ranges reflect appropriate literacy expectations for four-year-old children who are preparing to start kindergarten.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PALS TASK</th>
<th>FALL SCORES</th>
<th>SPRING DEVELOPMENTAL RANGES</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Name Writing</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>5-7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Upper-Case Alphabet Recognition</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>12-21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lower-Case Alphabet Recognition</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>9-17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Letter Sounds</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>4-8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beginning Sound Awareness</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>5-8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Print and Word Awareness</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>7-9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rhyme Awareness</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5-7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nursery Rhyme Awareness</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>6-10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix C

Recruitment Letter

March 1, 2016

Dear Parents/Guardians,

My name is Kimberly Austin and I am a student at East Tennessee State University. For my final project, I am researching parental perceptions of emergent literacy (or how children learn to read). Because your child is enrolled in Head Start at Kids Central, Inc and will attend Kindergarten next year, I am inviting you to participate in this research study.

Attached to this letter are two documents. The informed consent document and the questionnaire. The informed consent document explains the study in more detail and you will be asked to sign it if you choose to participate in the study, the questionnaire will be used to gather information. The informed consent and questionnaire will require approximately 30 minutes to complete. You will not receive any compensation for responding. In order to ensure that all information will be kept confidential, please return the documents in the provided envelope. If you choose to participate, please answer all questions as honestly as possible and return the completed documents to your Head Start teacher.

Participation is voluntary and you may refuse to participate at any time.

Thank you for taking time to assist me. If you require additional information or have questions please contact at the number listed below. Additionally, I will be at the KCI Administration Building on __________________________ to answer any questions in person.

Thank you again for your time and attention.
Sincerely,

Kimberly Austin

(276)393-5903

Zkaa3@goldmail.etsu.edu
Appendix D

DEMOGRAPHIC QUESTIONNAIRE

Parent/Guardian Name (Please PRINT FIRST AND LAST NAME): _________________________________

Sex of Parent/Guardian: ☐ MALE ☐ FEMALE   Age of Parent/Guardian: _________________

Race of Parent/Guardian: ☐ WHITE ☐ BLACK ☐ HISPANIC ☐ ASIAN ☐ BIRACIAL ☐ OTHER

Education of Parent/Guardian:

☐ SOME HIGH SCHOOL OR LESS THAN HIGH SCHOOL

☐ HIGH SCHOOL DIPLOMA OR G.E.D.

☐ SOME COLLEGE

☐ ASSOCIATE’S DEGREE

☐ BACHELOR’S DEGREE OR HIGHER

Primary Language Spoken At Home: ☐ ENGLISH ☐ SPANISH ☐ OTHER (PLEASE LIST): ______________

Child’s Name (Please PRINT FIRST AND LAST NAME): _________________________________

Sex of Child: ☐ MALE ☐ FEMALE

Race of Child: ☐ WHITE ☐ BLACK ☐ HISPANIC ☐ ASIAN ☐ BIRACIAL ☐ OTHER

What Is Your Relationship To The Child Named Above? (PLEASE CHECK ONLY ONE):

☐ MOTHER

☐ FATHER
- STEPPARENT
- GRANDPARENT OR OTHER RELATIVE
- FOSTER PARENT
- OTHER (PLEASE LIST): __________________________________________________________

Please read each statement carefully and put an ☐ or a ☒ in the box that best describes your beliefs about that statement. Please choose only ONE answer per statement.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>LEARNING TO READ</th>
<th>YES</th>
<th>NOT SURE</th>
<th>NO</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A child learns to read by first learning the phonetic symbols and/or letters of the alphabet and their sounds; then words; then sentences; and then books or stories.</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☒</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teaching a child to recognize single words on flash cards is a suitable and practical technique to teach reading.</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☒</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A child benefits from hearing their favorite books over and over again.</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☒</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>You should encourage a child to join in while you read a familiar book to them.</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☒</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It is a good idea to point to the words as you read them to a child.</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☒</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>You are helping a child learn to read by encouraging him/her to talk about what is being read.</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☒</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>You should encourage your early reader to “read” familiar books by using pictures to retell the story.</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☒</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EARLY WRITING (Writing sometimes means handwriting or printing. Here, writing means writing notes, lists, poems, signs, stories and so forth)</td>
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<td>---------------------------------------------------------------</td>
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<tr>
<td>It is necessary for a child to know the phonetic symbols and character; and/or letters of the alphabet and the sounds of the letters before he/she begins to write.</td>
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<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>YES</td>
<td>NOT SURE</td>
<td>NO</td>
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<tr>
<td>A child should learn to neatly print characters and/or the letters of the alphabet before attempting to print notes, messages, lists, stories, etc.</td>
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<td>☐</td>
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<td>☐</td>
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<tr>
<td>YES</td>
<td>NOT SURE</td>
<td>NO</td>
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<tr>
<td>When he/she begins to write, a child should be very encouraged to write only easy words and very short sentences.</td>
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<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>YES</td>
<td>NOT SURE</td>
<td>NO</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>A child’s early scribbles and drawings are actually considered to be writing.</td>
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<td>☐</td>
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<td>☐</td>
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<tr>
<td>YES</td>
<td>NOT SURE</td>
<td>NO</td>
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<tr>
<td>A child can begin to write (notes, stories, labels for pictures, lists) before he/she knows how to read.</td>
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<td>☐</td>
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<tr>
<td>YES</td>
<td>NOT SURE</td>
<td>NO</td>
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<tr>
<td>Learning to read and learning to write are similar to leaning to talk, in that children learn these skills gradually, and begin at different ages.</td>
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<td>☐</td>
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<tr>
<td>YES</td>
<td>NOT SURE</td>
<td>NO</td>
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<tr>
<td>Reading to children, and reading with children helps them to learn to write.</td>
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<td>☐</td>
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<tr>
<td>YES</td>
<td>NOT SURE</td>
<td>NO</td>
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<td>Children can learn about reading and writing before they begin formal reading programs or instruction at preschool or kindergarten.</td>
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<td>☐</td>
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<tr>
<td>YES</td>
<td>NOT SURE</td>
<td>NO</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Please read each statement carefully and put an ☒ or a ☐ in the box that best describes your beliefs about that statement. Please choose only ONE answer per statement.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>THESE ACTIVITIES HELP CHILDREN LEARN TO READ AND TO WRITE</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Talking to children about what they see/hear.</td>
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<td>☐</td>
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<tr>
<td>Talking to children about outings in the community.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Having children pretend (or try or attempt) to write grocery lists with you, and find items in the grocery store.</td>
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<td>☐</td>
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<tr>
<td>Reading to children.</td>
</tr>
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<td>☐</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>FINAL THOUGHTS</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Schools should be totally responsible for teaching children to read and write.</td>
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<td>☐</td>
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<tr>
<td>It is very important that children see their parents reading and writing.</td>
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<td>☐</td>
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<tr>
<td>Children have to be a certain age before they can begin to learn to read and write.</td>
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<tr>
<td>☐</td>
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<tr>
<td>Children learn to read and write by playing.</td>
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</table>
WHAT ARE THE FIVE **MOST IMPORTANT THINGS** YOU ARE CURRENTLY DOING TO HELP YOUR CHILD LEARN TO READ AND TO WRITE?

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<td>4.</td>
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<td>5.</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Adapted with permission from:

VITA

KIMBERLY S. AUSTIN

Education:

B.A. Education, The University of Virginia’s College at Wise, Wise, VA, 2000

M.A. Early Childhood Education, East Tennessee State, Johnson City, TN, 2005

Professional Experience:

Education Director, Kids Central, Inc. Head Start, Norton, VA, 2005-2010

Assistant Professor, Southwest Virginia Community College, Richlands, VA, 2010-present