

Stories of Experience:
Texas Preschool Teachers' Early Literacy Beliefs and Practices

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Abstract

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A focus on early literacy that became heightened in the early 21st century has had the unintended consequence of restricting our ideas about what children should be doing in classrooms, creating a preoccupation not only with literacy in general but also with a specific subset of early literacy skills that often reflect Eurocentric cultural norms and values. This can result in a proliferation of assessments, prescriptive curricula, and skills-based activities that allow little flexibility for teachers. A narrowing of curriculum and expectations, of behaviors that “count” as literacy, limits the potential for teachers to create literacy experiences that build upon the rich funds of knowledge that all children possess. Our understanding of how teachers have been impacted by this and the ways in which contextual variables mitigate expectations and requirements has not been sufficiently developed.

In the face of such concerns, this study sought to include preschool teachers' own descriptions of their literacy practices and their beliefs about early literacy development. Using a mixed-methods approach that included in-depth interviews as well as a questionnaire, narrative portraits were developed for eight pre-k teachers in Texas who worked in various program settings: Head Start, public prekindergarten, “braided” programs, as well as privately funded. A comparative analysis was also conducted, including the application of Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Theory to disentangle the influence of different contextual factors. Teachers navigated a host of different influences on their early literacy practice from local stakeholders

and colleagues to policies, cultural values and expectations, as well as shifting expectations for the early literacy skills pre-k children should have in order to be ready for kindergarten.

Regardless of their settings or beliefs about teaching, teachers experienced barriers that at times impeded their ability to teach the ways they wanted to. They described a variety of activities and approaches to supporting emerging literacy skills, and they balanced requirements and expectations with a desire to tailor their instruction and learning opportunities in individually appropriate ways. Survey responses mirrored those of previous studies that utilized the same questionnaires in order to develop an understanding of preschool teachers' literacy beliefs and practices. What emerged was a picture of eight different teachers who believe in the potential of all children and are committed to providing a strong education foundation for the children in their classes.

The field of early childhood is notoriously fragmented due to an incoherent system of governance, funding streams, and settings, resulting in a host of complications including expectations that might contradict one another and a redundancy within requirements that means teachers' time is frequently consumed with paperwork, competing curricula, and duplicate assessments. Future studies should continue to explore how teachers are impacted by the social and political contexts that surround education and literacy, and including teachers' perspectives is a critical aspect toward the continual improvement of early childhood education.

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Chapter I: Introduction

The purpose of this study was to explore prekindergarten teachers' descriptions of their literacy practices and their beliefs about early literacy development and curriculum. In the 21st century, early childhood education, and the field of early literacy in particular, continue to receive unprecedented amounts of attention. High quality early education is touted as an opportunity to improve children's lives (National Early Childhood Accountability Task Force [NECATF], 2007) and even as a means of bolstering the economy (Committee for Economic Development, 2006; Jones, 2009; Kagan & Roth, 2017). Early literacy instruction in particular is often viewed as a viable means of reducing the achievement gap between low income children and their more affluent peers (Johnson, et al., 2022; Neuman & Roskos, 2005a; Strickland, 2008), a perspective that has come under increased scrutiny as researchers critique the cultural biases that often underlie conversations about an achievement gap and what language and literacy skills are valued (Goodwin, Cheruvu, & Genishi, 2008).

This heightened emphasis on early childhood as a critical time for action provides both incredible opportunity for recognizing and fostering the potential of all children as well as great pressure on young children and those who work with them to create a strong foundation for development and learning. Many believe the emphasis on young children and early literacy has had the unfortunate consequence of standardizing early childhood education and creating early childhood classrooms where “[e]very day more and more children are being subjected to a narrow, limited curriculum...And every day more and more children are losing their eagerness for learning to read and write” (Neuman & Roskos, 2005a, p. 26; see also Campbell, Torr, & Cologon, 2012; Cooper, 2005; DeVault, 2003; Genishi & Dyson, 2009; Graue, et al., 2017; Hatch, 2002; Kliewer, et al., 2004; Liang, et al., 2022; Neuman, 2006; Zigler & Bishop-Josef,

2004). This is particularly problematic as an increasingly standardized approach is being impressed upon an increasingly diverse population of children who come to school with their own rich cultural practices and experiences (Reid, Scott-Little, & Kagan, 2019).

The rising interest in early literacy is paradoxically coupled with a lack of research about prekindergarten teachers' practices and beliefs regarding literacy development and curriculum. As a teacher of 3-5-year-olds from the late 1990s to 2005, I witnessed a slowly emerging increase in emphasis on early childhood, which my colleagues and I initially welcomed as acknowledgement of our work and dedication to young children. However, we also noticed an increase in parental concerns about the more “academic” skills their children were—or were not—developing in our classrooms, particularly concerns about early literacy skills such as letter knowledge and emerging reading and writing. Experiences such as mine and those of my colleagues are underrepresented in the literature about early literacy instruction and the impact of the increasing emphasis on early literacy in preschool classrooms.

Discussions about literacy are complicated by the fact that there is no consensus definition of literacy or what it encompasses. In fact there are extensive discussions of multiple literacies in which literacy is broadly viewed as ways of knowing within various contexts and within different cultures (see, for example, Barton & Hamilton, 2000; Gallego & Hollingsworth, 2000; Gee, 1999, 2001). My study, however, does not use this broader conceptualization of literacy as ways of knowing, instead focusing more on behaviors related to “conventional” reading and writing. As children develop understandings about written language, they engage in “multimodal events” (Siegel, 2006, p. 65), in which they use multiple systems, such as drawing, dramatic play, music, and gesture, to approach literacy and engage in reading and writing (see also Dyson, 1990, 2003a, 2003b; Paley, 1997, 2004).

Within this framework, literacy development becomes a complex and individualized process rather than a series of discrete skills in a set sequential order (Dyson, 2003b). Children “enter school having learned different things in different ways in different cultures and communities” (Clay, 1998, p. 1). Individual children bring different interests and experiences with them as they enter the realm of written language. The current educational climate, however, in many ways continues to promote narrow views of both children and literacy (Genishi & Dyson, 2009; Siegel, 2006) in efforts to achieve standardization (Liang, et al., 2022; Reid, Scott-Little, & Kagan, 2019; Yoon, 2015), all the while grappling with how to create early learning opportunities that welcome the richness of early literacies that exist amongst an increasingly diverse group of children. This contradiction—an increasingly heterogeneous student population facing increasingly homogenous curricula and instruction—is troubling. Despite being well-intentioned, early literacy standards are viewed by some as privileging the language and literacy practices of the dominant societal groups and excluding the ways of knowing seen in other cultures and communities (Souto-Manning, Ghim, & Madu, 2021). While having standards does not by necessity result in a narrow and undifferentiated approach to teaching and learning, oftentimes that is the end result, particularly with an increasingly ill-prepared workforce in which less-experienced teachers are more likely to rely upon district-adopted curricula that is scripted, teacher-driven, and geared toward accountability and improving test results (Campbell, Torr, & Cologon, 2012). This translates to children potentially having vastly different experiences across programs and classrooms, with some teachers either unwilling or unable to build upon the diversities of children and the vast potential of their varying linguistic and literate behaviors in favor of expecting them to assimilate and follow an absolute and predetermined path of literacy development. Oversimplified implementation of and interpretations of standards can often lead

to curriculum, instruction, and accountability measures that exclude children whose ways of knowing are silenced (Clay, 1998; Kliever et al., 2004; Souto-Manning, Ghum, & Madu, 2021).

Background of the Problem

Concerns about formal reading and writing were once reserved for first grade, the time when it was believed that children were cognitively and developmentally “ready” to learn to read and write (McGee & Richgels, 2003; Morphett & Washburne, 1931; Rosenkoetter & Barton, 2002; Saracho & Spodek, 2003). The “readiness perspective” that dominated early thinking about literacy development claimed that children should not be exposed to reading instruction until they reached a mental age of 6 years and 6 months (Morphett & Washburn, 1931) and had mastered a specific set of skills that would enable them to “profit from formal reading instruction” (Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998, p. 848).

In the second half of the 20th century, however, researchers began to reconceptualize their thinking about literacy and its origins with the realization that foundations for reading and writing were in place long before children entered first grade (Clay, 1966; Teale & Sulzby, 1986). This discovery heralded a shift away from conventional ideas about reading readiness toward ideas related to a new construct: emergent literacy. The emergent literacy perspective views children’s early experiences with oral language (listening and speaking), environmental print, books, stories, pretend play, and different media as a valuable foundation for their understandings of written language. The concept of emergent literacy is important not only for its acknowledgement of the experiences and understandings about written language that children are developing at very young ages but also the recognition of the incredible richness and diversity of opportunities and experiences in children’s lives outside of school.

The notion that children are engaged in literacy-related behaviors almost from birth has drawn the field of early childhood education into its own version of the “reading wars” that have long plagued discussions at the elementary school level about what constitutes the “best” or most effective approach to helping children become literate (Christie, Enz, & Vukelich, 2007; Pearson, 1999; Strickland, 1998). At the heart of the early childhood reading wars are interrelated conversations regarding literacy instruction and the behaviors children engage in that support their development as readers and writers.

McGee (2003) describes the early childhood reading wars as a “tension between two approaches to literacy instruction for 4- and 5-year-olds in preschool and kindergarten: reading aloud to children, on the one hand, and direct instruction in phonemics, on the other” (p. 114). Advocacy for different instructional approaches is frequently bolstered by evidence of how an approach helps children develop important emergent skills that are linked to later conventional reading and writing. For example, in a joint statement issued by the National Association for the Education of Young Children and the International Reading Association (NAEYC & IRA, 1998) regarding what constitutes developmentally appropriate practice when learning to read and write, the authors claim, “The single most important activity for building these understandings and skills essential for reading success appears to be **reading aloud to children**” (IRA & NAEYC, 1998, p. 33; emphasis in original). The argument is that reading and talking about books helps children develop concepts about print (e.g., reading left to right, top to bottom), enrich their vocabulary, develop comprehension skills and strategies, and recognize the importance of print in their lives. This perspective represents a holistic view of literacy that does not discount the importance of various skills, but rather espouses the belief that reading is one approach to

instruction that can be used to help children develop a range of skills and types of knowledge that support their developing understandings of written language.

The other side of the dichotomy represented by McGee (2003), direct instruction in phonemics, actually concerns two pieces that are often confounded: direct instruction as a pedagogical approach and phonological awareness as an area of content emphasis in a preschool curriculum. Many argue that research indicates phonological awareness has the strongest predictive relationship with children's later literacy success (National Early Literacy Panel [NELP], 2009; Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998; Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998). To help children develop phonological awareness, which is an understanding of the ways of breaking words down into units such as sounds (phonemes) and syllables, teachers might highlight the names and sounds of letters, engage children in activities that involve alliteration and rhyme, develop children's understandings about syllables, and point out the properties of speech as they read and write together (see Strickland, 1998). However, while phonological awareness can be developed in meaningful ways by encouraging and supporting children as they play with and attend to the sounds in language, many argue that an increasing emphasis on phonological awareness in early literacy instruction has led to a proliferation of didactic instruction in phonemic subskills (Kliewer, et al., 2004). This is particularly prevalent in classrooms that serve low-income children who are often mistakenly viewed as entering preschool classrooms without any meaningful literacy experiences (Dyson, 2003a; Neuman, 2006; Neuman & Roskos, 2005a), often leading to practices that reject the language and literacy practices of their families and communities in order to assimilate and "achieve literacy and educational success" (Souto-Manning, Ghim, & Madu, 2021, p. 486).

McGee's (2003) suggestion of two completely separate and even warring approaches to early literacy instruction, while helpful in its descriptions of different approaches, ultimately offers an oversimplification of instruction that fails to appreciate the complex work of teachers or "sufficiently capture the sophistication of...young learners' language practices and rich literacy repertoires" (Souto-Manning, Ghim, & Madu, 2021, p. 487). Teaching cannot and should not be reduced to an either/or phenomenon that forces practitioners to choose between pedagogical approaches. The distillation of literacy instruction into two discrete categories ignores the complexity of teaching and the multitude of literacy-related activities in which children and adults engage in early childhood classrooms. The forced dichotomy also leaves out a host of other experiences—most notably child-initiated ones such as writing, story-telling, creating songs and rhymes, and engaging in dramatic play (Cooper, 2005; Paley, 2004)—that contribute to children's development into readers and writers. Discussions of early literacy instruction would benefit greatly from hearing teachers describe in their own words the complex work they do as they incorporate a broad range of strategies to help children develop knowledge, experiences, skills, and abilities that support understandings of written language.

The Sociopolitical Context of Early Literacy Instruction

Throughout history, the United States has experienced continuing disagreement throughout various cycles of education reform about what constitutes "best" practice for "all" children (Tyack & Cuban, 1995). Early childhood education and early literacy in particular became a larger part of this conversation in the early 21st century when "[u]nprecedented attention to young children...ushered in a new era for early childhood education" (NECATF, 2007, p. 3). The increased interest in young children and early literacy development continues to be seen across federal policies, increased state spending on young children, the content of state

early learning standards, and rising concerns amongst parents about their children’s reading abilities and readiness for school (Genishi & Dyson, 2009; Graue & DiPerna, 2000; NECATF, 2007; Tyre, 2006).

Federal Policies and Initiatives. The federal government’s most durable commitment to early childhood education was realized in 1965 with the formation of the federal Head Start Program, seen as a vehicle to help promote school readiness for low income children. In the 21st century, there was a dramatic shift when the federal government moved from the broader understanding of readiness seen in Head Start and began to focus on young children and early literacy. It was at this point that “the growing body of research indicating that early exposure to oral language and literacy skills . . . put children at an advantage for later reading achievement pushed policy makers to institute new initiatives” (Christie, Enz, & Vukelich, 2007, p. 4). These initiatives—such as Good Start, Grow Smart and Early Reading First—clearly demonstrated the federal government’s interest in early childhood as a point of intervention in preventing future reading difficulties and holding publically-funded programs accountable for improving children’s readiness for kindergarten (Liang, et al., 2022). At this same time, Head Start developed the Child Outcomes Framework, which outlined specific goals and expectations, and the program “has found itself facing growing accountability pressures and a press toward standardization” (Bullough, Hall-Kenyon, & MacKay, 2012, p. 323). In addition, the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2001 raised interest in considering how increased federal funding for and involvement in preschool education can be a vehicle for helping states reach NCLB targets (Jacobson, 2006) while also ushering in standards-based reform and high-stakes testing (Figueras-Daniel & Curenton, 2023).

State-funded Prekindergarten and Early Learning Content Standards. The emphasis on early childhood and early literacy has not just occurred at the federal level but is also apparent in the provision of state-funded early childhood initiatives and analyses of state early learning content standards. In 1980, only ten states publicly funded prekindergarten programs, most of which targeted low-income 3- and 4-year-olds (Gilliam & Zigler, 2004). By 2000, “state-funded prekindergarten systems in aggregate¹ surpassed Head Start as the leading provider of preschool services for children in the 3- to 4-year-old age range” (Gilliam & Zigler, 2004, p. 2). In the 2021-22 school year, 44 states, the District of Columbia, and Guam all offered some level of pre-k and enrolled over 1.5 million children (Friedman-Krauss, et al., 2023).

Increased state investments in preschool education have coincided with the development of early learning standards. Every state in the United States has at least one set of Early Learning and Development Standards (ELDS) that address development across different domains (Bruder & Ferreira, 2022), and all address language and/or literacy development in varying degrees (NECATF, 2007; Scott-Little, Kagan, & Frelow, 2006; Snow & Van Hemel, 2008).

Demonstrating the recency of this early learning standards movement, Scott-Little et al. (2006) state that at the time of their report, 45 of the 46 states who had developed early learning standards had published their standards since 1999, with 31 published since 2003. This state-level response, the authors note, reflects the fact that:

[P]ractitioners and policymakers across the country have recognized the importance of specifying the knowledge, skills, and characteristics children should learn/develop during their preschool years. (Scott-Little, et al., 2006, p. 153)

¹ State funds for prekindergarten can be used in a combination of ways: a) to fund a state prekindergarten program; b) to supplement Head Start so more children can be served; or c) to fund a state program and supplement Head Start (Gilliam & Zigler, 2004).

A primary goal for the development of standards is to help teachers and other adults who work with young children use the standards as a “system of reference for the development of successful Pre-K language and literacy practices” (Burns, et al., 2002, p. 10).

In general, the development of early learning standards was met with “cautious enthusiasm” (Neuman & Roskos, 2005b, p. 126). Traditional notions of good practice in early childhood are largely child-centered, focusing on integrating learning across content areas and developmental domains as well as acknowledging variations in individual development and the influence of a child’s environment, culture, and out-of-school experiences (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009; Graue, et al., 2017; Neuman & Roskos, 2005b; Scott-Little, Kagan, & Frelow, 2003). Analyses of state early learning content standards, however, led many to raise concerns about the over-emphasis on cognitive development, and literacy more specifically, and a shift away from more “multi-dimensional” (Scott-Little et al., 2006, p. 164) or holistic understandings of preschool children’s development and learning (see also Bowman, 2006; Genishi & Dyson, 2009; Graue, et al., 2017; Liang, et al., 2022; Neuman & Roskos, 2005b; Scott-Little, et al., 2003; Snow & Van Hemel, 2008; Zigler & Bishop-Josef, 2004). The concern was that the heightened emphasis on areas of cognitive development, including literacy, would have an impact on pedagogy and push toward more academic instruction and away from play-based and child-centered approaches. As Graue et al. (2017) explain it, the use of standards in early childhood education created a fear of the “potentially perilous restructuring of the meaning of preschool, that may result in academic escalation and fewer opportunities for children to learn based on their own interests and developmental needs” (p. 109).

It is important to point out that the existence of standards themselves is not what early childhood educators and scholars are addressing. The conversation is not about eradicating

standards altogether but rather how to create standards that become a site for belonging rather than reflecting the image of “an idealized generic child, against whom all children might be measured” (Genishi & Dyson, 2009, p. 34). Early learning standards are not acultural (Reid, Scott-Little, & Kagan, 2019), and, even with the best of intentions (Graue, et al., 2017), they may unintentionally result in standardized approaches to curriculum and instruction built upon the language and literacy habits of dominant demographic groups, risking the marginalization and silencing of children whose cultural values, linguistic practices, and language tools are not represented (Souto-Manning, Ghim, & Madu, 2021). They have also been found to result in implementation of curricula and assessment requirements that leave teachers feeling frustrated, constrained, and disempowered as decision-makers in their own classrooms (Figueras-Daniel & Curenton, 2023). Concerns about a narrowed focus and homogenized expectations are acutely relevant in programs that serve economically disadvantaged children (Dyson, 2003a, Neuman, 2006; Sverdlov & Aram, 2016; Walter & Lippard, 2017), particularly given the fact that state-funded prekindergarten programs (as well as Head Start and Early Reading First) typically target low-income children and communities, (Dyson, 2003a; Neuman, 2006). As Dyson (2003a) points out, early literacy programs that claim to be for “all” children are really for “the ‘different’ children—not middle class and not white” (p. 100). Rather than recognizing the rich resources and experiences children bring with them to school, programs for children from low-income communities are often subjected to tightly scripted and constricted approaches to language and literacy instruction. Two decades into standards-based reform, the continuing dilemma is how to improve early learning standards that empower both children and educators, representing and building upon the rich language and literacy practices of all children and supporting educators in responsively implementing curriculum and instruction.

Parent Concerns. A concern with readiness and what children are learning is not only reflected amongst scholars but also translates into parent anxiety and concerns regarding what and if their children are learning and whether or not they are ready for kindergarten and its expected academic demands (Graue & DiPerna, 2000; Liang, et al., 2022; NECATF, 2007; Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998; Sverdlov & Aram, 2016). Teachers, in turn, are aware of parents' concerns about readiness and future school success and understand that the "external circumstances of the competitive social reality and the school requirements are the key reasons for the pressure coming from parents to teach children academic school-related skills" (Sverdlov & Aram, 2016, p. 364). The result, in some preschools, is a push-down effect, a perceived pressure to move away from the child-centered, play-based culture that typically defines early childhood and toward an approach to curriculum that emphasizes readiness for kindergarten, including helping children begin to learn to read (Liang, et al., 2022; Sverdlov & Aram, 2016). The pressures that come from parents combine with the federal and state interests in early childhood and literacy, leading to increased concerns about a narrowing focus on literacy in preschool classrooms. Ultimately, it is teachers who are left with the responsibility of determining how to respond to and negotiate these different tensions and ideas about what children can and should be learning.

Statement of the Problem

On the surface, asking schools to be responsible and accountable for helping children to become members of the "literate community" (Kliewer et al., 2004) is neither unreasonable nor controversial. Nor is it problematic to recognize preschool children's capabilities and appreciate the range of behaviors they are engaging in that are related to literacy and the resources they bring with them as they engage in school literacy practices. Problems arise, however, when we

run into what Genishi and Dyson (2009) refer to as the “educational paradox” (p. 10): pushing an increasingly “narrow curricular lens” (p. 10) on an increasingly diverse student population (see also Brown & Lee, 2012; Reid, Scott-Little, & Kagan, 2019; Souto-Manning, Ghim, & Madu, 2021; Yoon, 2015). The increasing interest in early literacy situated within the accountability culture that has pervaded education for the last two decades means that “[e]ven when early learning standards support child-centered approaches to curriculum they are overruled by accountability discourse” (Graue, et al., 2017, p. 108).

Many scholars in the early childhood field have noted that the current focus on early literacy is restricting our ideas about what children should be doing in classrooms and creating a preoccupation not only with literacy in general but also with a specific subset of early literacy skills including phonological awareness, alphabetic knowledge, print concepts, and oral language skills (Elkind, 2001; Gee, 1999; McGee & Richgels, 2003; Neuman, 2006; Neuman & Roskos, 2005a), often in ways that reflect Eurocentric cultural norms and values (Souto-Manning, Ghim, & Madu, 2021; Yoon, 2015). This narrow focus can result in classrooms that emphasize prescriptive curricula, teacher instruction and skills-based activities that allow little flexibility and are of “numbing quality” and “questionable age appropriateness” (Neuman & Roskos, 2005, p. 22). A narrowing of curriculum and expectations, of behaviors that “count” as literacy, limits the potential to recognize the rich funds of knowledge that all children possess and may “narrow opportunities for children to develop and grow at school” (Yoon, 2015, p. 390).

“We might call this decade the era of early childhood” (Graue, et al., 2017, p. 108), and yet, despite well-articulated concerns, there remains insufficient research on how this spotlight on early literacy and early childhood education has impacted teachers, their pedagogy, and their curriculum. In particular, while there have been studies and reviews about teaching in this era

(e.g., Akaba, et al., 2020; Cumming, 2017; Sverdlov & Aram, 2016), many of these occurred after the data was gathered for this study and they are missing an in-depth exploration of teaching and teachers' descriptions of their beliefs and experiences. Most evaluations focus on the "effectiveness" of prekindergarten programs and typically measure children's cognitive and academic outcomes such as reading and math test scores and grade retention (see, for example, Wong, et al., 2008). While this information can be seen as an important piece of understanding the impact of preschools, it fails to provide us with the full picture of the classroom experiences of preschool teachers and children. Analyses of academic measures say nothing about how the classroom experiences of preschool children and teachers are being influenced by the attention to early childhood education and an ever-increasing emphasis on early literacy. In addition, teachers working in different program contexts—such as Head Start, state-funded preschools, and private schools—are impacted and regulated in different ways by the aforementioned policies, standards, and stakeholders.

Snow et al. (1998) assert, "The critical importance of the teacher in prevention of reading difficulties must be recognized" (p. 9). Given the importance of preschool teachers, it is concerning that while preschool teachers are seen as critical players in children's lives in general, and in their developing understandings of written language more particularly, their voices are frequently missing from early childhood research (Ryan & Goffin, 2008; Ryan, Ochsner, & Genishi, 2001). Given that teachers have primary responsibility for implementing curriculum and translating various policies and standards into practice (Burns et al., 2002; Christie et al., 2007), leaving their voices out of the discussion about early literacy seems a significant omission.

Rationale

As McGee and Richgels (2003) comment, “[W]e have grave concerns about the nature of literacy experiences and activities that will be the outcome of such unprecedented attention to literacy instruction in preschools” (p. vii). In the face of such concerns, this study collected data from 2010-2012, seeking to describe preschool teachers’ literacy practices and their beliefs about early literacy development and to help develop an understanding of what is happening in preschool classrooms in an era of heightened emphasis on early literacy. Concerns about the impact of policies, standards, and increased attention are in many ways merely speculative if we do not know how preschool teachers are responding to and negotiating these various systems of pressure that have the potential to impact attitudes about children’s literacy-related behaviors and ideas regarding what types of curriculum support children’s literacy development. In addition, there are no in-depth qualitative studies that have considered the ways in which different systems—including program type, parents, requirements, policies, and broader sociocultural factors—interact and impact teachers and their literacy curriculum and instruction.

Statement of Purpose

Given the national interest in early literacy instruction and the lack of information we have regarding how preschool teachers implement and think about literacy curriculum, the purpose of this study is to explore Head Start, state-funded, and private preschool teachers’ descriptions of their literacy practices and their beliefs about early literacy development and curriculum.

Research Questions

Through conversations and interviews with eight teachers working in Head Start, state-funded, and private preschool settings in Texas, this study seeks to address the following questions:

- 1) How do the teachers describe their literacy practices?
- 2) What factors do teachers describe as influencing their current practice?
- 3) What shifts, if any, in literacy curriculum do teachers believe have occurred in their practice over the course of their teaching careers? What factors have influenced these shifts?
- 4) What are the teachers' beliefs about early literacy development and curriculum implementation?
 - a) What behaviors and activities do they believe children engage in that support their literacy development, including individual children of differing abilities?
 - b) What instructional practices and curriculum approaches do they believe best support children's literacy development?
- 5) To what extent are teachers' beliefs about literacy compatible with their descriptions of their literacy practices?
- 6) What are the similarities and differences in early literacy practices and beliefs across participants and across program settings?

Significance

With such a strong focus on early literacy across research and policy, this study includes teachers' voices in discussions regarding early literacy curriculum and instruction. This is not a study that sought answers about right or wrong or to reach a conclusion about what "best" practice for "all" children looks like, a task that is neither possible nor necessarily desirable. Rather, because much of the current literature focuses on a back-and-forth debate regarding definitions of literacy and what constitutes effective instruction, I aim to contribute to an understanding of the consequences of the emphasis on early literacy on individual teachers'

practices (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003, p. 33; Wilson, 2000). Based on what we continue to learn about children's literacy development, recent federal and state policies have tried to define what teachers' language and literacy goals should be for young children. Ultimately, however, no matter how much we theorize, debate, and try to legislate what instruction should look like, it is teachers who are working to disentangle all of these different ideas and influences as they contribute to and guide the education of young children (Burns et al., 2002; Christie et al., 2007; Scott-Little et al., 2006). As Wilson (2000) states:

If we are to understand more fully the possibilities and limitations of early education . . . we need finely grained portraits of teachers as they seek to navigate the complexities of implementing public and professional policies. (p. 11)

Chapter II: Review of the Literature

The literature reviewed in this chapter created a framework and background for this study, informed the methodology, and provided information that aided in my interpretation and analysis of the data. The chapter begins with an introduction to the theories that framed this study: sociocultural theories of language and literacy and Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory. This is followed by a discussion of research on early literacy development. Grounded by an emphasis on the importance of context, I then discuss the government reports, federal policies, and state learning standards that were part of the educational landscape when data was collected for this study from 2010 to 2012. While some of these initiatives, such as Early Reading First grants, are no longer in existence, they nevertheless impacted preschool literacy curricula and teaching practices, and the ideas contained within these reports and policies continue to reverberate to varying degree in conversations about early literacy. This broad contextual view is followed by the more specific circumstances of prekindergarten in Texas. I then address the implications for instruction that are apparent within this policy context and compare them with ideas about developmentally and individually appropriate practices. I conclude the chapter by discussing research related to preschool teachers' beliefs regarding what and how to teach and support children's literacy.

Sociocultural Theories of Language and Literacy Development

Vygotsky's (1978) work is used by many early childhood researchers to understand children's learning as socially constructed and contextually bound. Foundational to this perspective is the notion that "human learning presupposes a specific social nature and a process by which children grow into the intellectual life of those around them" (p. 88). Specific to language development: "Signs and words serve children first and foremost as a means of social

contact with other people” (p. 28). Language development is motivated by an interest in communicating with others. At the same time, the ways in which children learn to communicate are heavily influenced by the ways in which people in the lives of children use language—the words they use, the ways in which they speak with and listen to one another, the purposes for which they use language, and so forth.

Vygotsky (1978) conceives of language—both oral and written—as sign and symbol systems that are culturally specific. Children’s processes of development involve internalizing these signs and developing an understanding of the various symbols—and their attached meanings—that are part of the world around them. Vygotsky believes that the development of symbolic understanding is best supported through play, in which children are famously seen as being a “head taller than” themselves (p. 102). For example, as a child pretends that her stuffed bear is a baby and sits it down at a table to feed it dinner, the bear comes to directly represent something else. The bear is a “first-order” symbol (p. 108), a level of symbolism in which something is used to directly represent objects or actions that are not present but perform similar functions or can be used in the same way. The bear can be seated at the table and the child can pretend to feed it, much like she has seen her mother feed her baby brother.

First-order symbolism is an important stage in the development of written language. For Vygotsky (1978), early writing employs first-order symbolism—the marks the child makes directly correlate with features of what is being written about. In this way, drawing can be viewed as an early stage of writing as the child draws a picture—of a rocket, for example—that directly represents something else. These early writing stages are often surrounded with speech and gestures that both describe and supplement what is on the paper (see Dyson, 2003b, for rich examples of how language surrounds writing and drawing). Second-order symbolism is reached

as the child comes to understand that you can not only represent objects or actions in writing but you can actually represent speech. Second-order symbolism, then, is a translation from oral language to written language and occurs when children are able to represent not just physical objects but spoken words—words that the child hears and says—with written words.

Vygotsky's (1978) understandings of writing are couched within a developmental perspective that views children as necessarily active in their own development as they refine understandings and search for meaning. Viewing writing as a “complex cultural activity” (p. 118), he worried that much of the teaching surrounding writing had become focused on the technical aspects of writing and divorced from meaning. If children are only asked to write “whatever the teacher thinks up (and clearly suggests them to do), then the exercise will be purely mechanical and may soon bore the child” (p. 117). He continues by saying:

[W]riting should be “cultivated” rather than “imposed”...and this means that the best method is one in which children do not learn to read and write but in which both these skills are found in play situations. (p. 118)

Drawing and symbolic play promote a child's developing understanding of written language; not just the mechanics of writing but a broader and more complex understanding of written language as way of representing speech and the surrounding world.

Vygotsky's (1978) emphasis on literacy as a cultural activity has been extended upon in contemporary understandings of literacy practices. Barton and Hamilton (2000), for example, define literacy practices as “what people do with literacy” (p. 7). They continue by noting that literacy practices

involve values, attitudes, feelings and social relationships. This includes people's awareness of literacy, constructions of literacy and discourses of literacy, how people talk about and make sense of literacy. (p. 7)

Literacy is embodied, then, not just in the observable acts of reading and writing (or what these authors would term “literacy events”) but also in the beliefs people hold about literacy and its purposes.

Conceptualizing literacy as a social practice that is culturally mediated is helpful not only in understanding children’s literacy development but also the importance of talking to teachers about their beliefs regarding literacy and children’s literacy development, as well as their descriptions of their own literacy practices. Much has been written about what young children do as they become readers and writers—both in (Dyson, 2003a, 2003b) and out of school (Heath, 1983). In comparison there is very little research dedicated to preschool teachers’ descriptions of their teaching and their beliefs about early literacy development and instruction, particularly in more fine-grained, individualized accounts that provide deeper understanding of specific teachers’ experiences. Given that school is such an obviously central context for children’s literacy learning and the critical role a teacher can play in the experiences children have in the classroom, it is incredibly relevant and important to explore teachers’ interpretations of children’s development, ideas about literacy, beliefs about appropriate pedagogy to support literacy development, and the factors that influence all of these different values, attitudes, and beliefs.

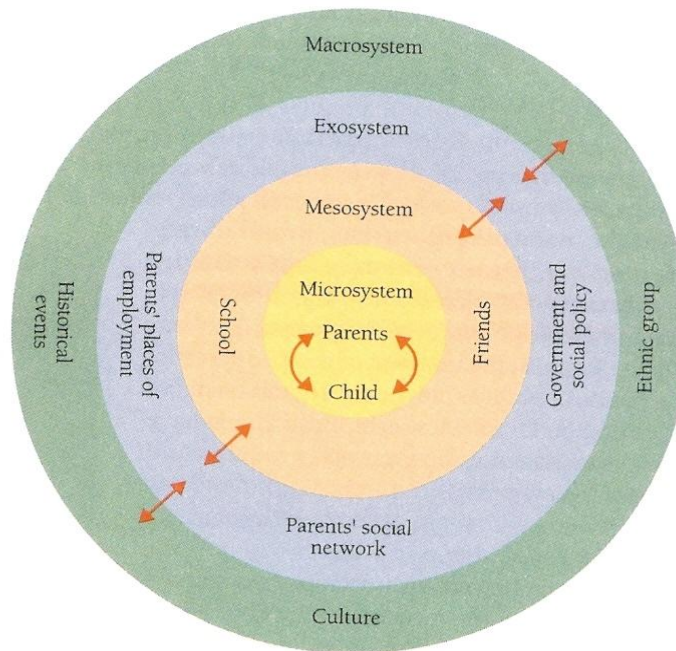
Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Theory

One of the goals of this study was to develop a sense of what and how contextual factors impact preschool teachers’ literacy practices and interpretations of literacy. This interest in context, and the ways in which I analyzed data collected regarding the influence of context, are shaped in part by Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) ecological theory. Bronfenbrenner, one of the co-founders of Head Start, offers a theory of development that considers the individual, the

environment, and the “evolving interaction between the two” (p. 3). A fundamental perspective of this theory is that an individual’s development does not occur in a vacuum but rather can be viewed as occurring in an environment that is like a “set of nested structures, each inside the next, like a set of Russian dolls” (p. 3). It is, in essence, one interpretation of a sociocultural theory in that it provides a very specific and analytical view of how different social and cultural systems influence an individual.

Bronfenbrenner views these structures as divided into four different levels, as seen in Figure 1. The microsystem is the first level and includes the immediate environment such as family, friends, coworkers, and school/work. The mesosystem addresses how the different settings or components of the microsystem interrelate. For example, one might acknowledge how work sometimes “comes home with you” and impacts your family life or how children’s responses to and interactions with classroom literacy practices are shaped by the understandings they have developed outside the classroom (Ballenger, 1999; Dyson, 2003a, 2003b). Bronfenbrenner (1979) offers this explanation of the microsystem: “A child’s ability to learn to read in the primary grades may depend no less on how he is taught than on the existence and nature of ties between the school and the home” (p. 3). The third level, the exosystem, involves settings that the individual might not directly experience yet is still significantly impacted by, such as policy. The fourth level, the macrosystem, includes sociocultural beliefs and forces, which Bronfenbrenner acknowledges may change or develop over time. The different levels do not play a concrete or predictable role in development. Rather, “what matters for behavior and development is the environment as it is *perceived* rather than as it may exist in ‘objective’ reality” (p. 4).

Figure 1. Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Theory. Adapted from Kail & Cavanaugh, 1996, p. 20.



Adapted from Kopp and Krakow, 1982

While this is a theory that is primarily applied in attempts to understand child development (see, for example, Kail & Cavanaugh, 1996), it has infrequently been extended to a discussion of teaching. A preschool teacher does not develop his or her ideas about teaching, curriculum, young children, or literacy in isolation. While teaching has historically been conceived of as an isolated profession (Lortie, 1975), teachers and teaching are in fact heavily influenced by several factors including but not limited to: the individual teacher's beliefs about curriculum, literacy, and learning; research on learning, teaching, and literacy development; the classroom culture/community (e.g., the ways in which the teachers and children interact and relate to and with one another); the school culture, including administrators, colleagues, and parents; policies and standards regarding preschool curriculum and goals for preschool children; the teacher's understanding and incorporation of the various policies and standards; and, societal or cultural beliefs about literacy and young children. As Matsumoto and Tsuneda (2019) note,

“ECEC [Early Childhood Education and Care] teachers’ literacy beliefs have been embedded in and affected by the direct and indirect environment” (p. 442). Again, according to Bronfenbrenner (1979), it is not the objective nature of these different systems that is significant or influential but rather how the individual *perceives* or interprets them. The following review of the literature intends to present my reading and interpretation of the “objective” nature of various policies, standards, and ideas about early literacy development and teaching. I view these different aspects of the discussion about early literacy and pedagogy as significant background both for entering conversations with preschool teachers about their practices and beliefs as well as for informing my subsequent analysis of the data generated.

Early Literacy Development

Ideas about how literacy develops have shifted over time, from a linear and essential view of what skills children must develop before they are ready to be taught how to read to a more developmental perspective typically referred to as emergent literacy. Emergent literacy posits that literacy development begins at a very early age and is an ongoing process that “consists of the skills, knowledge, and attitudes that are presumed to be developmental precursors to conventional forms of reading and writing” (Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998, p. 849). So, what exactly are the skills, knowledge, and attitudes that are so critical to helping children learn to read and write?

Like many questions, the answer depends on whom you ask. People who take up a sociocultural framework would likely answer that question somewhat differently—or would perhaps even alter the question. For example, while Dyson (1984) understands reading and writing as “following expected developmental principles” (p. 263), acknowledging the obvious importance of certain types of knowledge, such as the letters of the alphabet, she questions the

value of “a literacy program focused on isolated skills [that] confronts children with the pieces of a literacy puzzle one at a time, denying them an opportunity to view the puzzle as a whole” (p. 264). Clay (1998) also problematizes a focus on discrete skills such as letters or the alphabetic principle, which are “falsely represented” (p. 41) as the starting points for early literacy, and points out:

The first contacts that children have with written language are more complex than that, involving words, written messages, and storybooks, and children notice features of written language that adults would not think to teach them. (p. 41)

Clay and Dyson’s comments serve as reminders of the possible dangers of focusing too narrowly on specific skills and failing to see the myriad interests and understandings that children bring to their own literacy development.

A related consideration concerns the ways in which children develop into readers and writers. Understanding that there are certain aspects of language, both oral and written, that are foundational to children’s explorations of written language does not mean that *all* children follow the same path into reading and writing (Brown & Gasko, 2012). This is Sulzby’s (1992) argument when she claims: “the idea of linear, discrete stages prior to the onset of conventional literacy is flawed; instead, children appear to be building a repertoire of understandings with sociolinguistic properties” (p. 295; see also Clay, 1998; Dyson, 1990; Vygotsky, 1978). These “reductive ideologies” (Yoon, 2015, p. 366) privilege certain ways of knowing and doing that typically reflect Eurocentric, middle class values and serve to silence and marginalize the language and literacy practices of children, particularly “students of Color whose communicative practices do not align with academic language” (Souto-Manning, Ghim, & Madu, 2021, p. 486). Dyson’s (1984, 1990, 2003a, 2003b) work in early childhood classrooms develops this perspective further, viewing children as active meaning makers who build knowledge based on experiences with language and the written word, knowing that while children may share certain

cultural tools, they do not all have identical intentions or experiences to reference as they build understandings of language, reading, and writing. It is these differences in individual children's experiences and intentions that leads to what Clay (1998) referred to in the title of her book as "different paths to common outcomes."

On the other hand, a more discrete view of literacy development views the process as one in which all children follow the same linear path in learning to read and write, and the experiences, knowledge and abilities that children need can be isolated from one another for studying, teaching, and learning. Although there are obvious contrasts between the two positions, they do not have to be held completely in tension with one another. As Whitehurst and Lonigan (1998) point out in their discussion of differing research traditions: "Information from both approaches has much to add to an understanding of emergent literacy" (p. 854).

There is no shortage of lists outlining expected literacy-related behaviors for children in the birth to 5 age range (see, for example, Neuman, Copple, & Bredekamp, 2000; Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998; Wright, et al., 2022). These lists are intended to catalogue a wide range of skills that have been studied and determined to correlate with or even predict children's later successes with reading and writing. These skills include, but are not limited to: being interested or motivated to read; alphabetic knowledge; oral language; rapid automatic naming of letters and digits; being surrounded by and aware of environmental print; understanding of print concepts; phonological awareness; phonological memory; and emergent reading (for further discussion, see NELP, 2009; Neuman et al., 2000; Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998). Many conceptualizations of literacy development have emphasized four of these components as having the strongest relationships with children's later abilities to read: oral language, print knowledge, phonological awareness, and letter knowledge. Therefore they, along with emergent writing, will be the focus

of the following discussion regarding areas of early literacy development that came up in my conversations with teachers regarding their early literacy practices and beliefs.

Oral Language

Strickland and Riley-Ayers (2006) note, “Oral language is the foundation for literacy development” (p. 2). Oral language, however, is not a precursor to literacy, which would imply that one area would have to be fully developed before moving on to the other, but rather develops concurrently with children understandings of written language (Schickedanz, 1999; Strickland, 2004). Children’s experiences with language, both listening and production, provide them with a sense of words, sounds, and the basic structure of a language system. However, because no two children experience the world in the same way, children’s language learning does not follow some universal path in terms of vocabulary or ways in which language is used (Clay, 1998; Dyson, 2003a, 2003b). Children learn words that are personally meaningful and grounded in experience and learn to use language in ways that are culturally relevant (Yoon, 2015; see Genishi & Honig, 2009, for a more in-depth discussion of language learning). In her 10-year ethnographic study in the Piedmont Carolinas, for example, Heath (1983) talks about “the ways with words each community socializes its children” (p. 344). She found that across communities children developed different ways of using language (e.g., telling stories) and were encouraged to talk more or less frequently. Heath’s work exemplifies the fact that children come to school with different experiences in language development, different ideas about how to use language, different ideas about story, and with tremendous variation in vocabulary, in terms of both content and quantity, and it is vital to acknowledge all of these different ways of using language and different literacies as equally valid, not privileging one community’s use of language over another. Heath is careful to point out, however, that it is “the *kind* of talk, not the

quantity of talk” (p. 352; emphasis in original) that made the difference in terms of how well-prepared the children in the different communities were for school, indicating that school success is more contingent upon familiarity with the “ways with words” used in schools than on having any particular vocabulary size or level of talkativeness (see also Delpit, 1988). Heath’s assertion recognizes that the use of language in schools is not neutral but rather is inherently political, privileging certain conceptions of language use over others (Souto-Manning, Ghim, & Madu, 2021).

This recognition of how the privileging of the “cultural norms that are upheld by those in power” (Yoon, 2015, p.368) stands in stark contrast to the highly influential work of Hart and Risley (1992, 1995, 1999), which ushered in discussions about “language rich” and “language poor” homes. In a longitudinal study of children from professional, middle-class, and working class families as well as families on welfare, Hart and Risley discovered that children’s language experiences in the home determined both the verbosity—if their parents talked a lot, the children talked a lot—and vocabulary size of the children. When Hart & Risley (1995) followed-up on the children at 9-10-years-old, they found that the rate of vocabulary growth and use at age 3 strongly correlated with test scores at 9-10 for receptive language, listening, speaking, semantics, and syntax, thus linking children’s spoken vocabulary and experiences with oral language to later skills connected to language and literacy. Hart and Risley’s work has frequently been used to maintain a “deficit rhetoric in schools that ‘pathologizes the language and culture of poor families’” (Dudley-Marling & Lucas, 2009, cited in Yoon, 2015, p. 367).

Children’s oral language experiences contribute to their literacy development in several different ways. Children who have a broad foundation of vocabulary words have a greater understanding of the meanings of words and are more likely to come across words in texts that

are already familiar to them. When children are involved in the initial decoding of words as they learn to read and write, it is significantly easier to sound out a word that can be readily linked to a word that is already a part of their vocabulary (Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998). Greater experiences with both listening and speaking also provide children with more familiarity with the sounds of language, making it easier to hear the individual letter sounds (phonemes) when beginning to read and write. It is also through spoken language, both productive and receptive, that children develop ideas about different functions of language, including stories and story-telling, an understanding that will influence how they listen to and read other people's stories as well as the types of stories and the structure of stories that they create themselves (Cooper, 2005; Dyson, 1990; Dyson & Genishi, 1993; Genishi & Fassler, 1999; Heath, 1983).

Print Knowledge

Language, reading and writing all converge around print, and children are able to grasp basic concepts of print before they are actually able to read (Snow et al., 1998; Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998). The first step is developing print awareness, understanding that reading and writing convey meaning. Children must also understand the concepts of letters (as distinguishable from one another and also from numbers) and words (letters make words and there are spaces between words). Following these understandings, children develop a sense of print concepts, which include: speech can be written down; the difference between pictures and words on a page, though both are symbolic representations; books have titles and authors; and directionality (English is read left to right and top to bottom, books from front to back) (Strickland, 1998; Strickland & Schickedanz, 2004; Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998). Children also develop understandings of the functions of print, such as writing stories, creating lists, labeling, and giving directions. While print knowledge is commonly considered an important emergent

literacy concept, it is worth noting that the report of the National Early Literacy Panel [NELP] (2009) found it to be important but only mildly predictive of later “literacy achievement” while Lonigan, Burgess, and Anthony (2000) found that knowledge of print concepts did not independently predict children’s later reading abilities.

Letter Knowledge

Lonigan et al. (2000) claim that alphabet knowledge “is one of the strongest single predictors of short- and long-term success in learning to read” (p. 597). While letter knowledge is clearly foundational for developing early literacy that does not mean it is a simple thing for children to learn. Ehri and Roberts (2006) point out:

Learning letters is difficult. . . [as] there are 40 shapes, names, and sounds to be learned. All of this learning involves meaningless bits and arbitrary associations, so much practice and rehearsal are needed to achieve mastery. (p. 121)

While perhaps we think about learning the ABCs as a very rudimentary task young children engage in, it is important to recognize how complex and variable it actually is.

Letters are the smallest unit of the written word, with reading involving translating letters into sounds while writing involves translating sounds into letters. However, as Strickland (1998) points out, children do not need to know all of the letters of the alphabet in order to begin reading and writing. Many standards—including the Head Start Child Outcomes Framework (Head Start Bureau, 2000) as well as many state early learning standards—expect 4-year-olds to know and be able name 10 letters of the alphabet by the end of the school year. However, other than being able to trace this expectation back to Snow et al.’s (1998) report, which will be discussed in greater detail later in this chapter, it is unclear where the number 10 comes from. One study (Gallagher, Frith, Snowling, 2000, cited in Justice, et al., 2006) found that children who later went on to be typical readers knew an average of six letters at 45 months of age. On the other

hand, Diamond, Gerde, and Powell (2008) found that the Head Start children in their study knew an average of six letters at the beginning of the school year and an average of approximately 15 letters by the end of the school year. These studies demonstrate the tremendous variance in the number of letters children know when they are in preschool, complicating the possibility of determining one standard for how many letters preschool-age children should be expected to know.

Justice et al. (2006) conducted a study seeking to understand the order in which 4-year-olds learn the letters of the alphabet. The authors tested four hypotheses for letter learning, including: *own-name advantage* (children learn the letters in their own name first); *letter-order hypothesis* (children learn letters earlier in the alphabet sooner than they learn letters that appear later); *letter-name pronunciation effect* (children learn letters whose pronunciation is in their name—such as B, P, and F—earlier); and the *consonant-order hypothesis* (children first learn letters that are acquired earlier in spoken language). The findings supported an “own name effect,” which the authors speculate is a consequence of both frequent exposure to seeing their name in print as well as a strong motivation to learn the letters in their own name. The letter-order hypothesis and the consonant-order hypotheses were moderately supported while the authors found no advantages for letters based on their phonological structure, thus disconfirming the letter-name pronunciation effect. The authors point out that one of the most important implications of this study is the tremendous variance among children regarding the order in which they learn letters, particularly given the fact that greatest privilege seems to be given to the letters in children’s own names.

The wide differences exhibited in these studies between both the number of letters as well as which individual letters children know demonstrates the challenge with setting expectations

for letter knowledge. Obviously, learning letters is an important part of children developing understandings of written language. However, expectations of how many letters preschoolers should know can have the unfortunate consequence of leading to curricula and classroom instruction that are arbitrary and divorced from children's lives (Neuman, 2006). The Justice et al. (2006) study was a large-scale quantitative study that demonstrated that children learn letters that are important to them, a finding that is supported by qualitative studies that provide examples of children walking around with "their" letters (see, for example, Ballenger, 1999; Genishi & Dyson, 2009). Our focus, therefore, should be on supporting children as they develop meaningful associations with letters, rather than being overly concerned with the number of letters children are able to identify.

Phonological Awareness

Phonological awareness is the ability to hear and manipulate the individual sounds within language. It includes an awareness of both larger units, such as words within sentences and syllables, as well as individual phonemes, and recognizing and producing alliteration and rhymes. The importance of the development of phonological awareness in young children is widely supported and is frequently emphasized as the strongest predictor of children's later literacy abilities (IRA/ NAEYC, 1998; McGee, 2003; NELP, 2009; Neuman & Roskos, 2005a; Snow et al., 1998; Strickland & Shanahan, 2004; Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998). Knowledge and understanding of the sounds of a language help children begin to decode that language, breaking it down into parts as they sound out words to read and invent spellings of words when they write.

Some researchers suggest that there is a developmental continuum of phonological awareness, with children being able to detect and manipulate syllables and to rhyme and detect rhymes before they are able to discriminate individual phonemes, or letter sounds (Anthony, et

al., 2003; NCFL, 2009; Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998). Anthony et al. (2003), for example, found that children developed different phonological awareness abilities in a consistent sequence but in overlapping, rather than discrete, stages. In general, studies that support a developmental continuum for phonological awareness claim that children develop skills in the following order: word-level, syllable-level, onset/rime-level, and, lastly, phoneme-level skills. The instructional implications of such a continuum are that teachers should attend to the skills in order, letting children play with larger chunks of language sounds before asking them to focus on individual letter sounds.

Just as with other areas of development, there are problems with relying too heavily on the notion of a developmental continuum of phonological awareness. Children approach language and literacy in wonderfully rich and diverse ways and do not always develop understandings of written language in a set linear fashion (Clay, 1998; Dyson, 1984, 1990; Sulzby, 1992). While notions of developmental sequences are helpful in that they have the potential to prevent us from having inappropriate expectations of children, they also have the unfortunate side effect of causing us to compartmentalize and standardize children's learning and development, which ignores the complexity and variation of children's language use and development and does all children a great disservice. In the case of phonological awareness, teachers should be cautious of focusing exclusively on children developing skills in sequential order, failing to provide opportunities to support children's explorations of multiple and overlapping aspects of the phonological structures of language.

Emergent Writing

Many developmental conceptions of emergent writing also view it as a linear process that follows a set sequence in all children (Schickedanz & Casbergue, 2004; TEA, 2008; Whitehurst

& Lonigan, 1998). Children develop an interest in writing by seeing others around them read and write and interact with texts in different ways. As they begin to grasp the alphabetic principle and the notion that “print is mapped onto oral language” (Schickedanz & Casbergue, 2004, p. 29), children’s understandings, exploration, and attempts at writing change. Children’s own attempts at writing begin with “scribbling” as children make lines and marks to approximate writing they have seen around them. At times, adults may not be able to differentiate between children’s writing and drawing, in which case children’s intentions can only be gleaned from carefully listening and watching as they work and play with writing (Schickedanz & Casbergue, 2004). Children continue to develop their writing, incorporating swirls, circles, symbols and eventually letter strings into their work. Letter combinations might be completely random, and often during this phase children may be “hypothesizing a direct and concrete relationship between features of those letters and their intended meaning” (Dyson & Genishi, 1993, p. 130; see also Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998). For example, because Dad is so big, you obviously need more letters to spell his name than your baby brother Eli’s name. This direct correlation between what is written and what is being depicted exemplify Vygotsky’s (1978) notion of first order symbolism. As children’s understanding of the alphabetic principle develops, they begin to use invented spelling, which gradually moves them toward conventional writing.

While this perspective certainly has its utility, particularly in helping parents and teachers value the differences in children’s early writing, it does not tell the full story of children’s writing development. Instead of suggesting that children move through a set sequence of behaviors as they learn to write, Clay (1998) offers a different developmental theory that proposes that children take different approaches as they work on the following aspects of language learning:

- Trying to get a theory about written language,
- Trying to express their experience in writing,
- Trying to construct stories,
- Exploring sound to spelling patterns,
- Developing new language options, and
- Developing a range of writing forms (p. 69)

Clay's perspective asks us to take a step back, focusing on the underlying processes and theories that children are continuously developing rather than fixating on the products they produce as they learn to write (see also Clay, 1982).

Sulzby (1992), referencing her own longitudinal studies of kindergarten and first grade children's writing, also observed that the different approaches to writing that children take do not necessarily occur in a set of discrete stages. Children do not suddenly abandon scribbling and move on to mock letters but rather move freely across the different forms of writing. Sulzby notes that she and her fellow researchers observed children at times incorporating different forms of writing into a single text. This position is contested by Whitehurst and Lonigan's (1998) review of research indicating that children

often move between levels of writing depending on the writing task (e.g., invented spelling for short familiar words, idiosyncratic use of letters for sentences) but tend to show stability within task. (p. 853)

The difference between these two positions underscores a point that is particularly important to remember as we consider children's literacy development: while the expected endpoint—reading and writing—is essentially the same for all children, there are endless possibilities for the approaches they take to get there.

Governing Literacy: The Influence of Reports and Policies

In Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) theory, the third level—the exosystem—includes settings and systems that indirectly exert a strong influence on the individual. Government commissioned reports, federal policies, and state learning standards are just a few examples of systems operating within this level. Reflecting the strong national interest in literacy, in the early 21st century there was a flurry of government reports and panels addressing literacy, and there were significant concerns about how these reports would impact early childhood classrooms. These concerns informed the inquiry for this study over 10 years ago, and while the landscape of education continues to shift, there are persistent concerns in education regarding accountability, measurable outcomes for literacy, standards-based reform, and the populations of children that have traditionally been excluded by narrow expectations and conceptions of early literacy (Souto-Manning, Ghim, & Madu, 2021; Yoon, 2015). The following section is a review of the reports, policies, and standards whose content in many ways defined what early literacy behaviors should be valued and who continue to shape approaches to literacy curriculum and instruction in preschool classrooms, particularly in those who receive federal and/or state funding.

Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children

In 1998, the National Research Council of the National Academy of Sciences published a consensus report entitled *Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children* (PRD) (Snow et al., 1998), which intended to represent an end to the reading wars by presenting an integrated picture of early reading development and ideas about effective reading instruction. At the heart of the report are recommendations for improving reading instruction, which reflect a belief that high rates of illiteracy in the United States represent a failure not of children but of our schools and teachers (Pearson, 1999). The authors of the report state, “A large number of students who

should be capable of reading ably given adequate instruction are not doing so, suggesting that the instruction available to them is not appropriate” (Snow, et al., 1998, p. 25). The report not only outlines suggestions for kindergarten and primary instruction, but also looks to preschools to prevent the number of children who start school without important knowledge, skills and experiences.

While there are many positive things to say about PRD, such as the frequent attempts to advocate for rich and integrated language and literacy experiences, there are significant concerns regarding the report that address factors that are likely to have a far-reaching impact on early literacy research and instruction. The first concern regards the impact of PRD on definitions of what is considered “scientifically based reading research.” Snow (2001) notes that “scientifically based reading research” is frequently interpreted as research that fits the inclusion criteria for the report as well as comes to similar conclusions. This is problematic on two fronts. In terms of inclusion criteria, PRD considered research from a broad array of traditions—from experimental studies to ethnographies. However, Pearson (1999) describes the use of research in PRD as “compartmentalized” (p. 237) and claims that “experimental approaches are privileged over descriptive research” (p. 237). In the preschool chapter, for example, descriptive research is used in the sections describing child-centered activities families can engage in with their children. The section on schools, however, relies heavily on experimental studies and focuses predominantly on phonological awareness. If Snow (2001) is correct that PRD set the tone, then given their stronger voice throughout the report, the message seems to be that experimental and quasi-experimental studies are a better source of information in learning about literacy development and effective literacy instruction. This predilection exists despite the fact that even the authors of

PRD acknowledge the challenges of conducting experimental studies when researching contexts of teaching and learning.

A second concern with PRD stems from Snow's (2001) comment regarding the conclusions reached within the report. Perhaps the most significant contribution of PRD is the emphasis on the four areas of early literacy development mentioned earlier—oral language, print concepts, letter knowledge, and phonological awareness—as the most important components of early literacy. While PRD contains comprehensive lists of different things children and teachers do to support early literacy, these four skills are pushed to the foreground and described as having the greatest basis of research support in predicting children's later reading success. Phonological awareness and phonics instruction, in particular, receive an inordinate amount of emphasis (Gee, 1999; Pearson, 1999).

The impact of the focus on these skills, and on phonological awareness in particular, is still playing out. The developmental milestones or “accomplishments” that were listed in PRD (p. 61) were written into the 1998 reauthorization of Head Start. The Head Start performance standards and expectations (Head Start Bureau, 2000) “reflect the language of *Preventing Reading Difficulties* rather precisely” (Snow, 2001, p. 242). Snow (2001) notes that this is problematic, most significantly because the expectations listed in PRD are based on specific samples of children—from “rich language and literacy environments” (p. 242)—and should therefore not be applied to all children. As the editors of PRD note, “[W]e can only hope that the net effect is. . . not to penalize programs or children who fail to meet the expectations” (Snow et al., 1998, p. viii). Narrowing our conceptions of what aspects of early literacy development are important for preschoolers to be exploring not only has the potential to penalize children who have inappropriate expectations placed upon them, but also possibly narrows curriculum and

instruction to focus on these four areas rather than accepting a broad array of behaviors and types of knowledge that are necessary to support children' literacy development. The influence of this report cannot be understated. As Pearson (1999) notes:

PRD represents a much more deliberate attempt to provide the field with an authoritative account of what we know about teaching young children to read...[It] comes to us with a triple threat in terms of moral authority: It has the stamp of approval of the most prestigious scientific enterprise in the United States, it is funded by those U.S. federal agencies that fund virtually all of the literacy-based research in the U.S., and it was born of the labor of an outstanding collection of scholars. (p. 235)

Given the concerns regarding the narrow emphasis on specific areas of early literacy as well as conceptions of what research approaches are more valuable, PRD, despite good intentions, has the potential to limit the possibilities of what children and teachers can do in classrooms to support early literacy development. PRD has had a very rapid and far-reaching impact on classrooms, further research, state early learning standards, programs such as Head Start, and, as will be seen in the following sections, further influential government reports on literacy in America.

National Reading Panel

Created close on the heels of PRD and, therefore, heavily influenced by its conclusions, the National Reading Panel (NRP) was convened by Congress in 1997 and charged with assessing the available scientifically-based research on successful reading programs. While the report of the NRP targets research related to kindergarten and beyond, its brief inclusion in this paper is merited for two reasons. The first reason is the relatively well-known push-down phenomenon that exists between elementary schools and preschools (see, for example, Hatch, 2002). The directions that curriculum and instruction take in later grades have a great impact on what is expected of younger children and their teachers. Secondly, the areas of literacy emphasized and the recommendations of the NRP closely mirror the work found in PRD, an

intentional act as will be discussed shortly. The similarities between two such influential reports serve to confirm the conclusions they each drew. If two groups of well-known experts emphasize the same aspects of literacy and value the same types of research, other approaches to research and instruction will likely be viewed as less powerful and relevant.

The report of the NRP focused on “topics that we considered to be most promising (i.e., most valuable to policymakers and practitioners)” (Shanahan, 2003, p. 650), and constituted a review of research related to alphabets, fluency, and comprehension—based on three of the major areas of literacy development identified by PRD as central to learning to read (NICHD, 2000, p. 2). The panel also added the two areas of teacher education and reading instruction and computer technology and reading instruction as additional topics of study. Research related to other areas of literacy development and instruction was not included, an omission the authors note should “not be interpreted as determinations of unimportance or ineffectiveness” (p. 19).

After reviewing the research that fit their selection criteria, the Panel essentially came out in favor of skills-based instruction (Coles, 2001; Cunningham, 2001; Pressley, 2002; Yatvin, 2002). In particular, the Panel concluded that “preschool and kindergarten children should receive explicit and systematic phonemic awareness instruction with letters” (Cunningham, 2001, p. 335). However, given that the Panel elected to study such a small range of topics, one wonders what other practices, experiences, and skills it could have recommended had it widened the scope of its review (Yatvin, 2002). Much like with PRD (Snow et al., 1998), the limited scope of such an influential report is problematic in that its narrow focus gives credence to a limited range of instructional practices that are believed to be effective and worthy of implementation.

As with PRD, the report of the NRP also had an impact on the research world. The NRP included only experimental or quasi-experimental studies for review, a decision the report claims may have been the Panel's "most important action" (NICHD, 2000, p. 5). Qualitative research could be used in support of areas with limited quantitative studies, but "[n]o claim could be determined on the basis of descriptive or correlational research alone" (p. 29). There are many quality studies on literacy development and instruction that did not qualify for inclusion in the review because they did not comply with the methodological standards imposed by the Panel. Research in educational settings does not readily lend itself to experimental studies with tight control and random assignment of variables (Snow et al., 1998). Rather, as Pressley (2002) points out, "A complete science of instruction is more than experimental; it is also informative about how instruction really occurs in school, both what is happening and what is not occurring" (p. 182).

The limitations on types of research and areas of literacy development that qualified for inclusion might not seem so significant were it not for the fact that the report of the NRP has had such a strong influence on policy and practice across the United States. The NRP represents the coming together of powerful political forces: convened by Congress and put together by the U.S. Secretary of Education and the Director of the NICHD. As Timothy Shanahan, a member of the Panel, noted, "[T]he NRP report, more than any past research report, has become the basis for large-scale educational policies as well as for other research syntheses" (Shanahan, 2003, p. 654). Reading First, the federal reading program that is a component of No Child Left Behind, was based upon the report of the NRP. Consequently, any school that received Reading First grants was required to use a literacy program that focused on phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. This validated the concerns of critics that despite the

Panel’s statement that this was not intended to be a comprehensive review of all areas of literacy development and instruction, its limited scope would have a far-reaching—and narrowing—effect on further literacy research as well as classrooms across the country (Coles, 2001; Cunningham, 2001; Pressley, 2002; Yatvin, 2002).

National Early Literacy Panel

The National Early Literacy Panel [NELP] was convened in 2002 to address a significant omission in the report of the NRP: instructional practices that help young children from birth through age 5 develop early literacy skills. The panel was asked to use a similar methodological approach (meta-analyses of scientific studies) to determine which instructional practices, programs, and environments “contributed to or inhibited gains in children’s skills and abilities that are linked to later outcomes in reading, writing, or spelling” (NELP, 2009, p. vi). Although the primary responsibility of the panel was to identify “interventions” or programs that positively impacted children’s early literacy development, they felt that the first step in this process would be to identify the early literacy skills that are linked to later conventional literacy skills—defined by the report as decoding, reading comprehension, and spelling.

The findings of the NELP mirror in many ways the work of PRD and the NRP but also offer some important extensions. Overall, the NELP identified 11 skills that are important for the development of conventional literacy skills:

- Alphabet knowledge (AK)
- Phonological awareness (PA)
- Writing or writing name
- Rapid automatic naming (RAN) of letter or digits
- RAN of objects or colors

- Phonological memory
- Concepts of print
- Print knowledge (AK, concepts about print, and early decoding)
- Oral language
- Reading readiness
- Visual processing

While the variables found by the NELP included the four focal areas identified in the previous reports—alphabet knowledge, phonological awareness, oral language, and print knowledge—they also extended these by pointing out seven other emergent literacy skills that support later literacy development.

Strickland (2008) cautioned that the identified skills or “predictors” were not intended to be developed in separate activities. While delineating separate components of literacy behaviors, the intention was not that preschool classrooms should introduce drill-like activities that require children to rapidly name letters or objects. Rather, schools and teachers should incorporate playful and meaningful opportunities and activities that help children develop and integrate multiple areas of emerging literacy. Instruction, in fact, and the impact of different programs and interventions constitute the focus of the bulk of the report. After identifying relevant studies, the panel created five categories: code-focused interventions, shared-reading interventions, parent and home programs, preschool and kindergarten programs, and language-enhancement interventions. Different approaches were found to impact different areas of children’s literacy development, leading the panel to conclude that there is a wide range of approaches parents and schools can take to support children’s literacy development.

Just as criticisms were raised in response to PRD (Snow et al., 1998) and the NRP (NICHD, 2000) about their conceptual narrowness and over-emphasis on code-related skills (in particular phonological awareness), early reviews of the NELP report generated a similar response. For example, despite its inclusion of a greater array of early literacy skills, Dickinson, et al. (2009) worried that an “unintended consequence” (p. 1) of the report and its findings would be that it

might be taken as a mandate to teach narrowly prescribed skills like letter-sound correspondence at the expense of focusing on oral language skills, vocabulary and the associated background knowledge that form the foundation for early and long-term literacy. (p. 1)

Barnett and Frede (2009) pointed out that narrow skills such as phonological awareness are easier both to teach and to study, perhaps explaining why there is so much scientific research devoted to them. They argued, however, that because narrow skills such as PA are “easier to teach than broad and complex domains of knowledge and abilities,” teachers should actually spend more time “on the latter rather than the former simply because learning the latter takes more time” (p. 2).

The methodological limitations placed upon these panels, particularly the NRP and the NELP, meant that broader aspects of children’s understanding, such as background and conceptual knowledge as well as language development, were less represented as they are more difficult to measure or quantify than code-related skills and thus do not lend themselves readily to experimental or quasi-experimental study. However, “[t]his imbalance in the research must not diminish the importance of oral language and conceptual knowledge” (Dickinson, et. al., 2009, p. 2). Barnett and Frede (2009) point out—as did the panel in its report—that a meta-analysis is only as strong as the studies it uses, and that different aspects of early literacy have not been equally addressed in the literature.

Ultimately, the work of the NELP stands alongside the work of the National Reading Panel and the Preventing Reading Difficulties report to reflect a time in educational research and policy in which the interest in and emphasis on literacy and early literacy were coming to a head. At the same time, there was an increasing emphasis on accountability and determining measurable skills and outcomes in order to demonstrate that schools were adequately supporting young readers. Without attempting to attribute causality, we do know that the work of these panels couple with the reports were an important part of an educational landscape in which concerns over a narrowed conception of “what counts” continue to persist. As Yoon (2015) noted, conceptions of school readiness “often means letter identification, phonemic awareness, letter-writing, and other functions related to language mechanics” (p. 364). Souto-Manning and Yoon (2018) challenged educators and policymakers to work together to “rethink” the “traditional literacy notions [that] dictate what counts as reading and writing” (p. xv) and to expand the possibilities for young children’s language and literacy practices and experiences. The following section discusses federal early childhood policies that were shaped by PRD and NRP and that help define approaches to early literacy curriculum and instruction.

Federal Policies and Initiatives

In addition to commissioning the various aforementioned reports, the federal government also initiated a range of programmatic efforts that attempted to place greater emphasis on early childhood education as a location for ensuring greater school success and higher rates of literacy. The influence of PRD (Snow et al., 1998) and the work of the NRP (NICHD, 2000) were evident throughout these policies and initiatives.

Early Reading First. Early Reading First (United States Department of Education [USDOE], 2007) was a competitive grant program that was addressed in the No Child Left

Behind Act (Title I, Part B) as a means of helping programs in low-income communities boost the reading readiness of preschool children. Early Reading First grants were awarded to programs that demonstrated their use of instruction and professional development that were grounded in “scientifically based research” on literacy and literacy development. As has been discussed already, this approach to research, seen throughout the three government reports, is more compatible with certain early literacy skills as well as instructional approaches that are more skills-oriented. This compatibility is reflected in the requirements for programs who received Early Reading First grants.

Early Reading First required programs to incorporate activities that support the development of oral language skills, phonological awareness, print awareness, and alphabet knowledge as these are the areas that it claimed were supported by the scientific research base. It should be evident that these are the areas that were emphasized in PRD (Snow et al., 1998), and ERF intentionally focused on supporting the development of the skills addressed in PRD (Jackson, et al., 2011). In addition, the program “promote[d] coherent, skill-based instruction in the years before kindergarten” (USDOE, 2007, n.p.). Christie et al. (2007) pointed out the problem with this instructional requirement when they commented that there are “few research-based suggestions on early literacy instructional strategies and programs” (p. 11). That is, the program’s emphasis on using early literacy instructional practices, specifically skill-based instruction, rooted in scientific research, was a challenge from the outset given the lack of a scientific research base specifically focused on instruction.

In all, Congress allocated funding for Early Reading First grants for 8 years, for the fiscal years of 2002 through 2009, with grants totaling more than \$793 million during that time frame (McCallion, 2008; U.S. Department of Education, 2009). Several studies examined the impact of

ERF grants on teacher practices, instructional content, classroom environments, and/or children's literacy knowledge and skills. Gonzalez, et al. (2011) found that ERF improved alphabet knowledge and print concepts as well as vocabulary development. The authors note that previous studies had not found a positive impact of ERF on children's vocabulary. Wilson, Dickinson, and Rowe (2013) examined the impact of ERF on English-language learners as well as native English speakers. Their study revealed a significant positive impact on the receptive and expressive vocabulary of ELLs but a less consistent positive impact on the receptive vocabulary and oral comprehension skills of native English speakers and no impact on their expressive vocabulary. The Institute of Education Sciences (Jackson, et al., 2011) conducted a national evaluation of ERF and found positive impacts on: classroom environment; increased professional development and mentoring for teachers; teaching practices that addressed and supported different literacy behaviors related to phonological awareness, book reading, print concepts, letter knowledge, and writing; and more extensive assessment practices. In addition, they found that ERF grants positively impacted children's letter knowledge and understanding of print concepts but did not have an effect on their phonological awareness or oral language behaviors and knowledge.

Head Start. Head Start was founded as a comprehensive program in 1965 with the intention of helping young children from low-income families get ready for school "by meeting all of their needs, not just focusing on their academic skills" (Zigler & Bishop-Josef, 2004, p. 4), a clear reflection of Bronfenbrenner's (1979) influence and theory. Throughout its history, Head Start has maintained a holistic view of development and provided a wide range of services for children and their families, but attempts to measure the effectiveness of the program have often quite narrowly focused on cognitive assessments such as IQ scores (Roopnarine & Johnson,

2000; Zigler & Bishop-Josef, 2004). However, while a focus on cognitive outcomes is perhaps not new to Head Start, the 1998 reauthorization (P.L. 105-285), which mandated the development of early learning standards in language, literacy, and math, demonstrated a position that valued literacy (over other domains such as social-emotional development) as the primary determinant of children's readiness for kindergarten.

Head Start was last reauthorized in 2007 under the name of the "Improving Head Start for School Readiness Act of 2007," and in 2015, the first set of early learning standards, the Child Outcomes Framework (Head Start Bureau, 2000) became the *Head Start Early Learning Outcomes Framework: Ages Birth to Five* (ELOF; Administration for Children and Families, 2015). Both sets of standards go beyond the initial legislative mandate that focused on early literacy and math and include broader focus across developmental domains. The ELOF is divided into five domains: approaches to learning, social and emotional development, language and literacy, cognition, and perceptual, motor, and physical development. These domains are further divided into 24 sub-domains, 59 goals, and 182 indicators or examples of specific behaviors or abilities to look for in children. The areas of literacy that are delineated include attending and understanding, communicating and speaking, vocabulary, phonological awareness, print and alphabet knowledge, comprehension and text structure, and writing, many of which notably reflect areas of literacy development that were highlighted in PRD (Snow et al., 1998) as important precursors to literacy achievement. Throughout the framework, the critical importance of recognizing individual variation, whether due to cultural and linguistic differences or adaptations and different approaches for children with disabilities, is emphasized.

The ELOF is meant to be used as a resource for teachers and programs that describes development across the different domains but it is not intended to be used as a checklist. It is

important to note that at the time of this study, programs were still under the 1998 reauthorization mandate to collect and analyze data regarding phonological awareness, book knowledge and appreciation, print awareness, and number operations. When the Head Start Program Performance Standards (HSPPS; Office of Head Start, 2016) were revised in 2016, however, assessment requirements were significantly broadened, and programs were tasked with determining what developmentally, culturally, and linguistically appropriate assessment tools they wanted to use that would measure learning and development for the range of different skills and behaviors described in the ELOF (HSPPS1302.33). Section 1302.33 of the HSPPS notes that the primary purpose of assessment is as a source of information to help teachers individualize instruction and assessments may be either observation-based or direct but they must be “standardized and structured” and “conducted with sufficient frequency to allow for individualization with the program year” (Office of Head Start, 2016, p. 32).

While Head Start is an early childhood program that is legislated by the federal government, education is primarily a state-level responsibility. The following section demonstrates one way in which states have taken on greater involvement in early childhood education and have attempted to enrich preschool and early learning opportunities in order to help children enter kindergarten ready to learn.

State-level Early Learning Content Standards

Given states’ growing interest and investment in early childhood education, the development and prevalence of early learning standards was inevitable. Increased interest in standards at the federal level combined with increased state investments in early childhood, and policymakers began looking for evidence of a return on their investment (Kagan & Scott-Little, 2004). Prior to 1996, only four states (Texas, Vermont, Michigan, and Washington) had

developed early learning standards (Kagan & Scott-Little, 2004). Today, every state in the United States has at least one set of Early Learning and Development Standards (ELDS) that address development across different domains (Bruder & Ferreira, 2022).

The purpose of early learning content standards is to articulate what young children are expected to know and be able to do across various domains of development and learning, often times aligning these expectations with K-12 standards. According to Kagan and Scott-Little (2004), the primary intention of states' development of early learning standards was to improve instruction, with the

hope...that specifying expectations for children's development would enable teachers to be more purposeful in their teaching and would make children's preschool experiences more productive. (p. 392)

Many in the field of early childhood, however, have a number of concerns about how standards are actually impacting teaching and learning. Hatch (2002), for example, points out that in addition to concerns about a narrowed focus, other potential unintended consequences of early learning standards—what he refers to as “accountability shovedown”—could include: too much pressure on children and teachers; the deprofessionalization of teachers as they are “stripped of their roles as professional decision makers” (p. 459); an emphasis on performance rather than learning; and promotion of assimilation rather than valuing diversity and individualism. Early learning standards often privilege certain ways of knowing and doing that disadvantage children from minoritized groups (Souto-Manning, Ghim, & Madu, 2021), and they all “have a cultural perspective (Reid, Scott-Little, & Kagan, 2019, p. 51). The persistent challenge for educators and policymakers is to develop standards that guide teachers without standardizing teaching and create space for children's many different ways of knowing and experiencing language.

The following section offers a discussion of how the early learning standards movement has played out in Texas, the location for this study.

The Texas Public Prekindergarten Initiative

The Texas legislature began providing funding for prekindergarten after a special session led to a series of reforms specifically aimed at “break[ing] the debilitating effects of school failure by building a solid foundation of school success among high-risk four-year-olds” (Gallagher, Clayton, & Heinemeier, 2001, p. 42). Public prekindergarten in Texas is mandated in districts with 15 or more 4-year-olds who are:

- homeless;
- in foster care;
- qualify for free or reduced-price lunch;
- children of active duty or reserve military, as well as children of a member of the armed forces who was killed or injured while serving on active duty;
- or unable to speak or comprehend English (Jones, 2006; Texas Education Code §29.153).

Districts with 15 or more 4-year-olds who meet these criteria must offer full-day preschool while districts with 15 or more children who are at least 3-years-old and meet the other eligibility requirements have the option to offer prekindergarten classes using district funds or on a tuition basis.

The final criterion, concerning children who are English language learners (ELLs), is not unique to Texas as a factor that qualifies children for state-funded prekindergarten. However, ELLs make up a significant portion of students in the state: 21.7% of students in Texas were identified as ELLs/bilingual in the 2021-22 school year (Texas Education Agency, 2022b). The large proportion of ELLs in Texas schools, including Texas preschools, has led Texas educators to carefully consider how curricula and teaching can best build upon the knowledge and

resources that ELLs bring with them to the classroom to help them not only learn English but to also meet state learning standards and expectations. An example of this consideration will be seen shortly in the discussion of the *Texas Prekindergarten Guidelines* (TEA, 2022).

Current Context

With a history of nearly 40 years of public funding, Texas prekindergarten has expanded rapidly and currently serves more children and spends the third highest total amount on prekindergarten when compared to other states (Friedman-Krauss, et al., 2023). In the 2021-22 school year, there were 188,276 4-year-olds enrolled in public pre-k and pre-k special education in Texas, which is 45.8% of the 4-year-olds in the state, and spent \$871,371 on preschool (Freidman-Krauss, et al., 2023). Because of the large number of students served, Texas only spent \$4,267 per child, which, according to the National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER) (Friedman-Krause et al., 2023) ranked Texas 32nd in terms of state resources allotted per child enrolled.

The NIEER maintains a set of ten quality benchmarks that that they view as the “minimum criteria, established by state policy, needed to ensure the effectiveness of preschool education programs, especially when serving children who are at-risk for school failure” (Friedman-Krause et al., 2023, p. 25). Texas meets four of the benchmarks, including: having comprehensive early learning and development standards; requiring teachers to have a BA; requiring specialized training in early childhood; and providing health screenings and referrals. Texas only recently passed legislation limiting class sizes to 22 children, which means it fails to meet the benchmark requiring a maximum of 20 children in a pre-k class as well as the benchmark requiring a staff/child ratio of 1:10 or better. Texas also fails to meet other quality benchmarks regarding teacher assistant requirements (CDA or equivalent), support for

curriculum implementation, opportunities for professional development such as coaching and requiring at least 15 hours of in-service professional development per year, and the collection of classroom quality data that is used to improve policy or practice. The failure to meet all of the quality indicators coupled with serving a large percentage of the state's 4-year-olds but with low per pupil spending, has led to one description of Texas public pre-k as "high access, low quality" (Sanborn, et al., 2016, p. 15) and repeated calls for an increased investment in public prekindergarten in order to improve quality (Feigen, 2019; Sanborn, et al., 2016; Texas Commission on Public School Finance, 2018).

Evaluation Studies: The Impact of Public Pre-k in Texas

The NIEER benchmarks reflect policy requirements and, beginning with the 2021-22 report, whether or not a program met the requirement in practice as well (Friedman-Krause et al., 2023). While Texas fails to meet all of the quality benchmarks, leaving plenty of room for improvement, multiple evaluative studies have demonstrated that Texas prekindergarten has had a positive impact. Public pre-k attendance in Texas has been found to improve kindergarten readiness (Texas Commission on Public School Finance, 2018); improve social skills, critical thinking and problem solving skills, resilience, and self-regulatory behaviors (Texas Commission on Public School Finance, 2018); improve scores on third grade state standardized reading tests (Huston, et al., 2012 ; Sanborn, et al., 2016); improve third grade standardized math scores (Huston, et al, 2012); improve attendance (Texas Commission on Public School Finance, 2018); and to reduce grade retention (Huston, et al., 2012; Texas Commission on Public School Finance, 2018). Additionally, attending public prekindergarten has been demonstrated to have a positive long-term impact by increasing the likelihood of graduating high school on time by 6% as well as the likelihood of graduating college by 7% (Texas Commission on Public School

Finance, 2018). Aguirre, et al., (2006) also found that Texas would earn a return of \$3.50 for every dollar spent on public pre-k by reducing the need for special education and remedial services, lowering crime rates, and reducing participation in public programs.

Early Learning Standards

Texas’s early learning standards, called the *Texas Prekindergarten Guidelines* (TEA, 2022), were developed to “provide guidance for planning quality learning experiences for all children three to five years of age” (p. 3). Throughout, the guidelines emphasize creating a curriculum and program that is individually responsive and developmentally appropriate, that recognizes that children enter the classroom with different backgrounds and experiences, and that encourages children to problem solve, play, and to communicate with one another. There is technically no state-mandated curriculum for programs to use; rather, schools are required to use a curriculum that aligns with the guidelines, and they are provided with a list of curricula that have been approved by the State Board of Education (TEA, 2023).

As noted earlier, Texas’s early learning standards can be considered comprehensive (Friedman-Krauss, et al., 2023) and address 10 areas of development. These include: social and emotional development, language and communication, emergent literacy reading, emergent literacy writing, mathematics, science, social studies, fine arts, physical development, and technology. Each “domain” is further broken down into “skill areas” and lists expected behaviors for children and end of preschool outcomes. Previous iterations of the guidelines, which were what was available to the teachers who participated in this study, included instructional strategies teachers could employ to help children develop the particular skill. However, the most recent update is careful to clarify that they are “*not* [emphasis in original] intended to be used as a

curriculum, assessment tool or checklist. They are *not* meant to be used in isolation, or to stifle the creativity of caregivers and educators” (TEA, 2022, p. 8).

The guidelines contain specific information regarding instruction for multilingual learners. Heavy emphasis is placed on using a child’s home language as the foundation for the development of English language and literacy skills, with a specific recognition of the fact that children’s languages and experiences outside of school are an asset upon which to build. The Language and Communication domain offers multiple descriptions of how multilingual learners develop as language learners and how expectations may need to be appropriately adjusted. Additionally, there is frequent acknowledgement that multilingual learners are in a variety of learning environments—including ESL as well as bilingual programs—and that outcomes should be applied in whatever their language of instruction is.

Overall the guidelines are broadly inclusive, addressing the importance of a range of areas of development as well as noting the wide range of behaviors that children may engage in within those areas. Throughout the guidelines there is a strong underlying emphasis on language and literacy. The intention is that language and literacy will be integrated and supported throughout the classroom, with a suggestion that every learning center should be designed with purposeful and fun materials but should also include a literacy connection, labels or environmental print, books, and writing materials.

The guidelines contain three skill areas for children’s language and literacy development. The first, the “Emergent Literacy: Language and Communication Domain,” is divided into five sub-skills:

- listening comprehension,
- speaking (conversation),

- articulation,
- vocabulary, and
- sentence and structure.

The second relevant domain is the “Emergent Literacy: Reading” domain, which includes five sub-skills:

- motivation to read,
- phonological awareness,
- alphabet knowledge,
- comprehension of text, and
- concepts of print.

These skills very clearly reflect the areas included and emphasized in PRD (Snow, Burns, and Griffin, 1998) and the findings of the National Reading Panel (NICHD, 2000).

The next and final skill domain is the “Emergent Literacy: Writing” domain. The guidelines note that children see adults writing and become curious about the written language. They develop ideas about how the written language works, begin to try to write for themselves, and ask adults to write things down for them. It is through these early explorations and attempts at writing that children come to learn conventional written language and its various elements and functions. The sub-skills for this domain include: motivation to write, writing as a process, and conventions in writing.

While there are studies that have provided insight into pre-k in Texas (Brown & Gasko, 2012; Brown & Lee, 2012), there are no studies that have considered specifically the impact of early learning standards on teachers’ practices across Texas. The following section gives us some

insight into what could happen as it discusses the varying ways in which teachers in other contexts have responded to working with standards in their early childhood classrooms.

Teachers' Responses to Early Learning Standards

Susan Fuhrman, former president of Teachers College, noted, "Much of what happens in the classroom is beyond policy's reach. Instruction is what makes it all happen, and policy can only support that" (as quoted in Levine, 2008, p. 20). To understand how policy and instruction are interacting, it is helpful to look to previous studies that include teachers' descriptions of how policies and standards have impacted their work with young children, including whether they feel the policies have been supportive, as Dr. Fuhrman suggests, or whether they have been constraining, as many others have feared.

Despite the prevalence of early learning standards, there are few studies addressing how teachers are "negotiating standards" in early childhood classrooms (Wien, 2004). One of the more extensive ones is Wien's work with eight kindergarten through second grade teachers working with relatively new standards and expectations in Canada. Wien found that the teachers' responses to the standards could be grouped into four categories: complete resistance; a linear approach that followed the expectations directly; an integrated approach that wove the standards into developmentally appropriate practices; and an approach that held the linear approach in tension with the integrated approach.

Many of the teachers had negative responses to the standards. They felt overwhelmed by the "massiveness" of the new expectations and worried that they were occasionally inappropriate in that they were a push-down of expectations for older children, limited the opportunities for play and child-initiated activities, and encouraged superficial learning rather than deep exploration. They also discussed feeling pressure from teachers at the next grade, who wanted to

make sure children started the next school year with an adequate knowledge base to help them perform well on standardized tests. The teacher who resisted implementing the standards discussed how she felt discouraged and increasingly isolated as she saw her colleagues turn to worksheets and skills-based instruction.

The teachers' responses were not all negative, however, as nearly half of the teachers became skilled at integrating the standards into developmentally appropriate practices. These three teachers had classrooms that were rich, engaging contexts with shared power where the curriculum was driven by the children and their interests, and children were encouraged to interact, to think, and to initiate. These teachers were more experienced than some of the other participants in the study and had strong backgrounds in early childhood education. Wien described them as having "well-developed holistic pedagogies" (p. 145) that enabled them to integrate multiple expectations and subjects into activities and experiences that were meaningful and enjoyable for the children.

Building on Wien's work, Goldstein (2007) conducted a case study of two Texas kindergarten teachers who were working with a district created curriculum based on the state learning standards. Unlike Wien (2004) who placed each teacher neatly into a single category, Goldstein (2007) felt that the teachers in her study engaged in what she termed "pedagogical multiplicity." Goldstein believes that "having access to a variety of instructional approaches and choosing among them flexibly and freely increases teachers' ability to be successful" (p. 379).

Goldstein (2007) describes a similar environment as Wien (2004), one in which teachers are under immense pressure and feel pulled in multiple directions. In the face of increased accountability, rising emphasis on academic achievement, and attention from various "skeptical stakeholders such as administrators, colleagues, or students' parents" (Goldstein, 2007, p. 379), it

was more challenging for the teachers to maintain responsive, meaningful, and play-based classroom environments. The teachers felt like they had less control over the content of their curriculum and the pace and flexibility of their day. They responded to these constraints with three different strategies: integration, demarcation, and acquiescence.

The different approaches are similar to the categories delineated by Wien (2004), although Goldstein (2007) did not observe resistance. Goldstein describes integration as occurring when “state-mandated knowledge and skills are thoroughly embedded in meaningful, child-directed, play-based activities” (p. 388). During integration, the standards determine *what* is taught, but ideas about developmentally appropriate practice determine *how* it is taught. In demarcation:

clear boundaries are drawn around those activities expressly designed to teach the standards and around those activities designed to offer children developmentally appropriate learning experiences, and the two types of activities are kept distinct and separate. (p. 390)

The final strategy, acquiescence, occurred when teachers used materials or strategies that they felt were developmentally inappropriate in the face of pressure from parents (for example, giving kindergartners homework or using worksheets).

What determines which strategy or approach a teacher uses in response to standards? This is not an easy question to answer for, as Goldstein (2007) notes, “any single instructional decision must be viewed in relation to the context and the parameters within which it was made” (p. 392). Teachers in both studies felt pressure from parents and/or upper grade teachers to help prepare children for future standardized achievement tests. In both studies, a supportive administration that allowed teachers to have more expansive time frames to allow for child-initiated work and deeper exploration was considered key to a teacher’s ability to take an

integrated approach. A supportive administration also trusted teachers to rely on their own judgment, knowledge, and decision-making abilities.

As Goldstein (2007) notes, however, “not all teachers have the expertise, materials, or administrative support necessary to utilize this approach [integration] frequently” (p. 390). She continues, “Integration demands a detailed knowledge of the standards, a storehouse of ideas for learning activities, and a wealth of personal practical knowledge to bring to bear on the process of synthesis” (p. 390). The teachers who took an integrated approach in Wien’s (2004) and Goldstein’s (2007) studies all had a strong foundation of knowledge and experience with developmentally appropriate practice with which to work from, a foundation grounded in both an educational background that included coursework in early childhood education as well as a number of years in the field. This knowledge and experience allowed them to layer the expectations upon their more holistic pedagogies rather than to suddenly become tightly circumscribed by the standards. Nonetheless, when considering teachers’ responses to standards, we are left with Wien’s (2004) concluding thought:

Teachers are human beings, and as such take up standardized curriculum in nonstandardized ways. They take it up in ways that are complex and highly diverse and reflect their uniqueness and individuality. (p. 148)

Indeed, as Cochran-Smith (2003) tells us, “Teaching is unforgivingly complex” (p. 4).

Teaching Practices that Support Early Literacy

Preschool teachers represent an important, and largely underutilized, resource in promoting literacy by supporting rich language and emergent literacy skills. Early childhood educators should not try to replicate the formal reading instruction provided in schools. (Snow et al., 1998, p. 10)

Teaching is obviously a complex profession as teachers balance the needs of individual children in contexts that have different expectations for what and how children should learn (Kagan, Kauerz, & Tarrant, 2008). Despite this complexity or perhaps because of it, instruction

in early childhood education is still often discussed in terms that divide it into the oversimplified either/or categories of direct instruction and developmentally appropriate practice that do not reflect the complexity of teaching. This division is particularly marked when it comes to early literacy. Direct instruction in early literacy involves teacher-directed, skills-based lessons, often on letter sounds or identifying letters of the alphabet, with an overall focus on decoding or “breaking the alphabetic code.” On the other hand, a developmental approach to literacy instruction is more meaning-based, providing children with multiple opportunities to interact with and around words, language, and print and understanding that children will enter into these practices based upon their own backgrounds, interests, and experiences.

When data collection for this study occurred, the field of early literacy instruction was at a contentious point, stemming in part from the emphasis—particularly in government reports—on the scientific research that demonstrated a strong relationship between phonological awareness skills and alphabet knowledge and later conventional literacy skills (Cooper, 2005). Studies focused on these skills frequently involved very explicit training, the success of which often led to conclusions that skills-based instruction was *the* way to help children break the alphabetic code (Christie et al., 2007; Strickland & Riley-Ayers, 2006). As Kliewer, et al (2004) comment:

The emergence of phonemic awareness as the beginning of literate citizenship in early childhood has had the unfortunate effect of skill-and-drill phonics activities largely displacing activities in which young children represent stories through text, symbol, and drawing as a route to reading. (p. 394)

Dyson (1984) notes:

This may be especially true of instructional programs for low income children, which tend to be more regimented, more focused on the perceived ‘basics’...particularly the names, sounds, and formations of letters. (p. 262; see also Dyson, 2003; Neuman, 2006)

Although studies have demonstrated that some children are fully capable of learning, or at least memorizing, the letters of the alphabet, there was significant concern at the time that a focus on this as an individual goal would cause us to lose a sense of the big picture: reading and writing are not simply about decoding and encoding but are about finding and making meaning as you negotiate the world around you (Neuman & Roskos, 2005a; Strickland & Riley-Ayers, 2006), and there is tremendous individual and cultural variation in how children use language on their ways to becoming readers and writers.

The Effects of Different Approaches to Instruction

Naturally, researchers have tried to answer the question regarding what pedagogical approach best supports children's literacy development. At the same time, others caution that we cannot use "any one teaching method with all children, however child-centered and developmentally appropriate the technique is judged to be" (Cannella, 1997, p. 1). As Stipek, et al. (1995) note:

[A]lthough recent evidence tends to favor child-centered approaches...[t]he debate about the advantages of child-centered versus didactic instructional approaches for young children has not been well informed by empirical evidence. (p. 210)

To address this gap in the research, Stipek et al. conducted a study examining a range of effects of the two different approaches.

The study used several different measures to evaluate the different classroom types. Children in didactic classrooms had higher scores on letter/reading tests, which included letter and word recognition tasks. The authors speculate that the reason children in didactic classrooms had higher scores on the literacy assessment was because the particular test used measured skills that can be acquired through memorization; they propose that didactic instruction might be less effective in helping children develop other literacy skills such as fluency and expressive language skills. On the social-emotional measures, children in child-centered classrooms scored

lower on measures of anxiety, had higher expectations for success, were more likely to choose challenging tasks, were less dependent on adults for approval, and demonstrated greater pride in their work.

While the Stipek et al. (1995) study was concerned with broad categorizations of classroom type and the effect of instructional approach on various academic and social-emotional factors, numerous studies have focused more on specific aspects of literacy development and how they are impacted by different types of instruction. For example, Purcell-Gates, McIntyre, and Freppon (1995) examined the impact of different instructional approaches on low-SES kindergarten and first graders' knowledge of written language. Findings indicated that the whole language children showed significantly greater gains than the skills-based instruction group on measures of knowledge of written language and breadth of knowledge of the linguistic features of written language (e.g., participles, sound effects, adverbial clauses). The authors surmise that this finding indicates that:

providing children with multiple opportunities to hear, explore, and talk about books during these early school years is beneficial and allows [children] to maintain growth and language development consonant with their more privileged peers. (p. 679)

Juel, et al. (2003) sought to determine what types of instruction had the strongest influence on children's vocabulary development and understanding of the alphabetic principle. The most successful instructional approaches were those that integrated multiple properties of language and vocabulary—sound, spelling, meaning—so children developed a deeper understanding and more elaborate background knowledge for a word. This approach, which they called anchored word instruction, allows children to experience a word in a meaningful context rather than just hear it and perhaps be given a passing definition. This emphasis on meaning, the authors argue, is critical as “[i]t does little good, after all, to be about to sound out the words...if you have no idea what they mean” (p. 18).

Studies such as those described here can only tell us so much, however. There is an inherent difficulty in trying to “identify ‘scientifically proven’ teaching methods that will cure children of language or literacy ills and ensure all a healthy approach to education” (Dyson & Genishi, 2005, p. 11). It is not, Dyson and Genishi (2005) argue, particular teaching methods that are causal, but rather:

What are causal are human interpretations, on the basis of which people act. Both teachers and students bring interpretive frames that influence their ways of attending and responding to others with the social activities of the classroom. (p. 12)

In addition, Ayers (2001) claims that “there is not one best approach for all children at all times, and that effective teachers need every technique at their fingertips in order to invent the best approach for each particular child” (p. 103).

The complexity of teaching cannot be studied by being broken up into discrete actions and decisions because teaching, like literacy, is perhaps best represented as a series of complex behaviors, decisions, and ideas that are intricately woven together and shaped by context and experiences (Dyson, 1990; Goffin, 1989; Ryan, Ochsner, & Genishi, 2001). Research, then, must seek to “understand *others*’ understandings (their sense of what’s happening and, therefore, what’s relevant) and the processes through which they enact language and literacy education” (Dyson & Genishi, 2005, p. 12). To accomplish this, teachers must be more directly involved in research about teaching and learning.

Teachers Negotiating Differing Pedagogical Approaches

The frequent oversimplification of teachers’ behaviors and thinking leads to the following question: “what is lost or missing if EC [early childhood] teachers are seen only as *either* developmentally appropriate *or* developmentally inappropriate?” (Ryan, Ochsner, & Genishi, 2001, p. 46). Wien (1995) takes up this dichotomy, initially viewing early childhood as a field “caught in a conflict” (p. 1) between the two approaches. She discovered that while we

tend to hold these two frameworks—developmentally appropriate practice and, to use Wien’s term, teacher dominion—in theoretical opposition, in her study teachers were more likely to incorporate both types of teaching into their practice, although each of the teachers’ responses was distinct and shaped by a range of factors.

Wien’s (1995) study demonstrates “the ways in which teachers take on multiple subjectivities as they combine different and sometimes what often are assumed to be incompatible practices to interact with young children” (Ryan, Ochsner, & Genishi, 2001, p. 55). It also demonstrates again that teaching is complicated, rife with decisions about what and how to teach and strongly impacted by a plethora of factors including the community, school culture, individual children, parents of children, and the teacher’s own background, experiences, and values, just to name a few. Research by and with teachers helps us continue to understand the different factors that impact teachers’ decisions and actions. With that in mind, I turn now to focus specifically on research on teachers’ beliefs, in particular what teachers have had to say about early literacy development.

Including Teachers’ Voices: Research on Teacher Beliefs and Practices

Ryan and Goffin (2008) observe that the field of early childhood has somehow fallen into a pattern of focusing so much on young children that teachers have been rendered almost invisible. They argue for a research agenda that portrays teachers “not simply as consumers of top-down policy but as shapers of the classroom curriculum who hold strong views of what they should be doing in practice” (p. 387). It can be difficult for teachers to discuss and reflect upon the views and beliefs they hold about practice, largely because it is something they are unaccustomed to doing (Einarsdottir, 2001), and research has demonstrated both consistencies

and inconsistencies between teachers' beliefs about teaching and learning and their actual classroom practice (see Fang, 1996 for a review).

Inconsistencies between beliefs and practices can typically be attributed to a conflict between teachers' beliefs and the various constraints and mandates they encounter in schools and classrooms (Fang, 1996). Increasingly, early childhood teachers encounter pressure from parents, other teachers, and administrators to implement curriculum and activities that might be more skills-oriented and are inconsistent with their own views (Hatch & Freeman, 1988; Spidell Rusher, McGrevin, & Lambiotte, 1992). Parker and Neuharth-Pritchett (2006) note:

external factors, such as pressure from upper grade teachers and curriculum constraints within a school district, make it increasingly difficult [for early childhood educators] to teach in a developmentally appropriate manner. (p. 66)

Hatch and Freeman (1988) call this a "philosophy-reality conflict," and found that it is perpetuated when early childhood programs are asked to be more academic and skills-oriented. Stipek and Byler (1997) report that of the teachers in their study who did not feel that they were able to teach in a manner entirely consistent with their own beliefs, the majority felt that their program was too structured and academic, with parents listed as a main source of pressure to be more skills-oriented. This echoes Goldstein's (2007) finding, discussed earlier in this chapter, of a mismatch between parents' expectations for more academic and skills-oriented work and the teachers' preference for more developmentally appropriate activities and approaches to learning.

Oakes and Caruso (1990) offer three possible explanations for a disconnect between teachers' stated beliefs and their actual classroom practices. The first, which has already been discussed, is the perception of pressure to prepare children for later grades, which are marked by increasingly rigorous academics and achievement tests. The second possibility regards the influence of administration and policies, which might be pushing for more skills-oriented and

teacher-directed practices. The third and final suggestion is that early childhood teachers feel a certain amount of social pressure to say they support more developmentally appropriate and child-centered practices when in reality they might be more comfortable with more didactic and teacher-controlled activities.

Although inconsistencies between beliefs and practice clearly occur, studies with early childhood teachers typically have found a greater deal of congruence between teachers' beliefs and their actual classroom practices than have studies with teachers of higher grades. For example, Stipek and Byler (1997) found that preschool and kindergarten teachers' beliefs, but not first grade teachers', were significantly correlated with their observed classroom practices. This is supported by a National Center for Early Development and Learning (1999) survey of over 1,900 preschool teachers in which the majority indicated that they were engaging in practices that were consistent with their beliefs. Bryant, Clifford, and Peisner (1991) also found a high correlation between beliefs and practices, although the majority of the classes in their study did not meet their criteria for developmental appropriateness. This finding is echoed in Charlesworth et al. (1993), who also found a positive relationship between beliefs and practices, but note that "teachers' professed importance of developmentally appropriate practice was stronger than what was reflected in their reported classroom activities and materials" (p. 273).

In a study that specifically considered preschool literacy environments and teaching, Madison and Speaker (1994) found teachers' beliefs about literacy were less influenced by external factors and were remarkably consistent with their literacy planning and instruction. They determined that preschool literacy environments can be represented by a spectrum with skills-based practices on one end and emergent literacy environments on the other. In the middle were teachers who employed an eclectic mix of skills and more holistic approaches, materials,

and activities. The representation of literacy beliefs and practices by a spectrum rather than completely discrete categories demonstrates the similarities that can exist across classrooms but also the tremendous variety in how teachers approach and interpret literacy practices and development. It also rejects a forced dichotomy of teacher practices. Nonetheless, no matter where teachers were on the spectrum, the authors found that they all “teach what they believe” (p. 27). Teacher beliefs were shaped by a variety of factors, including their education background, teaching experience(s), and collaboration with peers (see also Kowalski, Pretti-Frontczak, & Johnson, 2001). Madison and Speaker (1994) conclude that “teacher theories and beliefs may be a driving force behind planning and decision making” (p. 28) but caution that while the influence of beliefs may be a similarity across teachers, teaching is still “shaped by factors unique to individual teachers and classrooms” (p. 26).

Burgess, Lundgren, Lloyd, and Pianta (2001) also found a high rate of consistency between preschool teachers’ beliefs about literacy and their self-reported practices. Survey results indicated that the majority of teachers supported eclectic approaches to literacy instruction that emphasized literature, print conventions, and language development. Teachers were less likely to endorse activities that support phonological awareness or writing and demonstrated the greatest variation in their support of alphabet knowledge. In an examination of the effect of teachers’ backgrounds and experiences on their beliefs, the authors found that level of education did not have a significant impact on any beliefs or practices other than an increased emphasis on verbal language. Teachers with more years of experience were more likely to value story-telling activities and word-study practices than those with less experience.

Building upon the work of Burgess et al. (2001), Hindman and Wasik (2008) distributed a survey to 28 Head Start teachers in an effort to explore their beliefs about early literacy as well

as how their beliefs might be related to various background factors such as education and number of years teaching. The survey asked teachers to agree or disagree with statements related to oral language/vocabulary, code-related skills (alphabet knowledge and phonemic awareness), book reading, and writing. These four areas were chosen as representative of skills emphasized in recent research on early literacy development. There was a high degree of variability in responses, with the greatest being on the code-related and writing items. Variability in responses was in part attributed to the general agreement with statements about best practices but less agreement on items related to how children develop various literacy skills. The authors speculate that this indicates that “teachers may have more procedural than conceptual knowledge about some of these topics” (p. 486). In terms of correlations with background experiences, the findings of this study echo those of Burgess et al. (2001): number of years of experience was only significantly correlated with beliefs about oral language and vocabulary while there were no differences found based upon level of education or if their education was focused on early childhood.

Taken together, studies with early childhood teachers have employed a range of methods—surveys, observation, interviews, as well as combinations of two or more of these—to determine a high rate of consistency between teacher beliefs and practices. This consistency, along with a sociocultural perspective that views teachers’ interpretations and beliefs as equal in importance to their actions, supports this study’s reliance upon interviews to document teachers’ descriptions of their early literacy practices and the factors that they believe influence their work. Importantly, several of the studies reviewed relied upon survey responses, robbing us of teachers’ descriptions of their beliefs and practices in their own words. Nonetheless, the studies included in this chapter coalesce around a vision of teachers as individuals who enter a

classroom with their own background experiences and distinct ideas about teaching and learning, in addition to personally held values and beliefs, but who, at the same time, are not immune to the influence of various factors in their teaching environment. This perspective of teachers sees them as “active, engaging and rational professionals who make both conscious and intuitive decisions in school contexts” (Isenberg, 1990, pp. 322-323).

Coda

The literature reviewed in this chapter framed the collection of data, which occurred from 2010-2012. The fields of early childhood education and literacy are of course not stagnant, and the issues, concerns and focus have evolved in the time that has passed. The fact that the *Texas Prekindergarten Guidelines* (TEA, 2022) no longer includes suggestions for instruction is just one example of how a very influential document has changed since the time of the study. The guidelines also have become more explicitly inclusive, reflecting an emphatic field-wide recognition of the need to foster early childhood education and early literacy spaces that build upon the knowledge and experiences of all learners. That being said, there is still a significant amount of work to do to capitalize on literacy as a “site of belonging” (Souto-Manning, Ghim, & Madu, 2021, p. 483), and there is a lack of consensus both within the field and society at large regarding if and how curriculum and instruction should respond to inequities (Reid & Kagan, 2022). Additionally, the “accountability shovedown” (Hatch, 2002) has not abated. Instead, as Graue, et al. (2017) point out, “Even when early learning standards support child-centered approaches to curriculum they are overruled by accountability discourse” (p. 108). In their study exploring pre-k policy enactment in Wisconsin and New Jersey, these authors found that teachers and administrators were faced with a reality that pressured pre-k teachers to focus on particular academic skills due to a pushdown of expectations and the accountability culture of K-12

education. Teachers, therefore, remain at the intersection and are left to negotiate competing perspectives and expectations.

Summary

Teachers' voices are significantly underrepresented in research on early literacy, an omission that is particularly striking given the emphasis on early childhood education, and early literacy more specifically. In the early 21st century, a proliferation of influential government reports and policies coupled with an increase in state-provided preschool and state-generated early learning standards represented not only heightened interest in early education and literacy but also, with this interest, increasing pressure on teachers to demonstrate the learning and development that are occurring in their classrooms. While we continue to learn more about the ways in which young children approach reading and writing, less is known about the work of teachers to support children's efforts and experiences. Early childhood teachers' beliefs have been demonstrated to influence their work in classrooms, and teachers' understandings and ideas about early literacy are impacted by a number of significant factors. Continued rising interest in early literacy demands the inclusion of teachers' perspectives regarding what is and should be happening in early childhood classrooms to support children's efforts to become readers and writers.

Chapter III: Methodology

Based on trends in early childhood education and policy emphasizing the importance of early literacy, the purpose of this qualitative study was to explore prekindergarten teachers' descriptions of their literacy practices and their beliefs about early literacy development and curriculum. I view this process of hearing and presenting teachers' experiences as both a search for meaning (Dyson & Genishi, 2005; Erickson, 1986; Holstein & Gubrium, 1995; Janesick, 1994; Seidman, 2006) and a means of developing an understanding of preschool literacy "as it is understood in the context of those who use it" (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003, p. 27).

Study Design

Erickson (1986) asserts that "the central issue of method is to bring research questions and data collection into a consistent relationship" (p. 14). This study was concerned with prekindergarten teachers' descriptions of their literacy practices and their ideas about early literacy development and curriculum. My interest in this area of research was reflected in both the methods of data collection as well as in the following research questions:

- 1) How do the teachers describe their literacy practices?
- 2) What factors do teachers describe as influencing their current practice?
- 3) What shifts, if any, in literacy curriculum do teachers believe have occurred in their practice over the course of their teaching careers? What factors have influenced these shifts?
- 4) What are the teachers' beliefs about early literacy development and curriculum implementation?
 - a) What behaviors and activities do they believe children engage in that support their literacy development, including individual children of differing abilities?
 - b) What instructional practices and curriculum approaches do they believe best support children's literacy development?

- 5) To what extent are teachers' beliefs about literacy compatible with their descriptions of their literacy practices?
- 6) What are the similarities and differences in early literacy practices and beliefs across participants and across program settings?

The teachers who participated worked in a variety of program settings in Texas prekindergarten classrooms, including: Head Start, state-funded preschools, and private preschools. This multi-methods study primarily relied upon interviews of two or three teachers from each setting, while also incorporating a brief survey and document collection and review. My understanding of interviews as an approach to inquiry is informed by Seidman's (2006) use of multiple interviews to develop a narrative of teachers' experiences. As Seidman points out, "At the root of in-depth interviewing is an interest in understanding the lived experience of other people and the meaning they make of that experience" (p. 9). Each teacher participated in two separate interviews: one to gather a professional background and descriptions of his or her literacy practices; and a second interview to address teachers' beliefs about literacy development, curriculum, and instruction. Interviews were recorded, transcribed, coded, and analyzed, and data are presented in two ways: portraits that tell the teachers' stories as they describe their literacy practices (Ayers, 1988; Genishi, 1992; Wien, 2004) as well as a cross-case analysis that considers similarities and differences amongst the teachers' descriptions. At the first interview, teachers were also given a questionnaire that asked about their beliefs and practices regarding literacy. Artifacts such as documents outlining school policies regarding literacy curriculum and instruction were also collected when possible as a source of important contextual information for each participant.

Participants

This study relied on the participation of eight preschool teachers working with 3-5-year-olds in Texas. In order to try to capture how teachers working in different contexts described their early literacy practices and beliefs, participants included teachers working in each type of preschool setting: two in Head Start, three in public schools, and three in private preschools. Because prekindergarten public district programs in Texas frequently serve as collaborators with Head Start, thus leaving teachers to navigate both delivery systems, one of the participants was selected because she was a Head Start teacher working in a public school district. Participants also included teachers who worked in bilingual classrooms, a teacher who worked in an ESL/inclusive classroom, as well as an additional inclusive classroom to include conversations with teachers working with diverse populations of children. It was also important to have a diversity of respondents, particularly given the diversity in the early childhood workforce in terms of types of program settings, teacher preparation backgrounds, amount of experience, and personal characteristics such as ethnicity and linguistic background (Kagan, Kauerz, & Tarrant, 2008).

In addition to seeking teachers from different preschool settings that characterize some of the diversity of programs in the field of early childhood, criteria for participant selection included: (a) a willingness and ability to talk openly about their teaching experiences and ideas about literacy; (b) a commitment to completing a brief survey and two separate interviews, involving up to a possible total of 4 ½ hours; (c) an ability to share curricular documents from their programs; and (d) in at least their third year of teaching in their current site so they had greater familiarity with any program expectations or standards. Table 1 provides a brief summary of participants.

Table 1*Study Participants*

Participant	Years Experience	Ethnicity	Program Type	Class/Program Description
Cristina	7	Latinx	Head Start	Bilingual; delivery via school district
Dana	3	White	Head Start	Delivery via child care center
Alison	12	White	Public	2, ½ day classes; ESL; inclusive; same school as Cristina
Deborah	26	White	Public	Inclusive
Rodrigo	6	Latinx	Public	Bilingual
Angie	18	White	Private	Church preschool; 2 ½ days per week
Margie	3	White	Private	For children of local school district employees; push-in for children who were differently abled
Tameka	3	Black	Private	Funded by United Way

Researcher Positionality

As Seidman (2006) notes, “Research, like almost everything else in life, has autobiographical roots” (p. 32). My interest in the field of early literacy as well as how preschool teachers talk about practice and beliefs stems from my own professional background. I spent 6 years teaching 3-5-year-olds in a preschool in suburban New Jersey that functions as a public/private partnership, meaning that it receives financial support from the town in which it is located but also relies on salary-based sliding scale tuition. The school’s attitude toward early literacy echoes a description provided by Wilson (2000) of a school in which it was assumed that all of the children would “become readers” and parents and teachers were partners “in the task of

socializing children into the reading practices of the community” (p. 5). While each teacher had her own ideas and approaches to teaching, the general sentiment was that overly didactic, skills-based instruction, including reading instruction, was not an appropriate approach to teaching young children. I came into the study, therefore, from a position that favors emergent literacy and child-based approaches and a belief that skills such as letter knowledge and phonological awareness could be taught in playful, meaningful ways.

In my last years there and in the years since I left, there had been an increased awareness amongst teachers of a possible “push-down” effect. Teachers and the administration wrestled with how to help children be ready for kindergarten classrooms that are working with rising literacy standards and expectations (e.g., knowledge of more letters and sight words in kindergarten) as well as address parent concerns about their children’s literacy skills and readiness for kindergarten. During my time at the preschool, the administration deflected the pressures to become narrowly focused on literacy-related skills and maintained its philosophy of a balanced, developmentally appropriate, play-based approach toward working with young children. Our position was that literacy-related activities can be successfully integrated into the curriculum in meaningful and relevant ways, and that literacy development can be supported in an interdisciplinary manner throughout the classroom and the curriculum. The program where I used to work is based on an emergent curriculum in which teachers in each of the 14 classrooms have individual autonomy to develop and enact curriculum based on their perceptions of children’s interests, strengths, and areas of need. During my tenure there and upon reflection since I left my position, I understand that this environment reflected a respect for children as well as a fundamental trust in teachers’ capacity to develop an appropriate educational environment for young children that integrated and supported literacy in playful and meaningful ways, and

this experience has significantly impacted my ideas about how preschool environments can be supportive of both children and teachers.

Exploratory and Pilot Studies

The exploratory study was conducted in February 2007 with Caroline, a teacher in a Head Start center in Texas that was also part of the local school district, and this early study informed several fundamental aspects of my study. While an experienced preschool teacher, the year of the exploratory study was Caroline's first year at a new school. Based on Caroline's description of feeling overwhelmed by the need to get acquainted with her program's standards, which were contained in "binders and binders of information," I determined that participants should be in at least their third year of teaching at their current site so that they had time to acclimate. Interviews with Caroline also informed different aspects of data collection and analysis, including the discovery that two interviews with clear structure provided ample opportunity to address research questions. In terms of analysis, I learned in this exploratory study that the analytic process does not begin when all the data has been collected but rather occurs alongside data collection. My experience during transcribing the first interview mirrored that described by Glupczynski (2007): "This early analysis was crucial because some of the information I gathered impacted the types of questions I asked in the second stages of interviews" (pp. 76-77). In the second interview, therefore, I was able to pursue questions related to some of these emerging themes. An example from the exploratory study concerns the discontinuities between what Caroline said she was required to do and what she believed was appropriate to do in terms of early literacy instruction. I had previously not considered the topic of discontinuities between beliefs and practices, which ultimately became a third research question, but early analysis during this first exploratory study not only allowed me to follow-up

on this thread during the second interview but also led to the creation of the third research question for this study.

After the exploratory study with Caroline, a pilot was conducted in September 2009 with Maria, a teacher at a private school in Texas. This study was intended to test out a new structure of focusing Interview One on descriptions of practice and Interview Two on beliefs about early literacy learning and instruction. The survey on beliefs and practices was also added as an additional data source after the initial study, and the use of a narrative portrait as a form of data analysis and presentation was also piloted. This pilot both confirmed findings from the exploratory study while also leading to new understandings. As with Caroline, two interviews with Maria provided sufficient time for us to discuss my questions and to explore Maria's responses. The organization of the interviews, with the first centered on descriptions of practice and the second on beliefs, was also found to provide greater focus on a set topic in each interview. Speaking with Maria, who was in her twelfth year of teaching at her program, also confirmed the importance of speaking with teachers who are not new to the setting. As opposed to Caroline, Maria was clearly very comfortable with and knowledgeable of her program's curricular and pedagogical requirements.

Both the survey and the narrative portrait were found to be important additions to the study. While Maria said she struggled with the survey because she felt she would respond differently to the items in different circumstances and with different children, I viewed the survey as an interesting way to look across the teachers at their beliefs and practices, also considering how they align with commonly held ideas about best practices and looking at possible differences across program types. The narrative also proved to be a coherent and

accessible way to present findings about an individual, as well as to begin thinking about emerging themes.

Data Collection

Given my interest in preschool teachers' experiences, beliefs, and their descriptions of literacy practices, from their own perspectives, this study's primary method of data collection was interviews. Data collection followed a two-interview sequence, with each interview spanning approximately 90 minutes each and taking place in a setting of the participants' choice, most often their classroom. Interviews were audiotaped, and the second interview typically occurred approximately 2 weeks after the first, which kept the topic fresh in the teachers' minds while also providing me with enough time to review the first interview to note emerging questions and themes before conducting the second.

Each interview was semi-structured in nature, with a set topic that is detailed below but without a rigid sequence of interview questions. Seidman (2006) suggests:

While interviewers may develop preset interviewing guides to which they will refer when the timing is right, interviewers' basic work. . . is to listen actively and to move the interview forward as much as possible by building on what the participant has begun to share. (p. 81; see also Mason, 2002; Merriam, 1998)

Because I assumed that each individual had very different experiences and therefore different responses both to me as an interviewer as well as to the questions I asked, it was important that I kept the structure of the interviews open and flexible.

Once teachers consented to participate (see Appendix A) and after the first interview took place, teachers were asked to complete a brief questionnaire concerning their literacy beliefs and practices (see description below). I also incorporated document analysis, collecting when possible curricular documents that described the schools' approaches to literacy curriculum, including any standards, requirements, or prescribed curriculum. At the conclusion of their

participation in the study, teachers were given a gift certificate to a book store as a token of my appreciation for their willingness to share their experiences and time with me.

While the exact questions or words I used were not pre-determined, the interviews were guided by set topics or areas to explore. The topics correspond with the research questions, as seen in Table 2.

Table 2

Alignment Between Research Questions and Data Collection Methods

<i>Research question</i>	<i>Interview 1</i>	<i>Interview 2</i>	<i>Survey</i>	<i>Analysis of curricular documents</i>
1) How do teachers describe their literacy practices?	X		X	X
2) What factors do teachers describe as influencing their current practice?	X			X
3) What shifts, if any, in literacy curriculum do teachers believe have occurred in their practice? What factors have influenced these shifts?	X			X
4) What are the teachers' beliefs about early literacy development and curriculum?		X	X	
a) What behaviors and activities do they believe children engage in that support their literacy development?	X	X	X	
b) What instructional practices and curriculum approaches do they believe best support children's literacy development?		X	X	
5) To what extent are teachers' beliefs about literacy compatible with their descriptions of their literacy practices?	X	X	X	X
6) What are the similarities and differences in early literacy practices and beliefs across participants and across program settings?	X	X	X	X

Interview 1

The first interview was an opportunity to learn about the participants' professional backgrounds and their current classroom literacy practices and curriculum (see Appendix B for the interview protocol and how it aligns with the research questions). Asking the teachers to talk about and describe their professional histories and current teaching environments was important in that it helped "put the participant's experience in context" (Seidman, 2006, p. 17). Interview 1 covered professional background and factors that influenced their teaching practices, including but not limited to program requirements, administrators, parents, and colleagues. With most participants, it also covered descriptions of curriculum, classroom literacy activities and materials, approaches to instruction, and shifts in practice over time. Four teachers experienced time constraints either due to longer responses to questions or schedule restrictions that resulted in a discussion of literacy activities, instruction, and curriculum in the second interview rather than the first.

Interview 2

The second interview explored teachers' beliefs about early literacy and instruction (see Appendix C). They discussed their ideas about literacy development, including the behaviors and activities they believed children engage in that support their literacy development. We also discussed how much emphasis they thought should be placed upon literacy in preschool classrooms, and what they believed were the best approaches to literacy curriculum and instruction. During the conversation, connections were made between the teachers' beliefs, as discussed in this interview, and their descriptions of their teaching practices as described in Interview 1.

Questionnaire

At the end of their first interview, each teacher was given a questionnaire asking them about different aspects of their literacy beliefs and practices (see Appendix D). The inclusion of the survey served multiple purposes. First, with its distribution in the middle of their involvement, teachers had a more clear understanding of the study and the focus of our conversations based on the first interview, and completing the survey gave them more specific aspects of early literacy to reflect upon prior to our second interview. Second, survey responses were used as specific probes in the second interview to ask teachers to elaborate on certain beliefs and practices. Third, the questionnaire provided an additional data source about practices and beliefs that was used both to augment the portraits created for each teacher as well as to provide a foundation for a discussion of the extent to which participating teachers' beliefs and practices align with research-based conceptions of early literacy practices. Finally, combining multiple methods of data collection helps to "develop more complete understandings of a given phenomenon" (Turner, Cardinal, & Burton, 2017, p. 244). The survey provided very specific data points of teachers' beliefs about various early literacy behaviors and how much time they did or did not spend on different activities or developing specific skills. This not only enhanced an understanding of each individual teacher but also provided a means to compare across teachers in this study as well as against different studies that employed the same instruments.

The survey contained three sections: (a) level of agreement with belief statements; (b) beliefs about the importance of specific early literacy skills; and (c) indication of how much time is spent on certain early literacy activities. The sections reflect the research questions that guided this study, which were concerned with teachers' descriptions of their literacy practices (seen in the third section of the survey) as well as teachers' beliefs about best practices to support children's literacy learning (seen in the first and section sections) and the degree of compatibility

between their beliefs and practices. Questions on the survey were derived from the Preschool Literacy Beliefs Questionnaire (TBQ; Seefeldt, 2004, as cited in Hindman & Wasik, 2008) and the Preschool Literacy Practices Checklist (PLPC; Burgess, et al., 2001).

The first section of questions, taken from the TBQ (Seefeldt, 2004, as cited in Hindman & Wasik, 2008) concerned teachers' level of agreement with statements related to research-based descriptions of best teaching practices as well as ideas about how children develop literacy skills. The original scale contains 30 items that are divided into four sub-scales: oral language/vocabulary, code-related skills, book reading, and writing. Teachers were asked to rate their level of agreement with the statements based on a five-point scale ranging from Strongly Agree (5) to Strongly Disagree (1). Higher scores on the questionnaire indicate greater agreement with research-based descriptions of best practices. Several statements, however, do not reflect best practices (i.e., the use of worksheets) and therefore are reverse-coded. This means that a response of Strongly Disagree (1) actually indicates strong agreement with best practices, so this response becomes recorded as a 5 instead of a 1.

The second and third sets of questions were taken from the PLPC (Burgess, et al., 2001). The section on teacher beliefs included questions related to three different factors: alphabet knowledge, knowledge of words and stories, and verbal language. The final section, which asked teachers to rate the frequency with which they employ certain practices, included instructional practices related to word study, alphabet knowledge, story understanding, and the promotion of children's motivation and interest in reading.

Document Collection

Curriculum materials were collected at the beginning of each teacher's participation in the study and included items such as schedules, lesson plans, and sample lessons. Curriculum

documents did not serve as a primary source of data but rather as an auxiliary piece in helping me understand the context in which the teachers are working (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003).

Prekindergarten programs take a variety of approaches toward curriculum, ranging from prescribed curricula that detail activities, materials, themes, scripts, etc. for every school day to an emergent curriculum that gives teachers and children the freedom to determine what and how they learn based on the needs and interests of the classroom community. This broad range of approaches to curriculum means that program curricular documents can be quite detailed and explicit about day-to-day activities and expectations or they can be more philosophical, outlining an approach rather than specific required content.

Data Analysis

Marshall and Rossman (1999) describe data analysis as:

the process of bringing order, structure, and interpretation to the mass of collected data. It is a messy, ambiguous, time-consuming, creative, and fascinating process. It does not proceed in a linear fashion; it is not neat. (p. 150)

The analytic process somewhat informally occurs alongside data collection and then continues once all the data have been collected. In this study, the formal analytic process involved two phases:

Phase One: Individual Portraits

Data analysis began with the re-construction of each individual teacher's experiences in a narrative portrait based on interviews, survey responses, and the curriculum materials that were collected. Phase one began with re-listening to the transcribed interviews. As Wien (2004) describes:

[T]he process of listening again to the teacher's voice, transcribing, or checking and correcting the transcription calls up further thoughts, themes, issues, and engagement with that teacher's particular situation. (p. 157)

The portraits incorporate information from both interviews; that is, they both describe what the teachers do as well as their beliefs about early literacy and instruction. Collected curricular documents provided contextual information for the teacher's practices as well as additional understanding of their daily routines and activities.

The creation of the portraits served multiple purposes. Presenting data in the narrative form of stories illustrates the unique experiences of each teacher and demonstrates how complex and personal teaching can be. They also contain examples of how the broader social and political context that receives so much attention in the literature is actually affecting individuals working in different settings. Teachers' stories extend the community of teaching, giving us a glimpse into our colleagues' classrooms, helping us feel less isolated and to understand how others are negotiating successes and failures (McDonald, 1992). In terms of my research, creating the portraits not only represents one way of (re)telling teachers' experiences but also provides a starting point for identifying patterns and themes that connect across their descriptions of literacy beliefs and practices (Ayers, 1988; Wien, 2004).

Phase Two: Comparative Analysis

While phase one of analysis considered the participants as individuals, the second phase of analysis connected the experiences and beliefs of the teachers through two processes: the creation of themes and the combination of their survey results. Phase Two began with a careful reading of the data to look for emerging patterns and themes. During this phase, interviews were analyzed using both internal and external codes (Brown, 2009). According to Brown, external codes are "based upon my conceptual perspective about this research project" while internal codes are "developed through my reading of the data" (p. 7). External codes incorporated topics from the research questions such as descriptions of practice, influential factors, and beliefs about

literacy development and instruction. Internal codes were derived from themes that emerged from the data and trended across participants. Data was independently evaluated by an outside reviewer who derived the same codes within and across participants.

Phase Two also involved analysis of the teachers' responses to the survey. The original surveys that I used to create the one used in this study (Burgess, et al., 2001; Hindman & Wasik, 2008) were created by the different authors to incorporate statements that reflect research-based conceptions of good early literacy practices, such as providing opportunities for children to dictate stories or to develop phonological awareness by playing with words and rhymes. Results from my study were analyzed on their own, looking at the average level of agreement with various statements amongst participants. They were also compared with those of the studies from which the survey was created and were used as the foundation for a discussion regarding the extent to which the practices and beliefs of the participants' in this study align with the research.

Validity

Marshall and Rossman (1999) claim, "The strength of a qualitative study...will rest with its validity" (p. 192). Various researchers have provided different explanations or definitions for validity in qualitative research (for example, Lather, 1986; Lincoln & Guba, 2003; Mishler, 1986), largely coming to the conclusion that validity comes from a study's ability to provide rich, in-depth descriptions grounded in the data, as well as clear interpretations and analysis of the data (Erickson, 1986; Janesick, 1994; Marshall & Rossman, 1999). This study is firmly grounded in the words of the teachers, using their experiences and beliefs to not only make connections amongst the data but also to contribute to the larger ongoing conversation about early literacy curriculum and instruction.

This is not to say that I sought generalizations, in the positivist sense of the word. Rather, the teachers' experiences represent individual cases that are "at once particular and general" (Dyson & Genishi, 2005, p. 112) and concrete examples of a universal phenomenon: early literacy instructional practices (Erickson, 1986). While patterns and themes were sought across participants, ultimately each reader will understand, interpret, and develop his or her own generalizations to their understandings of the phenomenon of interest (Dyson & Genishi, 2005; Erickson, 1986). Nonetheless, the development of themes is enhanced by differing perspectives, whether to confirm my own coding or to think about the data in a different way. For this reason, an independent peer analyzed the data separately and there was consensus about the themes that emerged across participants. This study also incorporated multiple methods to support its internal validity. Multiple sources of data—documents, interviews, and a survey—were used to strengthen and corroborate findings and themes (Marshall & Rossman, 1999).

Limitations of the Study

The data of this study and the interpretations and conclusions I drew are limited to the perspectives of the teachers who were willing to participate (Scott-Little, Kagan, & Frelow, 2003). Erickson (1986) presents an extended discussion regarding the ways in which interpretive studies address a concern with generalizability of findings from specific cases to a larger population. For example, Erickson points out the following:

[T]he primary concern of interpretive research is particularizability, rather than generalizability... The paradox is that to achieve valid discovery of universals one must stay very close to concrete cases. (p. 130)

On a micro-level, this study made connections amongst the words, stories, and experiences of the participants. I acknowledge, however, that my ability to make assumptions about generalizability ends there, particularly given the atypicality of the policy and social climate surrounding education in Texas. However, as Erickson (1986) points out, "The responsibility for judgment

about logical generalization resides with the reader rather than with the researcher. The reader must examine the circumstances of the case to determine ways in which the case fits the circumstances of the reader's own situation" (p. 153).

My effort to determine themes connecting the teachers' descriptions has the potential to "inadvertently minimize the differences among the [teachers]" (Scott-Little, Kagan, & Frelow, 2003, p. 4). The exploration of connecting themes does not reflect an intention to dilute or merge the teachers' experiences into one story but rather seek out moments of consensus or synergy to demonstrate possible connections between teachers with different backgrounds working in a range of contexts. This is a particularly important point to emphasize given that the teachers in this study lived and worked in rich and diverse contexts. Their experiences in their classrooms were shaped not only by their own constructions, personal and professional histories, identities, etc., but also how they interacted with the students, families, and the school cultures in which they worked. However, while a consideration of the broader contextual influences of the teachers and descriptions of my observations of their classrooms would have enriched this study and provided additional perspective, I have chosen to focus my inquiry on the experiences and beliefs of the teachers in their own words. Future studies could endeavor to combine teachers' stories and descriptions of practice with classroom observations to provide more finely-grained portraits of preschool literacy practices.

An additional limitation of the study is the small number of participants. However, as Merriam (1998) notes, "[T]he crucial factor is not the number of respondents but the potential of each person to contribute to the development of insight and understanding of the phenomenon" (p. 83). In addition, the small sample size was a necessity in order to address my research questions and to have in-depth conversations with teachers about their practices and beliefs.

Several large-scale studies examining these topics have relied strictly on surveys, and this type of inquiry provides a greater depth of detail that is sorely lacking.

The datedness of the data collected and this document in general also imposes a limitation on this study. More than a decade has passed since the data was collected, and, as noted earlier, the educational landscape has clearly evolved in the time that has elapsed. While many factors have persisted, such as the continued push-down of expectations and accountability, this is a study that emphasizes the importance of context, and there have been important changes that have occurred that would not only impact teachers' experiences but also some of the areas of inquiry for research study about preschool teachers' literacy beliefs and practices.

Chapter IV: Tameka

Tameka has taught varied learners, ranging from toddlers to high school students, during a career in education that has spanned more than 20 years. Her knowledge and understanding about teaching and working with young children comes from neither a college nor associates degree, but rather, in her words, “a lot of it just comes from insight.” Tameka’s answers to questions were brief, she was at times unfamiliar with certain terms, such as phonological awareness, and she stated directly that she would love ideas about how to incorporate more activities to support literacy learning in her classroom. While in some ways this seemed to be indicative of a lack of a formal education, it also felt at times that Tameka was doing a lot more to support literacy than she realized. She is just unaccustomed to reflecting on and talking about her practice (see Einarsdottir, 2001; McDonald, 1992). A study that incorporated observation in its methodology would likely have discovered that there was more of a literacy curriculum in Tameka’s classroom than she was able to articulate or fully recognize.

When Tameka was in junior college, she began working at a school with what she refers to as “mentally handicapped children.” She really enjoyed working with children and decided to take some psychology classes but ended up leaving school early. Tameka began working for the local school district, spending 5 years at each of two different elementary schools, 3 years at a local high school, and then 2 years as a substitute teacher, all as an aide working in special education classrooms and resource rooms. During that time, Tameka worked with children in pull-out classrooms for “content mastery” and observed that many of the children who were struggling academically or who were “slow learners” were often what she calls “socially disabled.” Tameka often discusses how academic success can be hindered when children come

from difficult backgrounds that have caused them to lose confidence or feel “like it was not a use” to try to learn and do well in school.

Now in her third year as a prekindergarten teacher, Tameka, a Black woman, talks about her approach to teaching and how the importance of her work with young children is heightened because of the community where she works. Carter Wesley Nursery School, where Tameka is a pre-kindergarten teacher, is a non-profit program that opened in 1957 to serve low income families in the surrounding community. Primarily operated by The United Way, parents must work a minimum of 30 hours a week, attend school, or do both in order to qualify. Tuition is based on a sliding scale determined by annual family income and household size. Tameka often worked in day care centers during the summer but typically returned to her job in the public school system when a new school year began. After working at Carter Wesley one summer, however, Tameka took a full-time job there because she felt like the “children needed a little bit more” and so it “drew me more than the other kids at the other daycares.” Tameka’s love for teaching is heightened by working in a community with under-served children. She notes,

I really really like teaching. I really like it. I guess I like the results, you know?...[B]y the end of the year [last year], we were reading books and that made me feel really good to be able to help the kids, especially in this community.

The students at Carter Wesley are predominantly Black or African-American, and Tameka describes it as “the lowest income daycare here.” These two factors, particularly the level of income, informed a lot of Tameka’s beliefs about what and how to teach. She notes that the school has “a lot of young, young mothers...18 and younger, some” and says “most of the children here are CCS children,” meaning children who are part of the Child Care Services system [see Table 3 regarding eligibility for Child Care Services in Texas during the time when Tameka and I met]. She goes on to say that, given this background information, “[Y]ou can just

kinda know where the children are. Some of them wear better clothes than we do, but yet, they are socially way out there, you know?”

Table 3

Eligibility Code Card For Child Care Services Central Texas (Effective October 1, 2010 through September 30, 2011)

Gross Monthly Income

Family Size	85% SMI (income cannot exceed this number, which is 85% of the state median income for a set family size)
1	\$2,407
2	\$3,148
3	\$3,888
4	\$4,629
5	\$5,369
6	\$6,110

Factors Influencing Literacy Practices and Curriculum

Tameka is the only pre-kindergarten teacher at Carter Wesley and she is alone in her classroom with 14 students. While this could be interpreted as isolating, Tameka notes, “I like it [laughs]. I really do. I like being in there by myself.” Tameka enjoys being in charge of her day-to-day interactions with the children in the classroom, possibly because she does not have control over her curriculum.

Administrative Control and Lack of Autonomy

At Carter Wesley, the assistant director maintains sole responsibility for lesson plans, including setting the theme for the week as well as selecting activities and books for the classroom. The assistant director, a white woman, says she picks the themes and activities from

teacher resource books that they have on site, and that she also finds activities on the internet.

Tameka is therefore not empowered as a decision-maker in her own classroom, as she notes the assistant director will “let us know what she expects us to do.”

The lack of autonomy becomes a source of frustration and internal conflict for Tameka as she feels like she lacks control over what happens in her own classroom. When asked if she wishes she had more involvement in planning lessons, she responds, “Yes. I do. I sure do.” Tameka believes teachers should have more input into lesson planning “because we’re here all of the time,” and teachers know their students’ needs, experiences, and capabilities best. As the person in the classroom every day with her students,

I know just about every level that the kids are on. And what they may suggest us to do in this class, I may have three or four that cannot do it. They won’t be able to do it right now and I know that. So at that point, I have to kind of throw something else in.

Tameka talks about waking up in the middle of the night thinking about ways in which she can help her students. While oftentimes these concerns are more related to social-emotional issues, she also loses sleep worrying about their academic needs as well. The challenge, however, is that while she wants to try to “sneak” things in and make subtle changes or adaptations for her students, she overall feels she lacks the authority to do this and also lacks the foundational knowledge as well as resources to develop a supportive curriculum. She spends a lot of time observing and interacting with her students, but she does not have a very extensive basis of formal education regarding how children learn and develop and what she can do to support them.

Relationships With Colleagues

There are monthly staff meetings at Carter Wesley, but curriculum is not discussed and, as the only prekindergarten teacher, Tameka notes that she does not have conversations with her colleagues about lesson planning or the curriculum. Even if there were other teachers working

with the same age group, given that the teachers are not involved in planning, it does not seem like an environment that is conducive to teachers collaborating and sharing ideas. Tameka spends a lot of time talking about social issues that come up in the classroom and her concerns regarding the children's social-emotional development. These concerns dominate her informal, classroom-related discussions with colleagues as well, particularly when discussing what is happening in the home environment with siblings in different classrooms. She notes that "We have to do that quite often" and gives the example of a boy in her class who came in one morning and was "having a bad day." She explains how she took him aside and asked, "Well, is there something you want to talk about? What happened, you know, to mom? Is she just gone on vacation?" And he goes into detail and let me know she had left the house." Tameka said she then spoke with the teacher of the child's sister, letting her know why the children are "having a bad day" so they can talk about it "before it gets out of hand." In this instance, Tameka wanted to make sure that the other teacher understood what was going on and that "this kid is not just deliberately being—misbehaving. There is a problem and he doesn't know how to handle it. And she [his sister] doesn't know how to handle it." Tameka's primary goal and concern is to make her classroom a safe, loving space for her students and this is the main thrust of her collaborations with colleagues. While they do not bear direct reference to conversations about curriculum and, more specifically, her literacy curriculum, they do represent a collaboration with her coworkers with the intent of creating the best environment to support children and their learning.

Parent Involvement and Interactions

Similarly, Tameka's descriptions of the content of her interactions with parents also initially reference social and disciplinary concerns. However, parents come to her

a little bit more than I would've expected for a daycare...And I think they are a lot like other people. They want the miracle to happen over there instead of here. A lot of

working parents that don't really have that time. So, they're really hoping that by the time they get to school, we've done that.

Parents seem to be concerned about “reading especially” and want their children to “at least be able to read small books” by the time they leave her classroom. She notes, however, that the parents at her school have little time at home to work explicitly on reading with their children. Even with that understanding, she also says that when a parent tells her that they want their child to be “doing more letters” and spending more time on concepts such as colors and early math, she thinks:

I feel like he should've known that already when he got in this class! But I'll take in consideration that this is what we need to work on, especially with that particular kid. With him or her, I will add a little bit more to the lesson.

Her initial gut reaction is almost defensive, a sort of “that's not my job” response indicating that parents are abdicating their own responsibility to help children learn basic concepts such as letters, numbers, and colors. She will, however, try to spend more time with a child if a parent asks her to. Her comments on parents also reveal her belief that adult support for literacy development occurs in sit down activities explicitly about concepts such as letters and phonemes rather than also appreciating the contributions of conversation, language, and stories to children's literacy development.

Description of Literacy Practices

Tameka frequently cites challenges her students face and how she is sometimes “scared” for their futures, all of which lend a heightened sense of urgency to her desire to help the children's language and literacy knowledge and skills develop while they are in her care. She notes, for example, “If they're in a predicament where everybody else around them can read something and they can't, you're looking forward to some problems—for serious problems. And they're going to act some other kind of way to avoid doing that.” In large part based on her

experience working with older children in special education classes or otherwise receiving special services, Tameka believes children who cannot read are at risk for exhibiting behavior problems, in part because they are “frustrated. They can’t read. They can’t write their names real good. They can’t recognize anything.” She is quick to point out that an inability to read is not necessarily a consequence of a learning disability and goes on to express her concerns about illiteracy and how it can impact their futures:

I’ve seen a lot of problems when they leave even a simple place like this and try to go to elementary. They stick a book in front of them because a lot of times teachers do think by the time they get there [that] they can do some of these. They recognize some letters or do—a lot of times they just can’t. They really can’t and that, it saddens me. It really saddens me because this is a hard world. You’ve got to be able to read what they’re putting in front of you or saying to you. You need to not sign a contract if you can’t read it. I don’t care how good a player you are. You don’t know what you’re signing if you can’t read it. So that is scary to me. Right now it’s very scary...I see it and it’s scary. They know more about a video game than they do about reading. That can only take them so far. They can repeat words, but if I wrote it down, they wouldn’t know it. I think that’s dangerous.

Tameka believes that “simple places” sometimes fail to teach children the skills and knowledge that they are expected to know once they enter kindergarten. These children can then get further and further behind, resulting in the frustration she references earlier. This potential outcome is what Tameka worries lurks in the future for some of her students and what underlies much of her motivation and desire to help her students develop early literacy skills. She explains that she does not want to be “just” a daycare worker, implying that daycare is often equated with a lack of academic content and preparation for kindergarten:

I guess some people would look at this as being a daycare and we’re supposed to take care of these people’s children ‘til they pick them up. I see it entirely different...I would like them to leave knowing something other than you’ve just been to a daycare all day. And it means a whole lot more to me than that.

Tameka initially thinks her literacy curriculum begins and ends with activities explicitly related to books and reading, which could be a reflection of her having a narrow understanding

of the different knowledge and skills involved in literacy (Mihai, Butera, & Friesen, 2017) or could potentially be due in part to the fact that the only thing listed by the assistant director under literacy on her lesson plans is a book title. However, Tameka ultimately reveals that she tries to incorporate many more opportunities for children to engage in behaviors and activities that support their literacy development. One of the areas that Tameka says she spends a lot of time emphasizing is oral language and working with the children to “use correct English” and to speak to one another in a way that “sounds a little bit better than just street talking.” Tameka says the children “use words differently at home. When they get to school, they assume that that is the right or the correct way to talk, speak, or say something.” Tameka is articulating what Whittingham, Hoffman, and Rumenapp (2018) frame as a distinction between Dominant American English (DAE) and African American Language (AAL), and her descriptions of the two different ways of speaking echo the sentiments of the participants in the study who similarly “readily privileged DAE as the correct way of speaking” (p. 470) and discussed the importance of “easing disparities between home and school language by teaching children to use the standard” (p. 474).

Like participants in Whittingham, Hoffman, and Rumenapp’s (2018) study, part of Tameka’s motivation for working on oral language is concern about future consequences of children not knowing how to use what Heath (1983) refers to as “mainstream language.” Tameka asks:

Would you want them to go on a job interview talking like that and try to get a job? No. They’re not going to hire them and that scares me because I know you don’t—they should not have to not know that there is a better way.

Similarly, Whittingham, Hoffman, and Rumenapp (2018) note, “Multiple participants reiterated the need for children to become competent using the dominant discourse to assure future academic and economic opportunities” (p. 467). Tameka essentially is working with the children

to help them learn how to code switch or develop “linguistic dexterity” (Whittingham, et al., 2018), to move between what she sees as the “jazzy” language and “slang” that they might use at home to understanding that “when you go to school or you’re out in public, this is the way you talk. They think they know everything else, so why not enlighten your children and let them know there is a certain way to talk?” The privileging of certain ways of speaking—particularly those that are common amongst the white middle class—over other ways of speaking functions as a means of “creating insiders and outsiders and identifying successful children according to the alignment between home and school discourse” (Souto-Manning, 2010, p. 255). However, while researchers discuss the ways in which this reflects problematic existing social and political structures, teachers like Tameka often see themselves as left to prepare children for the existing reality, whether they agree with it or not.

When Tameka first talks about the types of activities children are engaged in in her class that help directly support literacy, she can only think of two: reading books and opportunities for the children to act out familiar stories. Tameka reads to the children once a day and notes:

They really like to be read to. They really do. I didn’t realize children like that as much, but they really do. Especially if you make a big deal out of the story and use the voices of the animals or other people. They love it. So I try to make sure I get in a good story.

In addition, the children are able to look at books when they arrive in the morning, although she says she does not have a lot of books or as many as she would like in her classroom because they are controlled by the assistant director. She explains, “[T]here are not a lot of books anymore that we can use. Because she’s [the assistant director] kind of made her own schedule and what they want in here.” She laments the lack of reading materials she is allowed to have in her class, and this appears to be another source of discontent for Tameka regarding her lack of autonomy.

Tameka also considers children's emergent writing and notes that writing materials such as paper, pencils, crayons, markers, and envelopes are always available. She discusses how many of the children enjoy writing letters:

Now, right now, they're at this age where they think that they can write. So even like this morning, I had a little boy that called himself writing me a letter. I mean, it's chicken scratch, but he had it in an envelope and he pulls it out and reads whatever he thought was on there.

She supports the children's attempts at writing and accepts them in whatever form they may take, even if it's "chicken scratch."

Tameka worries that, due to the curricular decisions of the school administration, her students "do a lot of art and very little schoolwork." To counter this, she says she tries to "sneak in" more "academic" content into the school day, particularly during circle time or other large group times. She says they are "still working on" alphabet knowledge and that after they say the pledge every morning, she points to the letters of the alphabet in random order and asks the children to identify them. Tameka tries to "pick a letter or two a week" and asks the children to think of things that begin with that letter. She works on letter identification and letter sound at the same time, although she does admit that she is unsure whether or not she should just do the capital letter or also introduce the lower case version simultaneously.

As an example of how she introduces a letter, Tameka explains that during Thanksgiving, she might ask the children to find things in the room that start with "t" and reward them with stickers when they correctly identify something. She says the children love stickers, noting that "stickers mean more to them than candy," and so she often uses them as a reward and extrinsic motivator. When she is talking about doing a letter of the week, Tameka also gives the example of learning about the letter "o" and looking for things that are orange, using orange construction

paper and brainstorming things that are orange. The emphasis in this example, however, seems to be more on a color than the letter and the sounds it makes.

In fact, the majority of Tameka's examples about teaching letters and phonemes are related to colors. The process she describes involves flash cards and repetition during circle time every morning:

What I did first is I showed them the color brown on flash cards...Just the color. And we go back maybe that next week and remember this was brown. I'll flip it. It's brown. Flip it back over. It's a brown Crayola. Purple starts with P. Pink starts with P. But this is purple. They see the purple. I flip it over. It's spelled differently. We go over that intensively. It is spelled differently. These other letters in there. I go over that. And it may not be but 2 or 3 colors that day for that week even. So they won't get confused. But we'll do that first. Sometimes I'll put colors out without any work. I'll call a color out and they have to show me the color. Now what does it begin with? Spell that color out. I want to know that they know the letters of the color, not just B for brown. Spell it out for me. What does those letters say? B-R-O-W-N. Tell me what that says again? They're looking at the color brown. So they know it's brown. But I want them to recognize that not just on the color, but when I give them a paper and they see the letter. They're getting pretty good at it. They're really getting pretty good. Then I'm happy.

Tameka repeats this process many times over until she feels like the children have mastered one or two colors and are ready to move on to the next one. She says that she “started with phonics, with the beginning sound of each letter” and essentially doing drills with the children.

Once she feels like the children have learned some of the colors and their spellings, one activity she likes to do involves passing out crayons and a worksheet on color to each of the children as they are all seated at a table. She explains the activity, saying, “So if green is on there, then it starts with a ‘g.’ What is the ‘g’ sound? Tell me what the word is. And they pretty much will get it.” Only one child needs to figure out which word spells the color she calls out, and then the whole class claps for them. Once someone has said what the color is, she goes around the room to make sure that each child has his or her finger on the word green, noting, “You have to show me that you understand or show me where green is.” Then, each of the children have to pick up a green crayon and hold it up in the air. No one is allowed to color until

she sees that everyone is holding up a green crayon. She then goes on to describe how she is a “stickler” for the children coloring in the lines and making “it look decent” and coloring neatly. She says this activity can take 35-40 minutes. She notes, “It may take a little while, but I’m happy...because I know they got it.”

These activities fit the description of what Wien (1995) refers to as “teacher dominion.”

Characteristics of teacher dominion include:

1. The teacher chooses the activity, its purposes, and its design and then implements it. Ownership of the activity belongs to the teacher: part of the activity is persuading children to her purposes, motivating them.
2. The teacher controls the agenda for action, that is, there is a prescribed range of possible responses that the children are permitted. Activity outside the range is corrected.
3. The activities are obligatory. Children are to do them in order to learn specific content.
4. The activities are generally conducted in large groups.
5. There is a fixed schedule of events, the routine, with the teacher moving from one activity to the next as she conducts the children through them. (Wien, 1995, p. 8)

Interestingly, while Tameka frequently talks about her lack of dominion over her own practice, she exerts a significant amount of control in the literacy activities that she describes. These activities involve the whole class doing the same thing at the same time, there are strict rules and expectations, and there is only one right answer each time.

There are, however, a few examples of activities that Tameka gives that are somewhat more open-ended and play-based, allowing some flexibility for the each individual child to interpret and execute in his or her own way. Children have frequent opportunities to play with playdough, and while playing with playdough helps develop the fine motor skills needed for writing and is therefore inherently a literacy-related activity, Tameka only sees the literacy connection when she asks the children to shape letters from the playdough. Tameka also models writing for the children during circle time (although she does not explicitly address concepts of print such as directionality) and has environmental print throughout the room labeling centers,

furniture, and materials. Writing materials are open-ended and available to children throughout center time and she has several children in her class this year who seem to really enjoy using invented spelling and pictures to write letters to friends and family members.

While writing implements are available, Tameka does comment that only three children in her class are able to write their names, due in large part to undeveloped fine motor skills. The issue of fine motor skill development comes up when Tameka is complaining that there are activities on her lesson plan that her students cannot do, specifically commenting,

[W]e have days where we're supposed to be able to just cut paper...I have maybe three [that can]. The others, they can't even get their fingers in there. They're just grabbing. They can't do it. You think it's simple because we can do it, but it's the most hardest thing for them to be able to grab that.

While she observes these difficulties, it is not clear that she is spending time incorporating activities to help develop fine motor skills, which could be because she does not know what she can do or could be because of limitations in place when someone outside of the classroom controls the content of the curriculum.

Despite the lack of fine motor skills described by Tameka, the children in her class still really enjoy “writing” letters. This interest, in fact, likely led to a change in a writing activity that the children across the school engage in every year. In December, the children write letters to Santa, which last year took the form of the children cutting pictures out of magazines and catalogues of things that they wanted. This year, however, the children will write letters to Santa, although Tameka is still unsure of exactly what form this will take: “I was sitting here then trying to decide, should I put ‘Dear Santa’ on the letters for them and just let them write the letters. Or how are we going to do this?” With little direction and experience, Tameka is still working out the finer details, but what she does know is that her children enjoy writing, telling her about what they have written, and putting their letters in envelopes. She notes, “I know it’s

going to look a mess, but they'll know what they're writing," meaning that she does not expect conventional words and letters but rather accepts, as noted earlier, their "chicken scratch."

Puranik and Lonigan (2014) developed a theoretical framework for emergent literacy as consisting of three different domains. Working within this framework, Tameka supports the students' *conceptual knowledge* of writing, which concerns understanding the function of writing as having purpose and meaning. She encourages the children to write letters and accepts their drawings, scribbling, or whatever else they are producing as representing what are generally understood as the early stages of emergent writing (Byington & Kim, 2017). However, she seems to spend less time on the other two areas: procedural knowledge and generative knowledge. *Procedural knowledge* is concerned with the technical aspects of writing including letter knowledge, phonological awareness, and the development of fine motor skills in order to be able to hold writing tools. Tameka is working with the children to help develop their alphabet and phonemic knowledge; however, her focus is more on applying these to reading rather than to writing. Other than creating letters with playdough, she does not discuss working with children to write their names or creating other opportunities for children to apply their developing knowledge of letters in a written form.

Finally, *generative knowledge* moves beyond the technical to the more expressive components of writing, when children begin to express their ideas through word combinations including phrases and sentences. While the prekindergarten children "would not be expected to produce even moderately skilled writing" (Puranik & Lonigan, 2014, p. 456), opportunities for children to dictate to the teacher help develop this area and allow them to use language to convey meaning. Tameka acknowledges that she never writes down the children's words or stories, indicating that this area of the framework is not currently addressed in her classroom, but it is

possible that Tameka does create opportunities to develop the children's procedural knowledge as it applies to writing but did not mention it in interviews. Of all of the teachers, Tameka in particular seemed to have the most difficulty reflecting on and articulating her practice.

Beliefs About Literacy Learning and Development

Tameka's literacy goals for her students are straightforward: learn to read "a few words, if nothing else," be able to understand what they read, and be able to spell and recognize their names. While Tameka recognizes play and art as an important part of the day, she believes that these are over-emphasized at her school and that more time needs to be allotted to "schoolwork" given that preschool children are "like sponges almost." Allocating a lot of time to art, in her opinion, does not adequately prepare the children for what comes next:

I think by 5 and getting ready to go to kindergarten, they should be able to at least recognize some sight words. I think to me that should be a little bit more in the lesson plans than so much art, because you get art once a week, I believe, in [elementary] school. They're not going to need that as much.

This is not to say that she does not think art, in particular, has a place in the classroom as she describes art as a form of therapeutic story-telling:

[A]rt alone tells a story sometimes...I'll go around and ask them what exactly is your story about. You would be surprised at some of them. Ninety-five percent of it is something that has gone on in the house or they saw in the street or they saw at somebody's house. Something that they're little mind has not released yet, they'll put it down on paper. I do a lot of art, almost art therapy in here on certain days. Like today is art therapy day...They express a lot.

While she is able to see the value in art and activities that encourage self-expression, Tameka does not feel empowered to strike what she sees as a better balance between art and academic content. Her description also highlights a missed opportunity: she recognizes that their drawing is a means of story-telling, but she does not take the time to write down the children's stories that accompany their art, which would help develop their generative knowledge of writing.

Tameka favors more didactic, teacher-directed activities to work on specific content, including that related to emergent literacy, which creates a real disconnect between her beliefs about how children learn and the more play-based approach used at the school. She has a particular affinity for worksheets, viewing them as a clear and direct way to help children learn specific concepts and also a means of assessing what the children do and do not know.

Unfortunately for Tameka, her assistant director does not see the same value in worksheets and wants a more child-directed, play-based curriculum. Tameka comments:

It really hurts me when they cut me down to one paper a day or a week. I can only do one a week. That kind of bothers me because I like for them to be able to see what they're doing. When I go around and put stickers on their work, they are so proud of themselves.

Tameka holds what Riley-Ayers and Figueras-Daniel (2018) describe as a “narrow definition of academic rigor...that emphasizes worksheets and other highly teacher-directed activities” (p. 52). Riley-Ayers and Figueras-Daniel note that educators and policy-makers tend to mistakenly place heavier emphasis on the value of teacher-directed learning when working with children in “under-resourced communities” (p. 52) like the one served by Tameka’s school. The assistant director seems to act in opposition to this misconception and values a child-centric, play-based approach, but Tameka nevertheless maintains a preference for teaching practices that favor a teacher-dominion framework (Wien, 1995). This is evident in Tameka’s survey responses that she believes children learn better through “drill and practice” and “circling pictures of things that rhyme on worksheets.” On the other hand, she disagreed with statements on the survey that support children learning through play, making up rhymes, and listening to nursery rhymes to learn about sounds in words, all of which are more aligned with descriptions of developmentally appropriate practice.

At one point Tameka talks about what she would do if she had more control over what she did in the classroom, and she responds:

I would take each one—instead of, again, so much play—I would probably put more time into at least knowing that they could read a small book. It doesn't have to be really big, but enough where they could read a book by themselves. That would make me feel really good to know that they have left here and can at least read a book. So I would like to have the time to take each one of them daily and go over some books and read small books. And let them be able to read back to me.

When asked what she thinks she could do to help children get to this point where they are able to read a book, she says, “maybe reading more to them.” Tameka wants her students to leave her class knowing how to read, but she repeatedly states that the primary way to get them there is to simply read more. While reading books with children is an important part of developing emergent literacy, there are a multitude of other areas of knowledge, skills, and experience that also factor in to children becoming readers and writers. Beyond teaching the children letters and phonemes through teacher-directed repetition and drills, Tameka does not seem particularly familiar with developmentally appropriate ways to create a foundation for early literacy that are described in the literature (National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2022; Neuman, Copple, & Bredekamp, 2000; Riley-Ayers & Figueras-Daniel, 2018).

In fact, in an ideal situation in which she had more control over curriculum content and teaching, Tameka says she would use more worksheets and flashcards to help children learn to read and write. In particular, she talks about seeing a program on TV called “My Baby Can Read”² that she really likes and how in the past she incorporated a similar approach:

I would probably do more sight—I really like that, it comes on the television, “My Baby Can Read.” I like that. I really like that because I notice even in here, if I put up—well, I

² “My Baby Can Read” included flash cards, books, and videos and claimed to teach children to learn to read before the age of 1. The program went out of business in 2012 when the Federal Trade Commission filed charges alleging there was no scientific evidence to support the program’s claims that infants could learn to read using their approach. In 2014, the founder of the program and its parent company agreed to judgments of over \$185 million to resolve the charges, most of that to be suspended once the company paid \$300,000 (Lipka, 2014).

haven't been able to do it as much in this school as I did the last class that I had. I would show them one week solid. We went over a picture of a doll. Pictures and then I'd write it. Pictures of a grapefruit then I would write it out. Pictures of something and write it out. And eventually fade out with the pictures of the doll and let them be able to tell me the words. Then fade out. You spell the word. I call it out and you spell it. I like that. I like being able to—because I feel successful when I know that when I say the word *doll*, I don't have to show you the doll anymore. I don't have to write *doll*. You can write it now. So I think if I could do it that way, that's the way I would go. I like that.

There are a few possible explanations for Tameka's preference for flash cards and worksheets.

One is that they are very clear and straightforward methods with easy-to-assess outcomes. A child either does it correctly or she does not. However, another possible explanation is that Tameka is simply unfamiliar with more developmentally appropriate approaches. Tameka has been teaching for 5 years at Carter Wesley and says that they do 15 hours of professional development every year, but she still seemed largely unfamiliar with more play-based and meaningful ways to incorporate early literacy experiences. Compounding the problem is that she has no autonomy or control over her curriculum and it seems that rather than spending time helping Tameka learn about approaches and methods that are more developmentally appropriate, the response of the school has been to simply place the locus of control in the hands of the assistant director. An additional explanation is that Tameka felt that it was her responsibility to play a strong role and have high expectations for her students in order to try to prepare her children for a successful future and to, as Delpit (1995) described, "take the responsibility to *teach*, to provide for students who do not already possess them, the additional codes of power" (p. 40).

While Tameka's activities of choice are more didactic, a few of her beliefs about early literacy activities and development are more open-ended and allow greater opportunity for children to playfully engage. For instance, Tameka believes that letting children act-out stories allows them to

understand a story a little better if they can play parts in the story and have something that they can say in the story—their parts. I think that helps a lot, too, and makes it more—they want to read the story more. They're more interested instead of me just reading something to them.

Tameka also believes that children need a lot of opportunities to talk, with her and with one another. Tameka believes that oral language, in addition to being important in helping children learn to code switch between home language and school language as mentioned earlier, has an explicit connection to written language as well: “Because I think you’ll speak what you hear. You’re going to write down what you hear. They write the way they talk and that’s sometimes not always good. I have some pretty jazzy kids in here.” In addition to impacting how the children write, she also believes oral language impacts reading: “Because you’re talking one way, and you’re reading a very good novel and they’re pronouncing words that you don’t even know exist. You don’t even understand the book. You can’t understand them.” This fits with her definition of literacy as equated to reading but also “understanding what you read as well.”

Tameka speaks of feeling pressure and wanting to help children get ready. Unlike other teachers, however, her concerns are not explicitly related to kindergarten readiness but rather are broader in scope as she worries about helping her children be prepared to succeed in life more generally. This is likely in large part correlated with the fact that the students are from families with low household incomes and the children are also predominantly Black, both descriptors for populations of children that are typically left behind. Tameka seems to feel somewhat stifled by the school’s emphasis on play and she believes more teacher-directed activities such as worksheets and flashcards are the best way to help children learn. In interviews, she directly asks for ideas for activities she can do that will satisfy the assistant director’s beliefs about developmentally appropriate approaches but also help the children learn to read and write, so it is

possible that with more education and professional development regarding developmentally appropriate practice that Tameka could transition from favoring teacher-directed activities.

Summary

Tameka is a Black woman teaching predominantly Black children from families with a low annual household income, factors that likely impact her early literacy beliefs and ideal pedagogical approaches. However, Tameka has very little control over the content of her own teaching, including both materials and activities, which are selected by the assistant director of her school. This creates a low correlation between Tameka's beliefs about literacy curriculum and pedagogy and her actual practice, due primarily to the external control over her teaching. She is frustrated by the influence of instructional preferences and curricula selected by the assistant director that favor white, middle-class values while Tameka would prefer to incorporate more explicit activities and take a more didactic pedagogical approach, believing that these are concepts that are needed to help support her students' future academic experiences and success.

Tameka's descriptions of early literacy activities reflect the more child-centered approaches favored by the assistant director and the more large group, didactic activities that she tries to "sneak in." When asked specifically about literacy activities, she gets most excited about describing those that explicitly focus the entire class at once on repeating letter names and color words, for example. She favors worksheets, repetition, and large group instruction, and she does not seem to make the connection between other activities that she describes as occurring in her classroom, such as playing with play-doh and conversations during play, and their impact on early literacy development. In her 20 years in education, Tameka says there have not been any shifts in her literacy beliefs or teaching because the end goal, learning to read and write, has never changed.

Chapter V: Margie

Margie has been in the early childhood field for 17 years but is only in her third year of teaching prekindergarten. She has a degree in early childhood/child development/family relations and her initial certification was for kindergarten through third grade. However, while Margie has spent the entirety of her career in early education, she took a somewhat unconventional path to becoming a prekindergarten teacher. Margie began her career teaching toddlers but then very quickly made the jump to administration, becoming an assistant director of a NAEYC-accredited program and serving in that position for 10 years. When her family moved to Texas, Margie was looking to go back into the classroom but needed a position that helped her to balance work and family. She explains:

Well, I wanted something that fit with my children's schedule. I knew eventually that they would be—my daughter is in kindergarten now—and I knew eventually they'd be going into the public schools. And I had been so used to working in the program in Virginia that was all year round, you know, only closed for federal holidays, and I really wanted something that was going to be a little bit more flexible.

Margie's role as a parent not only impacted her decision to go back into teaching after an extended hiatus but also, as will be discussed later in this chapter, has shaped her developing beliefs about what are and are not appropriate expectations and activities in a prekindergarten classroom.

Margie is in her third year at the Early Childhood Learning Center (ECLC), a private program that gives enrollment priority to employees of the local public school district. Margie is a white woman, and 81% of the school district employees are also white. In the year in which we spoke, 89% of teachers were white, 1% were African-American, and 9% were Hispanic, and the average years of teaching experience was 13.5 with 32.7% of teachers holding an advanced degree (www.tea.texas.gov, 2023). Given these employee statistics, the students in Margie's

class were predominantly white and had a good chance of being the children of experienced educators.

The ECLC provides before and after care, opening at 6:30am and closing at 6:00pm, and also has programming in the summer. Margie, however, works 8:00-3:00 in order to align with her children's school schedule. The ECLC has classrooms for infants through pre-kindergarten, and Margie teaches in a partially inclusive pre-k classroom. The school district has a Preschool Program for Children with Disabilities (PPCD), which is a public program for children age 3 to 5. Every morning, four children from the PPCD come to Margie's classroom with a paraprofessional and their teacher, Becky. This year, Margie only has 13 children in her class so for the few hours that the PPCD children are in her room there are 17 children and three adults, a ratio that Margie has really enjoyed, particularly given that last year she had 27 children in her class in the morning. Margie describes herself and Becky as "kind of [a] tag team" as they alternate responsibility each week for lesson plans and leading class activities, and that relationship has been an important part of Margie's development as a prekindergarten teacher.

Factors Influencing Literacy Practices and Curriculum

In only her third year teaching prekindergarten, Margie admits to having her "own insecurity [about] being in administration for so long." She explains that when she first started, she would ask herself, "Coming back into the classroom, was I going to be able to do a good job? And so I think I had just been out of it for so long that I was just intimidated." Given her initial lack of confidence and her time out of the classroom, Margie was particularly fortunate to find a position that involved so much collaboration. Becky has been teaching in the district for over 15 years and Margie counts her as one of the greatest influences on her literacy practices as Becky brings extensive experience and knowledge to the partnership.

Administration and Curriculum

One of the things that drew Margie to the ECLC was the approach it takes to curriculum.

She explains:

I came from a NAEYC-accredited center and that was really important to me...to find a place that, even if they weren't NAEYC accredited, that it believed in those same principles. That didn't have this like canned curriculum that somebody came up with that maybe they've never been in the classroom before would use. And this place felt like that to me.

Margie and her colleagues have a theme-based curriculum. However, unlike other programs that prescribe not only a theme but also activities and materials, the boundaries placed upon Margie end at the theme. The program director "sets a curriculum for us as far as what the theme is for the week and then we kind of go from there with what we're going to do." The themes are the same each week throughout the school, from infants through pre-k, but Margie notes that the teachers "gear the activities so that they're age-appropriate for the children in our classrooms." Other than the themes, Margie feels that the director really has little influence on her curriculum. As she explains it, the director is "very supportive" but is "really not micro-managing about what we do in the classroom." This arrangement is perfect for Margie:

I like having the freedom to kind of do what I want to do in my classroom. I mean I kind of like having the shell, you know, "This is what our theme is going to be for the week, but you can take it from there and do what you want with it."

Relationships with Colleagues and the Value of a Strong Co-Teacher

The amount of flexibility Margie has can be very freeing for a teacher, allowing her to make her own decisions based on her pedagogical knowledge as well as her understanding of how her students learn best. However, as a teacher returning to the classroom after a decade-long hiatus, it can also be intimidating, which makes having Becky as a resource and co-teacher in the mornings a tremendous asset to Margie. In a program that leaves all of the lesson planning up to the teachers, Margie discusses how Becky "has lots of activities that she brings to the table," not

to mention the fact that co-teaching means Margie is only responsible for lesson planning and leading the class every other week. In particular, Margie comments how “the first year working with [Becky], because she’d worked in the district for so long and I had worked with special needs children before but not to this extent” that Becky “really influenced how I thought about literacy in the classroom.” Having a strong partner eased Margie’s transition back into the classroom, and Margie describes how Becky and the other pre-kindergarten teacher at the school have expanded her understanding of literacy learning and instruction and allowed her to “[get] away from that it has be on a worksheet type thing.” From her colleagues, she notes how she has grown to understand that literacy “can be so much more hands-on and let’s use a white board instead of a worksheet to learn how to write a letter or let’s use, you know, playdough to form the letters...really bringing play into our classrooms.” Having these collaborative relationships in place has created a particularly supportive environment for a newer teacher like Margie in which she can benefit from the expertise of her colleagues (Hopkins & Spillane, 2014; Ingersoll & Strong, 2011).

Influence of Parents

While Margie feels that Becky and the other prekindergarten teacher exert the strongest influence on her literacy practice, she also acknowledges that the parents’ literacy goals “can influence it [her teaching] quite a bit.” She explains:

Now I will say that because we work with teachers’ kids that they - their expectations of my age group do kind of blow me away sometimes as far as, you know, “Well are they going to be reading by the end of the year?” My - kind of how my philosophy on that is I’ll take a child as far as they can go. If they’re ready to read, I’m certainly not going to stop them but I want to give them the tools to use to be able to be a great reader in kindergarten. That’s my goal.

Margie does not necessarily share the parents’ goal of having all of the children reading at the end of the year. Much of her teaching is informed by her own experiences as a parent, and she

discusses how her daughter “went into kindergarten not being able to read at all, and she’s doing wonderfully. And so that’s what I tell parents: ‘It’s okay!’” Margie believes that the parents’ knowledge of kindergarten expectations influences their expectations for what their children do in prekindergarten, and she explains the contrasts she has observed between different elementary schools in the district:

You know, every elementary school is a little bit different and I've got some parents that were great over here at this elementary school and I said to one of them, "Have you seen the new report card?" because it really lays out what is expected each nine weeks in kindergarten. And some, and even not pushing our curriculum, some of what we're still doing is on, like, the children don't need to know 'til the second nine weeks of kindergarten. And they're like, "Yeah we saw that!" But, you know, this [other] elementary school they kind of go off the grid and they're so academic over there and that's why they're kind of more worried about it there, you know.

Parents whose children will be going to the more “academic” school are perhaps the most vocal proponents of what she describes as “the big push” for reading in prekindergarten. As teachers in the district and perhaps as parents with older children, they know what is coming next for their children and they might have greater concerns about how well-prepared their children will be for kindergarten.

While Margie does try to communicate to parents her belief that the children can become successful readers and kindergartners without learning to read by the end of prekindergarten, she acknowledges that the parents’ push for their children to be reading has led her to add certain activities into her literacy curriculum that she might not have otherwise. For example, she describes how worksheets can become a type of fallback activity that gives children something concrete to bring home and show their parents as a type of evidence of the literacy development that is happening. While she admits to relying more heavily on worksheets last year when she had 27 students, she notes,

[T]his year we really sat and looked at it and said, “You know what, that’s not always so age appropriate. And they’re going to be doing enough of that when they get into

elementary school. Let's find more concrete, hands-on things where they are learning the same thing but not necessarily with a pencil and a paper."

She discusses how she worried that moving into more hands-on activities would lead to push-back from parents "because usually when they see something they're like, 'Oh, they did something today' as opposed to 'What did you do today?' 'Oh, well we used the snap cubes and we were adding with them.' They can't really see that." Margie worried that the lack of a tangible product would bother parents, but she has been pleasantly surprised that she has not had any negative response from the parents. She admits that she still does have the children do some worksheets, primarily related to the letter of the week, but she justifies using them by seeing them as serving a dual purpose: parents get to see that their children are working on learning and writing letters while Margie uses it as an opportunity to see how well children can follow directions and work independently.

Margie describes another activity that she uses in part as a reaction to parents. Each week the children work on a "little mini book that goes along with the theme that's very simple to read." She gives the example of one they do for Valentine's Day that has pages that say "This heart is blue. This heart is red." The books are passed out on Monday and the children color the pages and the teachers read it with them every day. By the end of the week, the children "take it home and most of them have memorized it, which is perfectly appropriate at this age. But they are picking up a few sight words here and there and that seems to - that's what their parents want." She describes how the parents "are a little bit excited about sight words" and so she has found these books to be an activity that pleases the parents and that the children also enjoy working on. She explains, "It's something fun for [the children] and at the same time it's kind of—I don't want to say it's pacifying parents, but it's—we kind of have come to a happy medium there."

Policies and Guidelines

Margie's explanation of her expanding understanding of literacy instruction and learning fit with her description of the ECLC as a program that takes a child-centered, play-based approach consistent with NAEYC guidelines for developmentally appropriate practice. Margie has a large degree of freedom in determining what activities her students are engaging in on a daily basis and is completely free from the expectations and goals set forth in the Texas Prekindergarten Guidelines. In fact, she is largely unfamiliar with the content of the guidelines although she notes that "we certainly have looked at them and have access to those." As we are talking about the guidelines and I ask if she has ever looked at them closely, she has little to say about the actual content of the guidelines themselves. Instead, she responds that the only times she has really reflected upon the guidelines or anything related to state involvement in public pre-k is when she "wondered why we didn't have the same curriculum" as the district's prekindergarten program. She notes that she went to the director of her school and asked if they could get the same curriculum since Becky, the PPCD teacher, is a district employee and her children are part of the pre-k program, but was told it was not available to them.

Margie is careful to say, however, that she only wants the curriculum materials as a "supplement" or resource for designing her own lesson plans, not as predetermined outline for what she should do on a daily basis in her classroom. Margie highly values her flexibility and was adamant about not using a "canned curriculum". She submits weekly lesson plans that are in accordance with the director's chosen theme, but she also acknowledges that if a planned activity or idea just does not seem to be resonating with the children or helping them learn, she is able to deviate from the plans and try a different activity or approach. Margie comes up with activities based on suggestions from her colleagues as well as websites and teacher activity

books that she has found to be useful and also sometimes incorporates materials from Handwriting Without Tears. Margie's descriptions of different activities, both teacher-directed as well as more child-driven, demonstrate her expanding understanding of what she wants literacy to look like in her classroom as well as what activities she sees children engaging in that she believes support their literacy development.

Description of Literacy Practices and Beliefs

Margie's overarching approach to teaching is "I treat the children like I would want someone to treat my own children." As noted earlier, her experiences as a parent shape her teaching and support her belief that prekindergarten does not need to be overly focused on turning all children into readers before they go to kindergarten. She holds onto the notion that children develop in different ways and at different paces, something she has seen in her own children, and she believes that good teaching is responsive and flexible. Margie discusses how children need opportunities to "explore, experiment, make predictions" and that her goal is to foster independence and opportunities for the children to "come up with ideas about how to extend the lesson." She also recognizes moments when some children need more adult support than others as a scaffold for their learning and tries to adjust her interactions accordingly. The challenge Margie has is applying this broader, more process-oriented understanding of early education with more specific goals and expectations involving literacy development.

Margie has a broad understanding of literacy as "anything written or oral." Given this definition, she explains how she sees literacy not merely as isolated, planned-for activities but also as opportunities that occur throughout the day: "Well, I think that we're doing something that's related to literacy or literacy development pretty much every single day and it doesn't always have to be, you know, specifically journal writing or reading a book." She notes that they

“do things that are very, I’d guess you say, concrete” but she also recognizes the more spontaneous, child-led literacy events that occur throughout the day as well. Margie’s class spends a good portion of their day in what she calls “child-directed centers” during which the children move freely throughout the classroom. Margie provides materials in centers that she believes help support their literacy learning, and she acknowledges and value the spontaneous, child-directed literacy events that occur during their center time. There are writing and art supplies, letter stamps, magnet letters, books, magazines, puzzles with letters, and a listening center, and materials are labeled in order to provide environmental print (for instance, buckets are labeled cars, people, dinosaurs, etc.). She describes how having these materials available to children leads to activities such as making cards for loved ones, which has been something that was started by the children and has progressed over the course of the year. The children started by asking the teachers to write messages for them and in February began to try to sound words out on their own. Margie also acknowledges the value of oral language when she points out, “I don’t think some teachers recognize that, ‘Hey, that’s part of literacy , what I’m doing—talking to children and engaging them in conversation, giving them the correct words to use, or sitting down and maybe reading that book one-on-one.” Teachers “should be spotlighting [literacy] in their lessons planning” but she also hopes that all teachers recognize the everyday moments such as singing songs or providing children with the vocabulary to help them solve problems that are also part of children’s literacy learning.

The foundation of Margie’s literacy teaching is that it “offers them enough opportunities” to engage with oral and written language. While she recognizes the literacy development that occurs during play and that is initiated by children, she also has specific literacy goals for her students and devotes a lot of time each day to teacher-led literacy activities. Margie’s literacy

goals include: recognize their first and last names; be able to print their names “the kindergarten way” (first letter is capitalized); recognize their letters (“but if they don’t, that’s okay”); know letter sounds; know print concepts such as left to right, top to bottom; know some sight words; understand rhyming words; sequencing events and stories; be able to answer questions about a story (comprehension); and, finally, be able to ask questions about a story. When it comes to whether or not reading is a goal for all of her students, she clarifies, “If they’re ready to do it, I am willing to take them there, but it’s not one of my literacy goals.”

It is important to point out that Margie states that “most of the children came to us already knowing their alphabet and knowing their letters in order and knowing most of the sounds.” Alphabet knowledge and phonemes are heavily emphasized in the younger classrooms at her school, where children work on letter of the week activities such as decorating letters, painting letters, or writing with pencils. Margie admits that “what we’re highlighting and spotlighting in some classrooms is not age appropriate,” and she worries that the teachers of the younger children do not have an appropriately broad understanding of how language and literacy develop through conversation, songs, and play. However, the heavy emphasis on the letters of the alphabet in the early age groups means that all but one or two of the children are able to identify all of the upper and lower case letters at the fall assessment. She explains, “Whether it’s age appropriate or not, they’ve done it there, so when they come to my room, they already know it.” While Margie questions the appropriateness of this, she also recognizes that it affects her own teaching: “I think if they couldn’t [identify the letters], it might change where I went from there in the curriculum.” She explains that in her class they do a letter of the week and she acknowledges “some people don’t necessarily agree with the whole letter of the week thing. It should be more just as you come upon a letter [and] maybe you shouldn’t do the letters in order.”

Because the children already know the letters, she is less concerned about the validity of doing a letter of the week and going in alphabetical order. The fact that the children have already learned the letters also frees Margie from the burden of expectation and possible pressures from parents regarding alphabet knowledge. This makes it easier for her to adhere to her belief that it is not “the end of the world” if the children do not know all of the letters by the end of prekindergarten, in large part because they already know the letters when they get to her class.

Having a broad understanding about literacy development does not mean that Margie does not intentionally spend a significant part of her day on teacher-planned and teacher-directed literacy activities. Rather, it means that she feels more comfortable balancing what she thinks of as a whole language approach based upon more exploratory, child-driven activities with an emphasis on discrete letter learning and more concrete, teacher-directed activities. During circle time, Margie reads a story with the class, asks and answers questions about the story, and then frequently does an activity with the letter of the week. This may include reviewing how to write the letter with the whole class, going over the sound(s) the letter makes, or “letter of the week show and tell” where the children bring something that starts with that letter. After circle time, the class spends over an hour of each morning in “learning rotations,” goes outside to play, and then comes back inside for an additional 45 minutes of learning rotations.

The first learning rotations consist of three activities, with the children spending 20-25 minutes at each activity. On a typical day, one rotation is a child-directed activity in the block area, dramatic play or manipulatives that on occasion will have a theme-related suggested activity. An example of a theme-related activity in the block center would be that during the community helpers unit, children are asked to pretend to be an architect or builder and to work in a group to design and build a structure. The second rotation is a teacher-directed math or literacy

activity such as journal writing, an activity practicing writing the letter of the week, or retelling a story by putting pictures in the correct order. The third rotation is also working with a teacher and might be a fine motor activity such as cutting and pasting or maybe working on a puzzle. The second round of learning rotations later in the morning is usually one teacher-directed activity and two child-directed activities.

Margie gives examples of a few different literacy activities that might be included during learning rotations. Every week the children work on a mini-book, which are the books mentioned earlier that Margie said the parents like because they help develop sight words. Margie prints the mini-books from a website and then she sits with the children and tells them to “get your magic finger out, put your finger on the first word” and then she reads the word. Part of her goal for this, she says, is “I just want them to know that what I’m reading is also written on the paper.” The children might also work on letter puzzles, which they have for each letter of the alphabet. After the children put the puzzle together, a teacher will ask the children to name the letter, say what sound it makes, and think of words that start with that sound. They might also do “Rhyme Away” stories for which you draw a picture and then read a sentence and fill in the blank with a word from the picture that completes the rhyme. For example, if it were a picture of a child it might say, “She played in the sand, erase her _____.”

Margie balances these types of activities with what she describes as “literacy opportunities that are open-ended or all-encompassing.” She explains that she likes these types of activities for the children because “it’s not always someone telling them how they should feel or what they should say or what words to use.” When the children are “given a little bit of freedom to explore,” she sees them becoming “more confident in who they are.” She continues, “I think the journals are an excellent way to have literacy in your classroom and it’s mostly just your

thoughts and feelings that go in the journal.” Like much of her practice, Margie’s approach to using the journals continues to evolve. She admits, “Last year we would give a prompt every day and they would have to go from that prompt. This year it has been much more open-ended.” The children work on their journals twice a week during learning rotations and are asked to draw pictures and write about something they have been talking about that week. Over the course of the year, children are in different stages of writing development, and therefore the teachers work with the children and support them in different ways as they write in their journals. Some children dictate to the teachers what they would like written while others are encouraged to try invented spelling or “sound it out” as the teachers ask questions such as, “What does that sound like? What letters do you hear?” Some of the children are working on their fine motor skills, so Margie will sometimes write a word and have the children trace over it or she will make dots that the children connect to form the letters. Margie explains that using journals in this way allows for self-expression, supports individual literacy development, and also helps the teachers gauge “Are they interested in what we’ve been teaching? Have we found something they like?”

In addition to written forms of language, Margie believes that oral language is one of the most important aspects of literacy development because it “expands their vocabulary, and I think that the more words that they have, the better able they are to express themselves both verbally and in their writing.” Margie says that while she does not necessarily include oral language opportunities in her lesson plans, she is more cognizant of it as an important part of their everyday interactions in the classroom, in part because of the fact that it is an inclusive setting. Show and tell is a weekly activity in her class and Margie explains that “part of why we do this is for the children with special needs.” She is quick to point out, however, that the activities that support oral language development are emphasized with all of the children “so we’re not just

picking out the PPCD kids. So it benefits everybody, but it really benefits them.” For show and tell, the children bring in an item that starts with the letter of the week, and they have to stand up in front of the class and use complete sentences to talk about what they brought. For some of the children, the teachers give them the words to use and the children repeat them.

Margie works hard to support an encouraging environment where children share stories and experiences, pick songs to sing, and engage in conversation with one another. She sees oral language as intimately bound up with social development and describes how the PPCD children that come to her class are pulled out of their special education class where several of the children have severe disabilities and little to no oral language. Her partner, Becky, has observed a noticeable difference in the students that spend time in Margie’s class as it provides them with “that huge social piece that they’re missing” in their special education class. Margie relays how Becky describes what she has observed: “This is the best move ever. Over in our afternoon class, this child wasn’t talking, didn’t answer a question. And when they get over here, they have peers that can model that for them.” Language, therefore, becomes a significant area of development for all of the children in Margie’s class as it supports not only their literacy but also their social development.

Relationship Between Beliefs and Practice

During our conversations, it becomes apparent that Margie is a reflective practitioner who pauses to think about what she is doing and why as she helps children along in their literacy development. This questioning and reflection leads Margie to make changes to her practice not only when she discovers new ideas, but also when it comes to rejecting ideas or activities that she no longer feels align with her ideas about how young children learn best. The space for reflection is supported, in part, by the amount of latitude Margie is given in determining the

curriculum for her class and setting her own literacy goals for the children, unhindered by school or state requirements. While the themes for the week are determined by the director, the content, goals, and materials are based in Margie's beliefs about how children become readers and writers. This allows for a high degree of congruence between her beliefs and her teaching practice. Margie has been in the field of early education for many years and has very coherent ideas regarding individual rates of development and learning, an intention to focus on process not products, and an understanding that there is time, meaning not all children will or need to become readers before they finish pre-kindergarten. Her beliefs are clearly defined but, as a relatively new teacher, she is still exploring and developing her options for activities and approaches to supporting young children in their literacy development. Her practice, therefore, becomes something that is still in process as she works to align it with her beliefs.

Evidence of this growth can be seen in two activities that Margie finds herself moving away from: a word wall and worksheets. When Margie and I first talk and she describes different materials and activities she uses for her literacy curriculum, she mentions that she has a word wall in her classroom but immediately describes it as "really weak." She says she rarely refers children to it and admits, "I'm not following through with it." When we meet for a second time, she has clearly been reflecting upon the word wall:

After we talked that last time I really backed off from that word wall and I really haven't done anything with it because I kept thinking really what is the point of this word wall? And today I was looking at it because we're on the letter U and I only have up to Q on the word wall I think, I thought "why?" Maybe I should just take all the letters down because, I don't know, we have, you know, I don't know, 50 some days of school left. Am I just going to put a whole bunch of words up there just to make it look good or maybe I should just take it down? Because what's more important?

Margie explains that the reason she created the word wall was because she read about it online when she was doing research for reading and writing activities. She has yet to decide, however,

if the dissonance she feels is with the concept of a word wall itself or with her application of the idea: “I either had to be 100 percent in on it or not do it at all.” She continues:

I do think that I really looked at that word wall issue and thought “Why? Why am I killing myself doing these big letters and what can I do differently with it next year?” You know. I think that you know I do have one little girl that, we do read a little bit with her because she is ready to go there and her mom is like, “I can't believe she knows the word ‘the’ but she told me she learned it at school.” And so I take those little moments and I think that it's great for her. She's really kind of made some of those connections and she's reading a little bit at home and you know if we have the opportunity to read here we will. And I think...But you know maybe I need something on a smaller scale where for children that are ready we do like a dictionary with our journals.

Word walls in classrooms from preschool through middle school are held up by some as a means to develop word knowledge and vocabulary, improve fluency, and decrease students' reliance on teachers for help when writing (Jasmine & Schiesl, 2009; Wingate, Rutledge, & Johnston, 2014). Their efficacy, however, requires consistent and intentional use, which is not occurring in Margie's classroom. Margie feels like a word wall is something she is supposed to have in her classroom as a way to support literacy, but she questions its appropriateness in a preschool classroom and its overall utility in helping children's literacy development.

Margie's relationship with worksheets is similarly a source of internal tension, although she is more conflicted about their inclusion and describes herself as being “on the fence” regarding their place in a prekindergarten classroom. Margie believes worksheets are useful because they prepare children for activities, such as writing their name on the top of their paper, that they will be doing in kindergarten: “That's what they're going to be doing next year, and you want them to be prepared for it.” She also sees them as a tangible product for parents as they provide evidence of the work their children are doing in the classroom to develop literacy skills. Margie is wrestling with a tension between her ideas about developmentally appropriate practice and finding ways to both prepare children for kindergarten and appease parents' desire for evidence of literacy learning (Goldstein, 2007).

The second time Margie and I speak, she has also thought about how much more she used worksheets last year. She explains,

I keep saying it was the group was so big and they were so smart sometimes I didn't know what else to do with them, but we have killed a lot less trees this year in terms of that just because we've gone to things like white boards, and, you know, sand table and we do a lot with Play-Doh letters.

When we first speak, Margie says she used the worksheets due to the sheer size of the classroom, so this confession that it was also in part because she “didn’t know what else to do with them” is a clear moment of candid reflection and illustrates the challenges Margie faces as a newer teacher with a lot of responsibility for coming up with her own activities. Margie’s ability to take a step back is an example of Valli’s (1997) descriptions of a reflective teacher as someone who is able to “look back on assumptions and beliefs to be sure they are grounded in logic, evidence, or both” and “look forward to the implications or consequences of a particular action” (p. 68; see also Loughran, 2002). Our conversations about literacy in her classroom prompted Margie to analyze some of the choices she has made, to think about what and how she is teaching but also why she has chosen to include certain materials, activities, or approaches. While she speaks to worksheets and the word wall specifically, she is clearly someone who is comfortable stepping back from her practice and allowing herself to consider whether what she is doing is supporting the needs and interests of her students in meaningful ways.

Shifts in Literacy Practices

Margie feels like prekindergarten has experienced a “push down” and that she sees content and activities that were in kindergarten 18 to 20 years ago when she was doing her student teaching showing up now in preschool classrooms. She admits to worrying,

Are we pushing the reading too much?...Is art not in our lesson plan enough because we’re so worried about, you know, do they know every letter? Do they know all their sounds? Can they print every letter? Can they print their name the correct way?

Margie feels like this push down often translates to more worksheets and she sees this very clearly in her son's preschool. She explains that he often comes home with six worksheets in his take-home folder and that sometimes the teacher will send home notes saying things such as "lost focus" or "He has trouble recognizing a C." Margie worries that her son is missing out on other important elements of literacy learning such as rhyming, singing songs, and other overall more playful experiences.

Seeing her son's experiences as evidence of an overall change in expectations for preschoolers has caused Margie to shift her own practice even further away from activities such as worksheets. She finds herself incorporating fewer formulaic, teacher-directed activities because she says she doesn't "always think learning takes place through right when you're sitting at a table doing something. I think that there's so many other parts of the day where learning can take place." Margie is trying to move away from a reliance on worksheets and do "a lot more tactile things as opposed to paper and pencil." She is using fewer worksheets and is more deliberate in her choices for the ones she does include, noting that she seeks out worksheets that she sees as having "a little bit of meaning and purpose." The gradual shifts that Margie describes as occurring in her practice are illustrative of a reflective practitioner who strives to make her preschool classroom a place where learning occurs through a balance of both intentional and spontaneous, playful opportunities.

Summary

Margie has spent her career in the field of early childhood education, but, having primarily been on the administrative side, she has been learning firsthand what teachers experience as they translate theory into practice. What Margie describes as an initial lack of confidence led her to rely on teacher-directed activities such as worksheets when she first began

teaching three years ago. As someone who is both a reflective practitioner and open to asking for help and suggestions from colleagues, Margie has seen her practice grow into one that incorporates a range of approaches and activities to support children's literacy learning and development. Now in her third year and with the support and influence of an experienced co-teacher, Margie is experiencing greater congruence between her beliefs and practice, and without explicit standards to meet or a curriculum to follow, she has the autonomy and flexibility to create a more hands-on and responsive curriculum that balances play and exploration with intentional, teacher-led activities that support specific areas of literacy. Margie believes that there has been a push-down of expectations since she first entered the field of early childhood, and this combines at times with the high expectations of parents who all work for the local school district and want their children to succeed in school. While these systems of pressure mean that Margie still reluctantly uses worksheets at times in order to produce tangible evidence of literacy learning, she seems to be slowly gaining the confidence in herself as a practitioner to be able to integrate and articulate to parents the benefits of more child-directed and play-based opportunities and their impact on early literacy.

Chapter VI: Angie

With nearly two decades of teaching experience and two children of her own, Angie's ideas about early childhood education are informed as much by her education and experiences in the classroom as they are by her perspective as a parent. Angie holds a BA in Elementary and Special Education and has had a varied professional career: 6 years in public schools, 5 years on a military base in Asia, and now wrapping up her seventh year as a pre-kindergarten teacher at a private Christian school. Angie explains how she ended up teaching preschool:

I just always had an inkling to help those who were struggling. And I just always had a passion for working with the younger kids rather than the older kids...I just like these little ones...They're just enthusiastic about learning and taking all those new adventures with you.

Angie's college program, in particular the special education classes, emphasized the importance of honoring the individual. The program's guiding philosophy was that children

all learn differently. There's no one set box program that you can throw everyone into...You have to go at it in all different angles and give them all the different visual, hearing, touching, all that you need to give them all of that so that they will hopefully grasp onto one of those methods.

This notion of individually appropriate education, seeing development as varied and unique, as well as the importance of providing children with multiple opportunities and access points for learning are seen throughout Angie's descriptions of her teaching practice, her goals for children, and her beliefs about how children learn.

After taking a hiatus from teaching "to be mommy," Angie became a float at her sons' preschool to help offset the tuition costs. Not ever seeing herself "being a stay-at-home mom all the time" but not ready to go back to teaching full-time in a public school, Angie says, "I like the part-time thing and I like the fact that it's a Christian school and you can talk about God." She also likes that it is a NAEYC-accredited program with a "good reputation." The school, affiliated with a church, has programs from one-year-olds through a transitional-kindergarten (TK)

program. Angie, who is white, describes the school population as “pretty much Caucasian” and upper middle class, noting that this is somewhat a reflection of the relative lack of diversity in the surrounding area.

In describing the school as a whole, Angie explains, “Our school is known for the kids coming out of our pre-K program” as very prepared for kindergarten. She continues:

[W]e are academic but I also think have that balance, too, where we still make it—we do the fun things in the centers and the self-exploring learning kinds of things but also work to make sure they do get their letters and sounds. And those that are ready to read, we work on that.

There are four prekindergarten classrooms, three of them led by certified early childhood teachers. The certification is important, as she notes that parents “want to know that especially their last year getting ready for kindergarten that there’s teachers that have an education background and that we...know what we’re doing.” Angie’s class can be a maximum of 18 children, although she only has 16 this year, and they go to school Tuesday, Thursday, and Friday from 9 to 2. Fridays are different, however, in that they are reserved for “specials” during which children spend 30 minutes each in subjects such as art, science, bible drama, cooking, handwriting, movement, and a special program about how to treat others with love and respect. While part of the appeal of teaching in this program was that it was not a five-days-a-week job, its part-time status—with only two days in the classroom—means Angie often talks about the challenge of maintaining a balanced approach while simultaneously fitting in working toward the academic expectations of the school.

Factors Influencing Literacy Practices and Curriculum

Angie’s seventh year at her school marks the end of the second year of a new administration. She is quick to talk about the positive changes that have resulted in the school culture and the balanced learning environment that they are all working to create. Angie is the

team leader for the four pre-kindergarten classrooms at her school and is responsible for ensuring all lesson plans are in and that the teachers have the necessary materials and supplies for upcoming activities.

Role of School Administration

Fortunately for Angie, while the school has a reputation for preparing children for kindergarten—and the weight of expectation that comes with that reputation—, she does not feel that there is a lot of top-down pressure coming from the school administration. In fact, she explains, “I know that our school is...probably one of the heavier academic push and it’s yeah, we’re expected to get them there, but I don’t feel like if we don’t, we’re getting our hand slapped” and getting condemned for not ensuring that all of the children are reading before the end of the school year. Instead, Angie explains that rather than emphasizing academics, she feels that the administration expects the teachers to create a “loving, caring, nurturing environment.”

The emphasis is on

building that loving relationship with [the children], that they feel happy and secure in their environment, and that we take them as far as they can go. If we don’t all get to this point with every single child, it’s not like you’re a failure and you haven’t done your job.

Angie describes the administration as understanding “that not everyone is ready” to start reading and therefore wants the teachers to “expose them as much as possible to the academic part” but also provide time for play, exploration, the development of social skills, and getting a “good Christian foundation.” However, there is still an underlying expectation that children will be “prepped and ready to...be successful out there in the public school.”

Angie feels like the new director is creating a more positive working environment for the teachers. The director is “very supportive” and, in contrast to the previous one, does not micromanage the teachers but rather trusts them and gives them a degree of autonomy in their own classrooms. She explains:

I don't feel like I have someone coming from higher above saying, "You have to do this and it has to be done by this time."...Because I feel like I have the freedom within my classroom to take those that need to go up, up and those that are down here, work with them where they are at.

This gives Angie flexibility and empowers her to make her own decisions about how to individualize instruction and help all of the children learn.

Collaboration with Colleagues

The new director has also created a culture change at the school and altered the ways in which teachers collaborate and work with one another. Angie describes the previous dynamic between teachers as "very competitive." This was fueled in part by the physical separation of the pre-k classrooms, with two located together in one part of the building and the other two in a different section. The physical separation contributed to a competitive dynamic amongst teachers in which it felt like they were "always trying to one-up the next person...There was no team bonding or cohesiveness. It was just we're out doing our own things." This dynamic was further heightened when "parents were talking" and comparing different classrooms: "Why are they doing that? So and so's class isn't doing that."

With the new director, the pre-k classrooms were relocated so that they were all together and a more collaborative relationship was established with the pre-k team. The administration sets the theme, letter and number for each week, which is the same across all age groups in the school, and they also help determine the literacy goals that will appear on the assessment and the report cards. Teachers, however, have a high degree of input into the literacy goals and are also responsible for working together to select activities and materials. Together, for example, the pre-k teachers determine when they are "going to work on beginning sounds or when we're going to start working on word families. We kind of just talk about it and do it together just to get the basic stuff down for those guys for kindergarten."

Team planning follows a set schedule. On the first Wednesday of each month, the pre-k team meets to plan for the following month. They brainstorm as a group and then one team member is assigned to each subject area and is responsible for typing up that subject, creating a list of needed supplies, and making copies of any hand-outs or worksheets. The following week, Angie meets with the assistants to go over crafts, activities, and materials so they can get everything prepped and ready. Lesson plans are then due the third week when they have their staff meeting with the whole school. The teachers pull from a range of resources to come up with activities, but Angie notes that the themes usually come from Scholastic; Scott Foreman is used for math; and Scholastic, Frog Street, and Handwriting Without Tears are the primary sources for literacy-related activities. While there is now less space for teacher/class individuality, Angie feels that the teachers are “definitely more bonded together and sharing ideas” and that this creates a more positive and collaborative teaching and learning environment.

Parent Involvement and Influence

Comparisons by parents, often more negative than positive, played a significant role in the shift to collaborative team planning and the synchronization of activities across classrooms, demonstrating the strong influence of parents and parent expectations at Angie’s school. Parents communicate concerns in conversations with teachers and administrators and are also given a questionnaire at the end of the school year. For several years, the school was hearing concerns from parents regarding a lack of emphasis on handwriting development: “One of our big complaints the last several years was just the parents didn’t feel the kids were getting adequate handwriting kinds of things.” In response, Angie notes that the school has been “trying to work on that” and that they “definitely revved up our handwriting program.” The school began to incorporate “Handwriting Without Tears” into their curriculum, spent more time on developing

hand strength and letter formation, and became more deliberate about “scheduling more of that into our daily routines.”

In the first of two parent/teacher conferences, not only does Angie go over “what [their child] knew and didn’t know” on assessments, but she also take the opportunity to lay out expectations. For Angie, parents typically fall into two groups when it comes to expectations: those who have older children and those whose only or oldest child is in pre-k. While she notes that “probably 75%” of parents would say they expect their child to “learn their alphabet, learn their sounds, identify numbers, write numbers, [and] read,” she does observe that parents whose oldest is in pre-k are more likely to emphasize social-emotional goals such as making friends and being a good listener. She reflects, “But it’s interesting to get those same parents who say that for their oldest, by the time...their second one gets to you, their expectations have changed just because they have had a child” in kindergarten. Knowing what is next, parent expectations shift more toward academic skills they believe are integral to kindergarten readiness.

Angie describes the school as having a reputation for being more academic and helping children leave ready for kindergarten. At times, however, she feels she needs to manage parent expectations, particularly when parents say they want their child to be reading by the end of the school year. Angie notes that while most children will learn their upper and lower case letters, it is common to have children who learn “maybe 50, 75 percent of their sounds” and to further have only a small number of children who are mastering sight words and beginning to decode and put sounds together to read. Angie communicates to parents that “we’re going to take them as far as they are ready to go,” which means that children will be at different stages of literacy development at the end of the year, and she emphasizes to parents that this is all okay. She has frequent communication with parents throughout the year about their child’s progress and she

engages parents in specific activities at home to help foster their child's literacy development. For Angie, her relationship with parents is a balance between responding to and managing their goals and expectations for their children while also communicating to them ideas about variation in child development as well as literacy learning in particular.

Role of State Standards and NAEYC Guidelines

Angie and her colleagues use the NAEYC guidelines for developmentally appropriate practice in conjunction with the state pre-k standards to determine "the expectations of what we need to be doing." They compare the two different sets of standards and "look at what they expect 4-year-olds to be doing and kind of meshing those together." The state standards are used for the report card and "to review and make sure we're doing what we need to be doing and we're not totally out there in left field." Her school's recent renewal of NAEYC accreditation has led to a "tweaking" of the report card to include "more of the behavioral kinds of expectations" and "more with social and emotional development."

While Angie often talks about making an effort to be developmentally appropriate and to have individualized expectations for children, she does feel they also have to respond to a push down of expectations from the older grades. She discusses how there seems to have been a shift in expectations over the years, noting that "the state criteria has [sic] changed. Their guidelines have increased...Just talking to the kindergarten teachers over the last year or two, they constantly seem like they're changing their curriculum and updating" it. These changes or "bump up" of requirements to kindergarten result in increased expectations "kind of trickling back down to us." Angie asserts that the state standardized test in third grade is largely responsible for the increased expectations that are ultimately pushed down into pre-k. Rather than being able to push

back, she feels like pre-k teachers must adjust: “Well, if they want us to get ready, I guess we’re going to have to start maybe pushing this a little more or doing this or that.”

Description of Literacy Practices

Like I said, especially in our area it is expected that the kids are ready and prepared for kindergarten. That they’re very strong on their letters and sounds and walking into [local district’s] schools, they want to know that they’re not just starting to learn their alphabet or just starting to write their names. That’s kind of because [if] they come in at that point, then they’re probably going to be struggling to catch up for a good majority of the time.

At one point Angie states, “You’re probably going to go back...and say, ‘They push these kids too hard!’” For Angie, the challenge is to balance the expectations for kindergarten readiness of parents and local schools while also holding a belief in individual rates of learning and development. Combine these pressures and beliefs with the fact that she only has her students with her three days a week—one of which is spent in different rotations of specials—and Angie often comments on how she feels like “we’re so busy it seems like we’re always just go, go, go, go...I have no time to teach.” Gallant (2009) found that teachers like Angie who work in part-time programs feel an added pressure of teaching more in less time. Angie’s schedule, as seen below, is tightly packed. Take into consideration that transitions between activities are not specifically included in the schedule and one can understand why Angie talks about feeling rushed. This is the schedule that Angie follows for her classes:

Table 4

Angie’s Daily Schedule

	Tuesday	Thursday
9:00-9:40	Centers	
9:40-10:10	Literacy Circle Time/Morning Message (prayer, morning message, Phonemic Awareness Instruction, Read Aloud/Shared Reading, planning for the day)	
10:10-10:20	Restroom	
10:20-11:00	Literacy/Math Rotations (library corner, listening center, letter and word	

	area, writing area and special literacy projects, Math, snack). Teacher conducts guided reading lessons.	
11:00-11:45	Circle Time (calendar, weather, poems, singing and movement activities, Bible, discussion of theme topic)	
11:45-12:20	Restroom and Lunch	
12:20-12:40	Garage	Cube (indoor play space)
12:40-1:00	Outside Play	
1:00-1:20	Crafts	Library
1:20-1:40	Science	Chapel
1:40-2:00	Math	Story Time
2:00	Parent Pick-up	

Friday schedule:

9:00-9:30	Journal
9:30-10:00	Art
10:00-10:30	Music
10:30-11:00	Cooking
11:00-11:30	Circle Time/Morning Message (calendar, weather, morning message, discussion of theme topic, poems, singing and movement activities, planning for the day)
11:30-12:00	Cube
12:00-12:30	Restroom/Lunch
12:30-12:45	Quiet Reading Time
12:45-1:15	Rotation 1 – Movement or Math
1:15-1:45	Rotation 2 – Science or Bible Drama
1:45-2:00	Story Time
2:00	Parent pick-up

Angie starts the day with free time, sometimes trying to stretch the allotted time up to an hour as children play in different centers. She does not assign children to centers, restrict the number of children in a center at one time, or dictate how much time children are allowed to play in each center. This is the least structured part of the day, and Angie enjoys having this time to “hang out with the kids, play with them, take anecdotal notes of them, or just kind of talk to them and interact with them.” For the rest of the day, many of the activities are much briefer, typically 20 minutes allotted to activities that the class engages in as a whole. Literacy rotations take up a

50 minute block of time, during which the children are assigned to a rotation, spending 10 minutes in one of four centers before cleaning up and moving to the next center. For example:

Table 5

Angie’s Small Group Rotation

Tuesday:

1. Teacher Keia, Willie	2. Art—dot paint flowers Keira, Eli	3. Snack—yummy/ yuck taste test Mark, Jane	4. Math—make patterns with seeds Mary, Tim
1. Listening Center Alison, Will	2. Work Table—letter search, handwriting, poem pages Jen, Dave	3. Snack—yummy/ yuck taste test Michael, Adam	4. Handwriting— white boards, write numbers Dana, Phil

Thursday:

1. Teacher Alison, Will	2. Art—dot paint flowers Jen, Dave	3. Snack Michael, Adam	4. Math—make patterns with seeds Dana, Phil
1. Listening Center Keia, Willie	2. Work Table—letter search, handwriting, poem pages Keira, Eli	3. Snack Mark, Jane	4. Handwriting— white boards, write numbers Mary, Tim

The pairing of children is not random as Angie uses ability grouping based on children’s letter knowledge and emerging literacy skills as a solution to managing the lack of time, high expectations, and her desire to work with children based on where they are in their individual development. She typically begins conducting assessments during the third week of school to “find out where they are” and then makes cards, updated three to four times during the year that help her keep track of what letters and/or sounds a child misses or does not know. If a child is able to correctly identify a letter 100% of the time for a couple of weeks in a row, Angie takes the card for that letter out of the child’s individual packet. She then conducts a second more

formal assessment in the spring. Prior to using the information from these assessments to create ability-based groups, Angie says:

I was having a hard time getting especially those that were at the far ends of the spectrum. As a group we do a lot of group talking and group reviewing... but a lot of times, especially those little ones, they're in la la land and they're not really grasping. Whereas if it's pretty much close to being one-on-one or two-on-one, I can spend a whole lot more time talking and trying to get at whatever concept we're working at or what we're doing.

Using the assessments and creating groups enables her to give more time and attention to individuals and meet them wherever they are in their literacy learning. Angie says she typically has children who are right on the cusp of reading as well as children who are still working on learning to identify letters, and she feels the grouping allows her to support them on a more individual level, particularly the children who she believes are “struggling.”

This year, she and the other pre-k teachers began combining groups across the different classes into “high, medium, and low groups.” The “high” group works on “word families and stuff like that a whole lot because they were ready for those kinds of things.” The majority of children fell into the middle group and they work on “firming up letters and sounds and that kind of stuff through games” while the lower group would spend more time working on identifying individual letters, such as making A’s out of playdough. Angie and her colleagues like this approach and feel like it enables them to work with smaller groups, have the children work with different children, and most successfully help children continue to learn.

During both literacy rotations as well as throughout the day, Angie incorporates a range of activities intended to help children develop literacy-related knowledge, skills, and experiences. Activities are introduced during the morning group time or “literacy circle time”, where Angie goes over “stuff that we’re going to be talking about and doing once we get to our rotations.” They sing songs, talk about the letter of the week, have “phonemic awareness

instruction,” as well as go over the schedule and say the morning prayer. Angie frequently notes that parents and the administration are “expecting us to teach” the alphabet, and she views studying a letter each week, coupled with revisiting letters that have already been covered to help children learn through repetition and exposure, as a central part of literacy learning in pre-k. In addition to letter activities during literacy rotations, the class will brainstorm words that start with the letter during circle time and she will write them down, creating a list that the children add to over the course of the week. She encourages the children to go home and talk to their parents about the letter of the week to help them come up with more words. While letter of the week discussions also include introducing the sound(s) a letter makes, Angie is careful to clarify that she does not place too much emphasis on letter sounds with all of the children, particularly during literacy rotations, as some of the children are still working on letter identification.

On a typical day during rotations, Angie describes how children will spend time with books independently, go to the listening center, work in their handwriting book, or go to “table work”. Angie has books all around the room and provides the children with “exposure to a variety of different books” by including science books in the science centers, books about buildings and construction in the block center, books related to the current theme, picture dictionaries, and books about letters. The morning group time includes reading a book related to the theme and often building an activity from that book. During this reading time, “we’re working on just tracking print, doing book walks, and talking about the pictures and the stories and what’s going on, and everything. Do a lot of talking beforehand and then we choral read together.” While the morning reading time is more instructive, at the end of the day Angie reads “just for enjoyment” and “for the pleasure of being exposed to the love of books and reading.”

It is important to Angie to get books into children's hands and develop or nurture a love of reading. One of her favorite things to do is make class books. She will make books with pictures from a field trip; books that mimic the style of *Brown Bear, Brown Bear* by Bill Martin Jr. and Eric Carle; alphabet books with pictures of the children holding objects that begin with a certain letter (for example, holding a globe for the letter G); and also "Star Student" books, which children make with their families and include pictures and/or drawings of their family members, favorite books, favorite food, and other favorites. Angie sees the class books as empowering the children to read independently, including memorization rather than decoding. Angie's class will also write books and poems together "where kids will all get to contribute."

During rotations, "table work" is related to the letter of the week. An example would be when the children are "highlighting a page that came from Frog Street. If it's 'A' week, they're going to go through and look for all the upper and lower case A's" and highlight all of the A's they can identify on the sheet. Letter of the week activities are often pulled from the Frog Street curriculum and materials. For each letter of the alphabet, Frog Street has a book focused on that letter and also a CD that has a song about the letter, the sounds it makes, and words you can hear it in such as "Apple, Annie, Apple Annie, da, da, da." Sometimes the children are all expected to do the same activities during literacy rotations, but Angie will also make adjustments during this time to individualize her work with children based on their letter knowledge and specific needs.

Once a week, the whole class works on their journals at the same time. Next year, Angie is planning to transition this to a small group activity so she "can spend a little bit more time individually instead of two of us kind of scurrying around trying to get what they wrote and being able to really talk about what it is that they're working on and drawing." For each week, Angie types out the shape, letter, number, and color of the week and puts each at the top of a

page in the notebook. Then, she can direct the children to turn their journals to a particular color, letter, etc., such as asking them to turn to the letter ‘L.’ Some weeks the children are able to write and draw what they choose while other weeks they will have a specific prompt. For example, for the letter ‘L’ they might be given the opening, “I love my mother because...” and then draw and write their response. Angie notes that while one teacher always uses very specific prompts, she likes to sometimes give them more open-ended prompts related to the theme or letter or even sometimes let the children write and draw whatever they choose.

Angie very much sees the journals as a reflection of emergent writing and a developmental process (Byington & Kim, 2017; Puranik & Lonigan, 2011; Schickedanz & Collins, 2013), and her expectations for each individual child will change over the course of the year. She does not expect a lot of independent, conventional writing in September but rather explains, “[A]t the beginning it’ll be totally dictation...They’ll tell me what it is and we’ll just write it down.” As the year progresses, she will start to encourage the children “that are ready” to start sounding out words. For instance, when “O” is the letter of the week and their journal entry is supposed to be about the ocean, she might say, “‘You know your sounds, so what does ‘shark’ sound like?’ and have them start listening for those sounds and being able to put some of that down.” Other children might dictate a response and then she will ask them to copy what she wrote, while still others will be encouraged to use invented spelling or to see if they can find the word they want to use on the classroom’s word wall. Angie notes that part of the value of the journals is in “exposure, because in kindergarten they’ll be expected to have journals.” She wants the children to spend time and effort on the journals, creating detail in their drawings, and she explains, “I don’t want just scribbles.”

As noted earlier, it has only been in recent years that there has been a concerted effort to focus more specifically on handwriting in the pre-k classes at Angie's school. When she first started teaching there, Angie says teachers were more likely to use worksheets and engage children in cutting and pasting activities. After Angie got there, they started "doing more journaling and allowing them to try and express some of their selves in writing." Prior to that, children's activities were more product-oriented and Angie has tried to inject more individualized and process-oriented activities into the curriculum.

In large part due to parent concerns about handwriting, the program began to incorporate Handwriting Without Tears® and focus on hand strength and fine motor development. Children are encouraged to use a variety of different materials to work on forming letters, including making letters with play-doh, using an etch-a-sketch, tracing letters on a chalkboard with a piece of paper or sponge, or using wooden shapes to form letters so that the children can "see it and feel it before you actually pick up your pencil and attempt to practice." Prior to this change in approach, Angie describes their writing curriculum as, "This is a letter A. This is how you make it. Draw it in the air and now go back and do it on this piece of paper." Angie notes that some of the classrooms, such as hers, made more of an effort to include these new activities while others have been slower to adapt to the change.

In addition to activities more explicitly centered on reading and writing, Angie also considers the conversations and talking that happen throughout the day a significant part of the literacy curriculum and children's engagement in literacy-related activities. This "verbal exposure" might focus on letters and sounds but she also recognizes the value and contribution of oral language. When she talks about what the children do in her classroom that is related to literacy, she responds, "We're talking and brainstorming and writing and trying to be creative.

They're reading and discovering and kind of all of those things." She clearly connects oral language and conversation to literacy learning and notes, "[W]e do a lot of talking at this age— letters and sounds and topics and themes and just getting that verbal exposure." The examples that Angie gives concerning oral language as part of the curriculum are often about how they talk about the letter of the week in the classroom, including talk about

the letter and the sound and the words that started with that and just getting them that foundation and eventually leading into maybe we'll do some sort of writing activity or making a book and they'll do the pictures to go with it.

Much of the importance of oral language in the curriculum, then, is often when it is a mechanism to introduce literacy concepts that children are just beginning to apply in a print-based context rather than on the ways in which language can serve as an avenue for self-expression and meaning-making, both of which also have connections to literacy development (Dyson, 2003; Schickedanz & Collins, 2013). Angie does mention that conversation, talk, play, sharing experiences, and listening are an essential part of her literacy curriculum, but she seems to place more emphasis on language opportunities that center around other literacy concepts or activities rather than on the broader inherent value of language itself.

Beliefs About Early Literacy and Learning

While Angie's quick definition of literacy is that it is "learning to read and write," she takes a developmental perspective that considers a range of different behaviors that support literacy development (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009). Believing that literacy "starts from birth," Angie sees the time parents spend reading, playing, and talking with children as well as "giving them experiences" as providing children with "that foundation for literacy." In preschool, she sees it as her responsibility to help children "get a good literacy foundation where they are exposed to a lot of language activities and poems and being read to and having the opportunity to...look at books." Children learn by "getting down there with their hands on and experiencing,

touching, feeling it. Putting things to music and hearing the songs and the repetition and those kinds of things...instead of just telling them something and they're supposed to absorb it." While later grades may take the approach of "I'm just going to tell you about it and you're supposed to remember it," Angie believes that young children learn through hands-on, exploratory learning. Early literacy learning, therefore, involves "lots of talking" and helping children connect prior knowledge and experiences to new information as they read books and poems, sing songs, learn about letters and sounds, and begin to take ownership of literacy as they see themselves as readers and writers (Schickedanz & Collins, 2013).

While Angie views learning as rooted in experience and holds a broad view of literacy development as a variable and individual process, she does have specific literacy goals for her students. She starts off by saying her goal is that her students "love school, they love what they're doing, they're having fun here because there is more learning to go." However, she also wants her students to be ready for kindergarten, so she believes most children at the end of their time with her should be able to write their names, "know the majority if not all of their letters and sounds," to have a love for books, to "feel like they're reading" including memorizing books or using the illustrations to tell the story, and also to leave with a "good foundation for learning and the love of learning."

Angie tries to balance having these overall literacy goals with her belief that not all children learn the same things at the same rate. She talks about how she tries to remind parents that "the academics will come" and that the bigger emphasis in prekindergarten should be on social-emotional development. In an ideal situation, Angie says she would have a bigger classroom, fewer students, would be able to provide "lots of opportunities for children to

experience just different things,” and would be “able to work from wherever they are at.”

Additionally, she wishes to

not feel maybe quite so rushed that you have time to really enjoy the kids and be with the kids instead of rush, rush, rush so that you have to get from one thing to the next thing to the next thing.

She constantly emphasizes the importance of “taking them from wherever they’re at” and “accepting whatever they’re going to give me.” Angie does not believe in taking a one-size-fits-all approach because she acknowledges that children are learning different things at different rates (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009; Schickedanz & Collins, 2013). The challenge for her is balancing this belief with the expectation—of parents, administration, as well as local elementary schools—that children leave preschool knowing all of their upper and lower case letters as well as most letter sounds.

Relationship Between Beliefs and Practice

Wien (1995) delineates two frameworks for practice: teacher dominion and developmental appropriateness. She defines teacher dominion as occurring when teacher direction is “the principal mode by which learning is seen to occur...Teacher dominion asserts the teacher’s authority in all domains except when she explicitly removes it, as in recess or ‘free play’” (p. 5). In contrast, while teaching occurs in both frameworks:

In developmental appropriateness, it is but one of a variety of ways the children comes to understand his or her world...[T]eachers are prepared to manage resources and organize children, to lead activity and set the agenda, and also to give up the lead. (p. 5)

Angie, much like one of the teachers in Wien’s study, has an “allegiance” to both of these frameworks or what Wien describes as a “tension between her belief in the children’s right to the activity as their own and belief in the structure of teacher-taught episodes, content-driven and with objectives” (p. 34).

Angie describes her classroom as having “some direct teaching [and] talking but also letting kids get down and explore and discover on their own.” Children have the opportunity to move freely throughout the classroom, playing, talking and exploring, at the very beginning of the day and also when they go outside. The remainder of the day, the children are either engaged in whole-class instruction, such as during circle time or Friday rotations, or they are moving through the literacy rotations in their assigned pairings. Her classroom works on themes that are the same throughout the whole school and every week they spend considerable time on the letter of the week, both during circle times as well as during literacy rotations. While she makes an effort to differentiate instruction and has ability grouping for this purpose, much of the time all of the children are rotating through the same activities albeit with some slight variation when they are in the 20 minute station with her. She believes in hands-on experience as the best way to learn and has tried to incorporate more of that, although she still mentions activities that involve things such as highlighting letters and words that begin with a specific letter, which seem more rote and product-focused and less experiential.

The pressures of high expectations regarding kindergarten readiness, as well as her feelings of having little time and always needing to rush to squeeze things in or get to the next activity, present very real challenges for Angie and her ability to provide more open-ended activities for her students (Bullough, Hall-Kenyon, MacKay, & Marshall, 2014). Angie wants her students to be engaged and have fun, and she contrasts her classroom to the other “very quiet” prekindergarten classroom, describing her students as “bouncing off one another and getting their things done but as they’re talking and playing and enjoying themselves.” She sees herself as “making it fun,” for example seeing music as a way to introduce letters, sounds, and rhyming concepts in a fun, playful way. She tries to individualize her goals and expectations for

each student but constantly finds herself bumping up against the notion that they “are being forced—or not really forced but we’re expected to teach” letters and letters sounds in order to prepare children for kindergarten. She explains,

[I]t’s parents expecting it, and so we need to teach it and try to get them there or as far as possible with their letters and knowing them and identifying them and being able to name things that start with those letters.

Angie feels like these expectations have increased for prekindergarten children over the course of her teaching career, a shift she contributes to both parents as well as the educational culture of the surrounding communities.

Shifts in Literacy Practices

In the 7 years she has been teaching at this school, Angie feels like there has been a “gradual” increase in expectations, primarily influenced by the local school districts, which in turn affects what parents want their children to learn in preschool. She explains:

Unfortunately with the school districts...it’s pretty much expected these days of they need their letters and sounds going into kindergarten or they’re going to be behind, which is crazy. I’m thinking, yeah this is all stuff that I did in kindergarten, probably even some of it, first grade, but we’re introducing and pushing our kids to do now, which is kind of a double edged sword. So we try to make it give them that academics but also as much developmental, and play, and discovery, and free, and that kind of stuff too so it’s just trying to work on that balance.

In the face of increased expectations, Angie believes her school strives to achieve a balance between academics and play. She acknowledges that her school has a reputation for a “heavier academic push and...yeah, we’re expected to get them there,” but she also feels like the director understands that “not everyone is ready. Not everyone is going to get there.” The tension is in managing parent expectations and concerns about readiness with Angie’s own belief that children are “going to develop at their own rate.”

Angie attributes a lot of the shift to a push down of expectations from the higher grades, which she sees as related in part to the increased emphasis on standardized tests in the local

school districts (Bullough, et. al., 2014; Gallant, 2009). As she describes it, “It’s coming from there down to us. Trickling down to make sure everyone is ready so we can pass the test, which I feel is a lot of pressure to put on kids.” Angie sees a lot of pressure firsthand as a parent. Her oldest son is in fourth grade and she says, “There’s nothing sadder than seeing your nine-year-old...stressed out about having to go to school to take a test. And it’s just like that’s too much pressure.” Angie worries that the pressure is manifest in preschool classrooms as well:

I think we start to push a lot so that they are ready for kindergarten. And then ready for first grade. Instead of learning to read in first grade, they're learning their alphabets in kindergarten, it's kind of you're teaching me to how to read in kindergarten so it's trickling back down to us where we have to have our letters and sounds and more of that academic stuff in there.

Angie hopes that her school is not pressuring the children and she notes how she tries to only move forward with things as children are ready. However, she says,

I don’t *think* I’m putting too much pressure on them, but someone from the outside, you may look at it and go, “Oh yeah, you are all just push, push, push.” I mean, I don’t know. But I do know going on up, once you get to public school, there is even higher and greater expectations.

Angie says she is “kind of conflicted” because while she worries about the increased pressure on children and believes that children learn differently and at different rates, she also wants to make sure her students are ready so that they are not blindsided or so they do not fall behind.

While Angie thinks that “society in general not just probably our schools” is experiencing a push for kindergarten readiness, often defined by literacy expectations, she does believe that it is heightened in some communities. She sees parents in her community as highly involved, competitive, and concerned about their children’s success. She describes them as “more vocal, more demanding about what they see and want and expect.” In her 7 years at this school, she thinks this has become even more heightened as the “expectations are bumping up more, more, more,” and her concern is that “we may be pushing them a little too much in some aspects

beyond” where they are developmentally. She continues, “They’re just not ready for it and they’re not going to really get it until it’s developmentally—their brains and bodies have kind of caught up with it.” Angie also points out that most of the parents in the local community are college graduates and therefore have high academic expectations for their children.

As she reflects on the role of context, Angie contrasts the high expectations and high parent involvement with the “small farming community” where her parents live. Most parents there, she says, do not send their children to preschool either due to lack of availability or prohibitive costs. There are “a lot of transient migrant parents” in her parents’ town who “have expectations of their children and expect them to go on and be successful, too” but notes that the parents might be more likely to believe “education is the school’s responsibility not the parents’ responsibility.” She concludes, “I think it’s just different dynamics and different where you’re coming from, your history, your background.” Although she does see an increase in expectations as a general trend in education throughout the country, Angie speculates that “expecting more of kids at a lot earlier age” might be more pronounced for her because of the community in which she teaches. Angie’s challenge is to balance the increasing expectations, often specifically related to reading and writing in particular, with her belief in variable rates of learning and development and the importance of learning through play and exploration.

Summary

Angie frequently worries about the perception that she and her school pre-k program are pushing kids too hard. The school administration sets the literacy goals for teachers, using the Texas Prekindergarten Guidelines as the framework, and teachers have the autonomy to work in teams selecting materials and activities. With parents and a community that she describes as having high expectations for kindergarten readiness, Angie describes her school’s approach as

“very academic” while striving to maintain a primary emphasis on creating a loving environment.

On top of an academic culture and a community with high expectations, Angie is tasked with meeting these demands in a compressed schedule. With only two full days, Angie feels like she is teaching more in less time and frequently describes feeling rushed and lamenting that there is less time for play. One of the strategies that Angie uses to address this demand is ability grouping her students based on letter knowledge and literacy skills, which she believes helps her to address individual needs in a more efficient manner. Angie strives to find a balance her belief that children need opportunities for play, exploration, and hands-on learning, while also meeting the academic demands and expectations of parents and the community. Angie believes that expectations for pre-k have been pushed down from the higher grades, due in no small part to the looming state assessments that begin in third grade, and this has resulted in higher early literacy goals for prekindergarten children. At the same time, she also recognizes the significant role that community and context play in shaping expectations about what young children are expected to know and be able to do, particularly in terms of the significant role that literacy plays as a foundation for all learning.

Chapter VII: Rodrigo

Rodrigo began his journey as a teacher when a large urban school district in Texas was recruiting international/bilingual teachers in Mexico. Rodrigo's wife, a teacher, heard about the program and Rodrigo, a chemical engineer by training, agreed to accompany his wife to Texas to attend an information session about the teacher training program. They liked what they heard and ultimately decided to move to the United States, where Rodrigo would be the one who entered the program and obtained his pre-k through fourth grade certification. In the United States and globally, only approximately three percent of early childhood educators identify as men, in part because of conceptualizations of early education and care positions as a gendered profession that is typically female (Bhana, Moosa, Xu, & Emilson, 2022; Reich-Shapiro, Cole, & Plaisir, 2021; Warin, 2019). Despite the low number of men in the field and that his wife was already a teacher, Rodrigo and his wife considered the move to the United States to be a good opportunity and decided that she would stay home with their baby as the primary caretaker, following a different but related set of gendered norms. At a job fair near the end of his alternate certification program, Rodrigo was offered a job as a first-grade teacher that ultimately became a position as a prekindergarten teacher. Although a career as a pre-k teacher was not something he planned for, Rodrigo views his position as extremely fortunate because he has fallen into a career that he truly enjoys. As he describes it:

Had I known what I know now, I don't think I would have chosen pre-k at the moment, but I think it served me right...I think it was a good idea that I started in pre-k from the very beginning without knowing what to expect. Because now, I really enjoy teaching this age group. I really enjoy it, and I think the kids enjoy it. I want to think they enjoy it, too!

Reflection on teaching seems to be unfamiliar to Rodrigo, and there were aspects of our conversations that posed a challenge to him. Rodrigo struggles to distinguish between his own beliefs about teaching, learning, and literacy and those of the school, and he would sometimes

respond to my questions by saying he would have to “think about that for a while” but never actually providing an answer. Rodrigo was not being uncooperative, but rather it was my impression that he had never been asked to reflect on his own practice or talk about his own beliefs and that this was somewhat unfamiliar or even uncomfortable for him. While reflection is regarded as a way for teachers to develop and improve their practice and understanding about teaching and learning (Day, 1993; Loughran, 2002; Valli, 1997), it is not always widely supported or implemented (Einarsdottir, 2001; McDonald, 1992). Talking about *what* he does was much more comfortable for Rodrigo than trying to determine *why* he does certain things. He very much wanted to be helpful, and he also takes a tremendous amount of pleasure and pride in his job as a prekindergarten teacher and is very happy where he works. He believes in the work that he and his colleagues are doing with young children and is proud of what they are accomplishing together, so it made sense to him that his ideas would align with the methods and philosophies that are supported in the school community.

Rodrigo has spent the entirety of his teaching career at the same urban pre-k through third grade school. During the year of this study, 86% of the student population at Buckner Elementary School qualified for free or reduced-price lunch and 89% of the students were Hispanic (National Center for Education Statistics, 2014). When the local school district closed 11 schools in 2012 due to budget cuts and low enrollment, Buckner was one of the schools that was closed despite being a part of its community for almost 90 years and maintaining an exemplary rating, demonstrating top performance on state-wide student assessments, and receiving national awards for excellence. During the year of this study, Rodrigo was in his eighth year at Buckner Elementary and in his sixth year of teaching in a bilingual prekindergarten classroom. In addition to teaching prekindergarten, Rodrigo previously taught kindergarten one

year, was the computer teacher one year, and he has also taught first and second grade in summer school. There were two prekindergarten classrooms at Buckner: one general education class and Rodrigo's bilingual class, in which all instruction is in Spanish except for math. The pre-k classes were in trailers a few steps away from the school building, lending a sense of separation to the work that Rodrigo and the other prekindergarten teacher were doing.

Throughout our conversations, Rodrigo would occasionally acknowledge how the community context impacted his thinking about the needs of his students. Buckner was widely regarded as a successful school and my impression of it from my own time there and my conversations with Rodrigo was that it was a positive environment and an important part of the community. Indeed, parents and staff at Buckner were vocal in local media about their disappointment when the school closed, with one parent noting, "It's a big loss to the community. That's what makes this school. The community makes this school." (www.dallasobserver.com, 2012). Teachers similarly lamented the closing, noting that they had built a strong community with staff and parents, and that the smaller population of students, the reason cited for their closing, had contributed to the schools' success including being considered one of the top ten urban schools of its kind in the country (www.dallasobserver.com, 2012). However, the community also experienced high crime and high rates of poverty, and this causes Rodrigo to view the school as a place where the children could "feel safe and comfortable...at least from 8:00-3:00." Safety is an important consideration for Rodrigo and his colleagues, and he comments:

We also want to make the kids feel safe in the classroom all the time. And we always think about this—some of the kids come from very rough places, and, you know, sometimes maybe school is their only safe place, actually. So, we'll—we try to keep that in mind as well. And so, when we kind of think about the way he's acting or if he's acting up or something, we kind of have to think about his background and where does he come from and try to – try to deal with that in a positive way.

Factors Influencing Literacy Practices and Curriculum

While Rodrigo's classroom is physically isolated from the school in that he and the other prekindergarten classroom are outside the building in trailers, Rodrigo's descriptions of the school paint a picture of a very collaborative and connected community in which administrators, teachers, and families are in regular communication. He believes that other teachers have played a "big role" in influencing his ideas about early literacy development, but is less certain about ways in which his principal directly impacts his literacy teaching. When talking about the influence of administration, colleagues, and parents, Rodrigo frequently cites conversations that center on children's behavior, which he acknowledges is the primary concern of the pre-k children's parents at his school. It is possible that Rodrigo's inability to think of specific examples of other people influencing his literacy curriculum and instruction is due in part to his reliance on the provided curricula, which outline specific activities he should do with the children to work toward the state standards.

Role of Administration

The principal of Buckner Elementary is a "really supportive" and "very active" influence on Rodrigo's teaching. Although her informal visits to his classroom are less frequent than her visits to classes inside the building, the principal comes to Rodrigo's class five times a year to do a formal observation and take notes on his teaching. He points out that these formal assessments of teachers are only required twice a year by the district but his principal goes beyond this in order to maintain more oversight and better contact with each classroom. Rodrigo gives the sense that these visits are both supportive and beneficial and provide opportunities for conversation with the principal about how his teaching can continue to grow. The principal frequently makes

suggestions to help his practice develop and expand, and encourages teachers to “step out of your comfort zone a little bit more.” He continues:

She comes to the classroom. And when she sees the same things going on for the same topic, like language arts or math, and she sees the same thing, she will tell you, “Okay, why don’t you do this, this or that?”

Rodrigo points out, however, that teachers also approach her and solicit her feedback and suggestions. He explains:

She will give us suggestions, and we will – we can discuss them. I mean, she’s so very open to our suggestions as well. We can go to her and say, “I want to do this sort of activity in the classroom. What do you think?”

While Rodrigo has great admiration for his principal and considers her a strong influence on his development as a teacher, he could not come up with examples when pressed to think of ways in which she specifically influences his literacy teaching and curriculum. As an individual, she may not have conversations with him about literacy curriculum specifically, however he comments that there are a lot of professional development opportunities, including in-house workshops and presenters at the school, that cover topics including reading and writing. Her largest single contribution may be her role in developing the sense of community and expectations that pervade the school’s culture.

Parent Expectations

Rodrigo’s perception of his relationship with parents is primarily that it is his responsibility to encourage them to become more involved and to also develop their understanding of the skills and knowledge he expects the children to develop during their year with him. He asserts that he values parental feedback “[b]ecause, well, it’s their child here...It’s their little baby.” He adds, however: “Sometimes I do not do the activities that they suggest, or sometimes their feedback is not as constructive as you want it to be.” Although Rodrigo notes that on occasion parents come to him with suggestions that he thinks are good ideas and he

implements (e.g., using Rebus charts with the children), for the most part he views their relationship as primarily unidirectional in that he sees educating parents as an extension of his work with their children.

Rodrigo sends home activities for the children to do with their parents' help as a means of increasing parent involvement. These activities are intended to help the children continue to develop skills they are working on in the classroom and to also educate parents about both what their children should be learning and how they, as parents, can best support their children. Some of the assignments come directly from the curriculum, but others are activities that Rodrigo has decided will be a good means of community building and getting parents involved, including a lot of "cultural activities" that are intended to boost the sense of connection to the school community. When he believes that parents are not doing the activities he sends home and he feels the children are not developing skills at a good rate, he pulls parents aside and re-emphasizes the importance of "homework", saying to them, "Please, start working on this before it gets too late."

Beyond getting parents involved, Rodrigo also says about the parents, "I have to teach them." For most parents in his classroom, their primary concerns are related to social and behavioral issues. As Rodrigo comments:

In my class, in pre-k, they want their kids first of all to have a good time. I mean to feel they are safe. Sometimes...and also the behavior. My parents or the parents of pre-k, they worry about behavior at this grade level.

While Rodrigo clearly has literacy goals for the children such as ensuring that they learn to identify letters and letter sounds, "the parents actually don't see that far ahead. They're just concerned about discipline." Rodrigo therefore views it as his responsibility to adjust parent expectations and help them understand the importance of focusing on more academic goals for their children. He observes, "When we start telling them that we expect them to learn the names

of the letters and the sounds, then that's where their expectations started to change from just the behavior and social skills to the academics now."

As he does with many other topics we discussed, Rodrigo comments on how his relationship with parents has changed over the course of his teaching career. He notes:

It took me some experience to be able to talk to parents a little bit more freely. The first year, I was very – I didn't talk to them as much as I did right now. And it's different. I mean, I don't feel pressure and I think they notice that. The first year, it's a bit more tense and they sense it as well.

With experience and increased confidence in his knowledge and abilities as a teacher, Rodrigo has become more comfortable talking to parents and entering into a dynamic in which he assumes the role of the expert.

Collaboration with Other Teachers

Every week, Rodrigo meets with the other pre-k teacher and the kindergarten teachers for a grade level meeting. The teachers share ideas, help each other solve problems regarding discipline or instruction, and discuss strategies for working with children. He explains:

We try to encourage each other to just talk about stuff that has worked in our classrooms. You know, "I did this activity like this, this and that. Do you want it?" "I taught this activity doing this, this and that and they loved it." Or stuff like that. So, we try to bounce ideas between each other in the team.

Rodrigo believes that these meetings, coupled with quick, informal observations in other classrooms, provide him with strategies and other styles of instruction that he then incorporates into his teaching, trying on different approaches in order to "find what works in my classroom."

He continues:

I try to take whatever I like from other teachers and try to implement them and see if it works for me. And so...every teacher has a different teaching style. And I like, you know, this part of her teaching style, this part of his teaching style. Let me put them together and see if it works for me. And then I start developing my own teaching style.

These opportunities for collaboration and peer support, both formal and informal, have been a critical piece of Rodrigo's development as a teacher.

Because he was alternate certification, Rodrigo was mentored during his first year of teaching by a kindergarten teacher at the school. During that first year, Rodrigo observed in the other teacher's class on four separate occasions and the mentor teacher came to observe Rodrigo four times. However, after his first year, there were no formal times set aside for observation of other classrooms, so Rodrigo would on occasion make time for quick, informal observations in other classrooms, particularly if a teacher was doing an activity that he thought looked promising and/or incorporating a style of teaching that he was interested in folding into his own teaching. Rodrigo believes that these informal moments, combined with the weekly meetings, had a significant impact on his teaching, and they are frequently regarded as an important method of supporting and facilitating opportunities for development for beginner teachers (Hopkins & Spillane, 2014).

One of the collaborations that Rodrigo believes has been extremely helpful in developing his teaching was with other pre-k teachers in the district. Once a month for two hours, the pre-k teachers in a small section of the district would meet at someone's school and share ideas about activities for the upcoming month. Given that the themes were determined by the district curriculum guide, all of the teachers were going to be addressing the same topics, skills, and similar activities. Rodrigo notes, "Reading hasn't been like my strongest subject...I see that some of the students are struggling with that, like I did, so I want to learn more about how to teach literacy to other kids." Because of his own struggles, Rodrigo felt that this community group of pre-k teachers was an invaluable resource for helping him learn how to help children learn to read and write. Unfortunately, these meetings did not continue into this school year,

meaning the pre-k teachers no longer have these official opportunities to get together and share ideas, which Rodrigo believes is due to budget cuts across the district.

Influence of State and District Requirements

The district in which Rodrigo teaches describes its prekindergarten program as a “full-year, intensive language development and early literacy program designed to give 4-year-old children who qualify for the program an opportunity to develop skills, concepts, and attitudes needed for school success” (DISD, 2014). Because the district places such a heavy emphasis on language and literacy development, it is perhaps unsurprising that it developed its own planning guide to direct teachers in their literacy instruction. This district guide provides the foundation for Rodrigo’s literacy curriculum. He notes, “We follow the curriculum planning guide, the one the district is actually designing. It has also the objectives laid out very specific every week of the year.” The district guidelines are organized into weekly units that support a theme that has been predetermined for each 6-week period. For each unit, there is a chart that details state learning standards that are to be addressed during that week across domains: reading/language arts, vocabulary, mathematics, physical education, science, technology, social studies, fine arts, and social and emotional development. Specific activities for centers are also listed, with the note that these “should be purposeful, planned, and ‘playful’ to reinforce instruction and develop vocabulary” (DISD, 2013a). For example, the unit for the fifth week of school is entitled “Meet My Family” and is part of the first six weeks’ theme of “Friends and Family.” In addition to specific standards to be addressed and suggested activities for each center, there is a list of vocabulary words as well as “instructional considerations” for different areas of literacy development. The latter includes somewhat generic suggestions such as engaging students in daily journal writing and using conversation to expand oral language development, as well as

more specific suggestions such as beginning to guide children through segmenting sentences in order to lead them to identifying the syllables in words. There are also activities listed to help children develop their fine motor skills (labeled “fine motor pre-writing skills”) such as working with clothes pins to hang cut out shapes of pieces of clothing to a clothing line.

Rodrigo supplements or interchanges the suggested activities from the district with activities he has used in the past from state-approved curricula that his school adopted, primarily Scholastic and LEAP [Language Enrichment Activities Program]. He comments:

I do have some flexibility. And what I try to do is look at the objective and think about it. Now I think about the activities that I can do to teach this objective. As opposed to the first year, I couldn't do this. I had to look at the...read everything and follow the examples or the activities that they were suggesting here....Now I look at the objectives and say, “Oh, okay. They want to teach this? Okay, I can do this, this, and this and that.” Because I have a little bit more experience and that's, you know, well, with the years, you kind of develop that skill.

However, Rodrigo tries to stay on track with the standards that are listed for that week so he can make sure he is incorporating all that he needs to in order to comply with the state Pre-K Guidelines, which he believes set appropriate expectations for children's literacy development during preschool. Rodrigo admits that it took him a few years of experience to feel confident in veering away from the suggested activities and incorporating his own ideas. He believes the district and state guidelines support new teachers by keeping them on track in the face of overwhelming amounts of requirements, but, as a more experienced teacher, appreciates that the activities provided in the district guidelines are more suggestion than mandate.

Description of Literacy Practices

The influence of the district requirements is evident in Rodrigo's descriptions of his literacy teaching and curriculum. Rodrigo closely follows the themes and suggested materials and activities provided by the district, and his description of his literacy curriculum emphasizes the areas that dominate the district curriculum: oral language, vocabulary development, letter

knowledge, and phonological awareness. He observes that language arts in prekindergarten includes activities such as chants and songs; reading aloud and asking follow-up questions; making letters with play-dough, sand, and shaving cream; playing games with letters; and writing each other's names. While Rodrigo emphasizes that he likes to let the children "discover by themselves" and that he provides them with opportunities to learn, discover, and problem solve on their own, most of the literacy activities he describes are teacher-directed and somewhat inflexible.

Letter of the week activities provide the launching point for much of Rodrigo's literacy instruction. On Fridays, Rodrigo sends children home with an assignment to ask their parents to help them find words that start with the letter they will be learning about the next week. On Monday during large group time, Rodrigo and the children chart all of the words they have thought of. Each day during that week, the children sing a song about the letter and the sounds it makes and write the letter in the air with their finger. The children then leave group time and go to the tables for independent practice as well as guided activities that involve that letter. Three times a week, the children do phonological awareness activities with the letter of the week.

A sample activity Rodrigo described involved filling a bag with different objects that start with the letter of the week. The children reach into the bag, guess what they are feeling, take it out, identify it, and emphasize the sound they hear at the beginning of the word. Rodrigo may prompt them by asking, "What sound do you hear first?" He has observed that the children frequently respond by saying the first syllable, such as "din" if it is a dinosaur, and he then has to guide them into hearing the onset: "That's not the sound you hear first. You hear /d/ dinosaur. Try to say it slowly. Di-no-saur. Do you hear the first sound?" Rodrigo comments that they work

on initial letter sounds from the very beginning of the school year, noting, “That’s a big one here in Pre-K.”

Journals are a part of the daily routine in Rodrigo’s class and are used for many different purposes, including letter of the week activities. Every week the children use their journals to practice writing upper and lower case versions of the letter of the week. On a different day, they will write the letter of the week in the center of their paper and draw a picture of a word that begins with that letter. Sometimes, however, the directions for the journal are more flexible, such as when he asks the children to write about their weekend. It is important to note that Rodrigo does not limit his definition of writing to letters and words. He understands that pictures and illustrations are also a form of writing and story-telling and that early writing is represented in various forms (Coates & Coates, 2016; Gerde, Bingham, & Wasik, 2012; Puranik & Lonigan, 2011; Schickedanz & Casbergue, 2004). This understanding is supported by the district curriculum, which views prekindergarten children as beginner writers who are encouraged to use written communication, including pictures, as a means of self-expression. Rodrigo admits, however, that he has not found a tried and true method for getting the entire class to engage in some form of writing in their journals. He observes, “[S]ome of the kids produce something, but some of them don’t. I’m going to say like 50% produce something.”

Rodrigo understands that a variety of materials can be used in the classroom to support literacy development. When asked about the school’s literacy goals, Rodrigo emphasizes the importance of books, including knowing how to handle the books properly as well as how to use the pictures to interpret the story. He actively encourages parents to read to their children at home while he incorporates at least one whole group story time into his daily routine. Rodrigo incorporates activities from various state-approved curricula across his own curriculum but

prefers to use the Scholastic books for both story-telling as well as letter and letter-sound activities.

Rodrigo's descriptions of his classroom activities demonstrate his emphasis on letter sounds and knowledge but not an expectation that children will be beginning to put this all together to read and write words. He explains, "We have expectations with them for when they're dealing with books...And although they don't know how to read, they can actually read the pictures...They're going to kind of sound out the word a little bit more in kindergarten." Rodrigo sees literacy development very linearly: his responsibility is to help the children learn the letters and letter sounds. In kindergarten, the children will build upon this knowledge and begin to put it together to read and write words. This aligns with an expectation stated in the district curriculum guidelines: "Students are expected to learn the necessary beginning literacy skills that will help them become successful readers and writers in kindergarten and beyond" (DISD, 2013b, p. 7).

As a bilingual prekindergarten teacher, Rodrigo strives to balance how he uses Spanish and English in his classroom to help children develop both languages, thereby avoiding the decline in performance on Spanish language assessments that can accompany English-only early childhood programs (Hammer, Scarpino, & Davison, 2011). Spanish is the primary language spoken in the classroom, most of the class books are in Spanish, and it is the home language of all of his students. Rodrigo estimates that 90% of his teaching is in Spanish, although he points out that all math lessons are done in English. In addition, Tuesdays and Thursdays are referred to by Rodrigo as "English days," during which the children are encouraged to speak English during centers and the adults use English for behavioral instructions, such as asking children to line up, wash hands, or sit quietly. Even on the English days, however, all of the Language Arts

instruction is in Spanish. Thus, while the children are exposed to English orally, all of the written language they are learning and exposed to is in Spanish. This “strict separation” model of bilingual education is seen to be overly restrictive by some bilingual preschool teachers who prefer a more flexible approach in order to respond appropriately to children’s different linguistic needs (Palvianen, Protassova, Mård-Miettinen, & Schwartz, 2016).

Beliefs About Early Literacy Development and Curriculum

Rodrigo prioritizes creating a safe, fun, and engaging learning environment that encourages children to explore, ask questions, and make connections. He states:

If you have fun with them, they’ll learn. If you actually do what you’re supposed to and teach your curriculum in a very interactive and engaging way, if you’re having fun doing that, then they’ll have fun and they’ll be engaged.

The role of teachers, in Rodrigo’s opinion, is to introduce a concept and then guide children in applying it. He views teachers as facilitators who create “as much as we can, opportunities for those students to be able to use those—or get to that point where they can use—the concepts themselves in the classroom.” He points out, however, that “our job is to kind of let them explore and make mistakes. I mean, that is how they are going to learn.” The idea of a safe learning environment comes up repeatedly with Rodrigo, and he emphasizes that children must feel secure in order to be willing to take risks and explore, risking failure and feeling confident enough to ask questions and move forward to try again. Rodrigo alludes to the fact that many of the students in his classroom do not always have the luxury of feeling safe and secure, which makes it all that more important to him to create an environment in which children can develop relationships and are given the time and space to play, create, and learn with his supportive guidance.

This view of educators as providing children with a foundation for learning is a core aspect of Rodrigo's beliefs regarding teaching, and it can be clearly seen in his personal definition of literacy:

[It] means they're going to have the tools needed to discover on their own... Obviously they need to learn how to read. That's a big part of it. But it's also everything you can find from books and you can find from writing... It's having the tools to learn on their own [pause] and to enjoy it.

Within this definition, literacy is not an endpoint but rather a foundation for an education that not only enables but empowers children to become lifelong learners. Rodrigo emphasizes the role of oral language as a foundation for literacy learning. He is also careful to point out that developing oral language skills is an important part of preschool literacy "because most of their oral skills are not developed or fully developed at this time... and I think that's a big part of our program to develop that, to let them be able to explain something, to describe something." He frequently discusses how children develop their oral language skills in conversations, both with peers and during whole group times, and he expresses an understanding of the significance of oral language as it exposes children to the sounds of words and letters and is their first vehicle for learning to express themselves and share thoughts and ideas.

Beyond this broad understanding of what literacy means, and particularly what it means in the prekindergarten classroom, Rodrigo also discusses specific activities that he believes are an important component of an early literacy education. Rodrigo points out how songs, poems, and rhymes are an important part of literacy learning in that they provide an opportunity to develop oral language skills, vocabulary, and phonological awareness. Rodrigo uses songs to introduce letters and concepts, and he has observed that the repeated singing of songs helps children learn letters and begin to understand the sounds and patterns of language.

The children in Rodrigo's class do not always have the same exposure and experiences with language and print, and much of Rodrigo's work seems to focus on introducing concepts and ideas that are unfamiliar to many of his students and striving to help them make connections between what they learn in school and their life outside of the classroom. For some of the children in his class, reading and exposure to books is something that they only experience in the classroom. Rodrigo has observed that the children who do not have experiences with books at home need more explicit instruction and support to help them stay focused during stories, to use their imaginations when they are listening, and to be able to answer questions about the story. An important part of Rodrigo's role is to encourage parents to spend time reading with their children so the children can become more familiar with books, printed language, and concepts of story-telling.

Rodrigo understands that he is not solely responsible for the learning that happens in his classroom, and he recognizes the contributions the children make to each other's education, particularly when it comes to oral language development as well as learning English. When it comes to learning English, Rodrigo observes, "They learn a lot more from their neighbors and their peers than actually from their teachers, but I don't know why." While there are structured times during which the adults use English, Rodrigo sees the greatest learning coming from the interactions between the children. Some of the students in his class are more proficient in English, and he observes those students helping their peers during unstructured times such as outdoors or in centers. He points out, "They don't realize it, but they are learning from their neighbors and their friends." While sometimes the children will actively seek out help with English from a classmate, which is something Rodrigo and his teaching assistant encourage,

oftentimes Rodrigo observes this peer-to-peer learning happening more informally as the children code switch during their play.

As Rodrigo discusses what happens in his classroom and his understanding of literacy, he continually comes back to the concept of differentiation. It is his job, as he sees it, to be “skillful enough to address every child’s needs.” He continues, “And if we find the right approach to everyone, I mean, they are going to be very successful in the long run.” Rodrigo understands that not all children come to his classroom with the same experiences, the same knowledge, or the same learning styles. He observes:

I believe that all of the students have their own little thing that makes them special. I like to think the very best from all of them. Obviously there are discipline issues and there are different learning styles in the classroom, but all of them have the potential.

As Rodrigo describes his teaching and curriculum, he stresses the importance of giving the children multiple opportunities to explore a concept. Presenting information to the whole group and then breaking up into smaller groups to apply a concept within different activities provides multiple entry points for the children to develop their understanding. He sees the value in focusing on one letter a week because it provides so much repetition—through songs, books, whole group activities, small group sessions, and independent work and play. This repetition coupled with opportunities to explore, is a key aspect of Rodrigo’s attempt to create a learning environment in which all of his students can thrive.

Compatibility Between Beliefs and Practice

Rodrigo, having only worked at the one school and having received most of his learning and training on the job, believes that he is in an environment that understands and supports students in an appropriate way. He is unable to distinguish between his own beliefs and those of the school either because the bulk of his learning about teaching has occurred within this one context or because he was fortunate enough to land at a school that shares his beliefs. He talks

about how the school brings presenters to discuss research on learning and “best practices” that the teachers are then encouraged to implement in their own classrooms. He notes, “We try to follow as much as we can what has worked in research.” This belief that he and the other teachers at his school are enacting best practices supported by research creates a high degree of compatibility between Rodrigo’s beliefs about teaching and learning and what he is actually able to do in the classroom. However, he is careful to point out that teachers are also empowered and trusted to “try to do something that we believe is going to work” that is not necessarily “research-based” or from a presenter or workshop but rather from their own knowledge, experiences, and understanding of the children in their classrooms.

Shifts in Literacy Practices

Rodrigo vacillates somewhat on whether or not he feels that the literacy expectations for preschool have changed over the years. He observes that what children are now expected to learn in prekindergarten aligns with what was expected of kindergarten or even first grade 30 years ago, but he is undecided whether or not this is a good thing. He notes:

And something what I believe is that I wouldn’t want to push that student or all the students to where we want to make them learn a lot of things in such a short amount of time and maybe let them learn things they are not developmentally ready for...But it is very dangerous if we say there’s just no limit to what the student can actually learn.

Rodrigo believes that the field of education in general continues to raise the standards and questions, “But when do we say, ‘This is enough?’” He worries that other areas—particularly the arts—are being neglected in order to meet math and literacy standards. He is uncertain, however, that this is a problem that extends to preschool.

When the topic first arises, Rodrigo responds that in his experience the prekindergarten expectations have not shifted dramatically. However, as he pauses to think about it, he comments, “But maybe I have been pushing the goals a little high and I haven’t even

noticed...Maybe we have been pushing it a little higher and higher [and] I haven't even noticed.” However, even if he acknowledges that ideas about preschool teaching and learning are constantly shifting “because every year we find that research has come up with something that this is the best practice for this,” he is careful to say, “But I don't think they have gotten beyond the developmentally appropriate things to do for prekindergarten.” Stepping back and making a critical analysis of his practice is challenging for Rodrigo, and he often responds that he would need to think more about it. This self-reflection is something he seems unfamiliar with, and I often feel that he resists digging too deeply because he knows that he is proud of the work that is being done in his classroom and at his school and he fears presenting any doubt or opening himself or the school up to possible criticism—from himself or from me.

While Rodrigo is less certain that his practice has altered noticeably over the years in response to changing expectations within the field, he has very clear ideas about how his own teaching has changed as he has gained experience. In particular, he discusses how having a set curriculum that outlines daily activities, materials, and at times even specific words teachers should use was something that he found useful his first year or two of teaching. He comments, “First...I taught using like a script, and I followed what the script was saying. Now I am a little bit more resourceful, and, for example, for an objective or concept I have more ideas or more ways to teach that concept.” Now, given an objective, Rodrigo feels like he has more experiences to draw upon and is not as restricted to a specific packaged curriculum that delineates every single activity but rather is able to pull from multiple resources. This enables him to individualize his teaching more, understanding that different activities help teach the same objective while catering to the different learning needs and styles of the children in his class. He explains:

Now...for an objective or concept, I have more ideas or more ways to teach that concept. Now I can have all the students working on the same concept that we're going to do but one kid needs to see it differently than this one. And I can do this now.

This shift in his teaching, from relying on a step-by-step, curriculum-directed approach to an approach that places children and their needs first and reflects a deeper understanding of children, teaching and learning styles, and a broader array of activities to engage students in, is something in which Rodrigo rightly takes a tremendous amount of pride and empowers him to take the child-centered approach that he values.

Summary

Rodrigo is fortunate to have found his first teaching job in a school that seemingly shares his vision and values for literacy and early education and places a lot of emphasis on developing a strong sense of community. In his bilingual pre-k classroom, Rodrigo closely follows the district planning guide to help him meet the state early learning standards, and he strives to nurture a safe and supportive learning environment that, through a combination of repetition and a range of activities, seeks to provide multiple entry points to different aspects of literacy knowledge. Over the course of his career, Rodrigo describes himself as shifting into a practitioner who is “more resourceful” and able to take different approaches in order to differentiate his instruction for all students. Rodrigo’s beliefs about literacy and teaching closely align with the content, goals, and pedagogical approaches that are outlined and supported in his school, and he believes he has benefitted from an early mentorship as well as opportunities to collaborate with and observe other teachers in their classrooms.

Chapter VIII: Alison

I've never had a problem with not doing what I didn't think was right. (Laughing) No, I've never had that problem ever in my life. I've never had a problem with telling somebody, "No, I don't like it. I'm not going to do it. It's ridiculous. I'll do something that's just as good only it's not what you say. As long as the kids are learning what they need to learn, what do you care?"

Alison has a very strong sense of what is right and what is wrong when it comes to early childhood education and working with the children in her blended public school prekindergarten classroom. She describes herself as fighting the system when she can, complying when she has to, and credits her confidence to a lifetime dedicated to understanding and working with young children.

Alison believes she was destined to be a prekindergarten teacher. As she describes it, "There are army brats in the world [but] I am a university brat and all my 'university-ness' throughout the years was child development, family relations, and early childhood." The daughter of a university professor of Child Development, Alison feels that she has always understood young children. She began working in classrooms through a program in high school and went on to earn both a Bachelor's and a Master's degree in Early Childhood Education and also has an English as a Second Language (ESL) teaching certificate as well as a Reading Recovery certification. Her entire 12-year career has been teaching prekindergarten in the same public school district, primarily as an ESL teacher in a "blended" class that combines general and special education students at Adelfa Callejo School for Young Children. The Adelfa Callejo School for Young Children is a public Title 1 school that only serves preschool children and heavily emphasizes social development, kindergarten readiness, and parent involvement. During the year of this study, Adelfa Callejo had 333 students, with nearly 93 percent of students identified as economically disadvantaged. Alison is a white teacher at a school that where 16 percent of students were White, 21 percent were African-American, 57 percent were Hispanic,

and over 37 percent were English Language Learners (<https://tea.texas.gov/texas-schools/accountability/academic-accountability/performance-reporting>).

Alison has two half-day blended classes, with 22 children in the morning and 23 in the afternoon, which she notes is about three times as many students as she typically has. In the two classes, there are English-speaking children as well as English Language Learners representing six different language backgrounds: Spanish, Shona, Farsi, Punjab, Bengali, and Arabic. Alison says that she fought for smaller class sizes but was unsuccessful in changing anything.

Unfortunately for Alison, Texas does not have any requirements for prekindergarten class size, but rather “encourages” districts to “not exceed the 22:1 ratio required for kindergarten through fourth grade” (Texas Education Code Chapter 25, Section 25.112, 2013). The large class sizes forced Alison to remove chairs from her classroom to ease crowding and shorten table legs so the children could sit on the floor and work at the tables. It has been a frustrating accommodation, and Alison frequently describes her classroom as chaotic. Alison has a teaching partner who is a certified Early Childhood Special Education teacher, in addition to an aide and a daily volunteer, and while she is grateful for the extra hands and has a strong relationship with her partner, she comments that frequently all of the adults just add to the crowd in the classroom.

Factors Influencing Literacy Practices and Curriculum

At the beginning of our conversations, Alison explained to me: “I just have never had a problem [pushing back], and they can fire me but they’re not going to. If they were, they would have done it by now so I’m not concerned.” Alison does not teach in a contextual vacuum, however, and while she is passionate about describing herself as standing up to authority when she believes they have inappropriate ideas about what her students should be doing, she is not immune to the influences of the various stakeholders who surround her. For the most part,

however, when asked about the influence of others on her practice, Alison tends to respond with the ways in which they do *not* actually influence her and to explain why this is the case. It is with great reluctance, it sometimes seems, that she allows anyone to have any influence over what she does in her classroom.

Texas Prekindergarten Guidelines

At the beginning of our conversations, Alison warned me: “So you just happened upon probably the one teacher in the district that doesn’t really care whether as to what the district tells her (laughing).” This comment perfectly illustrates Alison’s frustrations with what she views as others’ inappropriate ideas and expectations regarding what her students should be doing as well as her view of herself as someone who has to “fight the power” in order to do right by the children in her classroom. Alison comes across as confident in her knowledge and beliefs about what is appropriate for young children and frequently standing up for what she believes is right, but she also experiences a reluctant tension and occasional need to comply with district requirements in order to keep her job. She juggles her own beliefs with requirements such as the Texas Prekindergarten Guidelines (Texas Education Agency, 2022a), assessments, supplied district curricula, and expectations of district curriculum coordinators.

The most significant influence on Alison’s practice is the Texas Prekindergarten Guidelines (TEA, 2022a) as they truly shape everything she does in the classroom. Alison comments, “We have to follow the Texas Pre-K Guidelines, and...as long as we follow the Texas Pre-K Guidelines and have them on track each week with those guidelines, they really don’t care how we got there.” Alison’s lesson plans for each week specify activities, lessons, and materials and include the corresponding standard for each. For example, one large group activity that is listed on her lesson plan involves using picture cards with items that rhyme in order to

help develop phonological awareness, and Alison lists the specific Pre-K Guideline that is addressed by this activity. Sometimes, however, Alison says she “just put a whole six weeks’ worth of guidelines on the side because somewhere in those lesson plans I’m utilizing them.”

In keeping with her rebellious stance, Alison is not overly fond of the Prekindergarten Guidelines and the influence they wield over her practice. She believes that many of the expectations outlined within the guidelines are inappropriate for prekindergarten children and are more appropriate for first graders, something that she believes demonstrates a “push down” of academic standards and expectations for young children. However, despite the fact that she believes many of the goals and standards are not developmentally appropriate, Alison notes that she is “not in a position to do much about it.” Alison is two classes away from an administrative certification and tells me that she did this because she thought, “that’s the way I can go to really start making a difference. But the second that I move out of the classroom then I’m not here in the trenches really helping.” As a teacher, Alison feels she has the freedom and flexibility to do what she believes is appropriate for the children in her class, but she believes as an administrator she would be pulled away from “fighting the good fight” and would become bogged down in administrative responsibilities such as maintaining a budget and not be completely focused on what is occurring in classrooms.

Because she does not hold the guidelines in high regard, it is particularly frustrating for Alison that she has to reluctantly use a thematic curriculum throughout the year because she views this as a more “structured” approach that helps her “continuously make sure I’m getting the right Pre-K Guidelines in.” Despite all that she describes herself as fighting for, Alison seems to recognize that addressing the Pre-K Guidelines is the one requirement that she cannot get around. As she talks about the guidelines and their impact on her practice, she continues,

And that's where the one thing I wish that we didn't have to follow in public schools, but I realize we have to have some kind of accountability. And so, *c'est la vie*, there's nothing we can do about it.

While the guidelines obviously exert tremendous influence on Alison's curriculum and the activities she engages in with the children, it is also important to note that Alison feels she is able to, in a sense, meet the guidelines halfway and find creative ways to address them with activities and materials that she still feels are appropriate and enjoyable for the children.

Assessments

Every six weeks throughout the school year, Alison is required to use a district assessment to gauge the children's progress toward the Texas Prekindergarten Guidelines. In addition to the children needing to meet expectations on their assessments, Alison's district also has begun a new system of assessment for teachers. Throughout the year, administrators visit the classrooms to review lesson plans and children's assessments to ensure that the guidelines are being used and that children are progressing toward the outlined expectations. They will also randomly pull children out of the classroom to check their progress toward the guidelines' goals.

Alison deals with the assessments, of her and her students, in the best ways that she can. She puts the guidelines on her lesson plans, has put up a Word Wall in her classroom as required (although she does not use it), and she often administers assessments in small groups rather than waste her time and her children's pulling them out one at a time. Alison also keeps anecdotal records that she uses to demonstrate how much growth she has seen in individual children when a district administrator questions her about the below-expectation performances of some of her students. When it comes to the assessments, Alison essentially views herself as one of the lucky ones. She has the background and experience to address requirements in ways that she still believes are as developmentally appropriate as possible. In addition, her students historically do

well on their assessments and do well in kindergarten, which has garnered her the support of her principal, who trusts her and gives her the freedom and flexibility to teach in ways that are more developmentally appropriate. Many of Alison's colleagues, however, are not as fortunate.

Alison faults the assessments for creating a "split personality" in the school. She describes the school as having a philosophy that supports "learning by doing" that is undermined by a system of assessment that measures discrete skills and decontextualized knowledge. Less experienced teachers, Alison says, are afraid to push back and lack the necessary knowledge to find ways to creatively deal with the assessments and their impact on teaching. Alison describes the resulting climate as the following:

It's the pressure to assess and the pressure to show those scores, you know, the pressure to show all this progress. Well, if you don't know how to assess the children developmentally and you're trying to assess them, and you don't know how to look at what they're doing and just glean what you need for those assessments from it, then what you get is just teachers in chaos.

Alison seems to be one of the lucky few who is not thrown into chaos as she navigates the requirements, and she feels confident in the support of her administration and students' families. While she is unable to avoid assessments, she believes she has found creative ways to minimize their impact on her teaching and her students.

Curriculum

The district in which Alison works selects and provides various curricula for the teachers to incorporate, but they are considered "supplementary" and it is not mandatory for the teachers to use them. For Alison, voluntary use of the supplied curricula means that she can pick and choose what she likes and believes is appropriate. The curriculum flexibility is particularly fortunate for Alison as during the year I spoke to her, the district had just selected a new curriculum that she had a very low opinion of:

We have a new curriculum. I'm not going to say what it is...They didn't ask my opinion on it, they went ahead and bought it, and it is not being utilized in this classroom...It's the [curriculum she does not want to be disclosed] and it is not teacher friendly. It's not student friendly that I can find. It's dull...[I]t doesn't allow for any exploration of what the students' interests are...The activities are dull, the children lose interest, the songs are boring...I don't need someone to tell me what to say to children. I don't need a written script of what it is that they want me to tell or what it is the children need to be learning.

There are other curricula provided by the district that Alison does like, and she picks and chooses what she believes are the best activities and materials from the curricula that are made available to her.

Alison credits her flexibility and confidence combining different activities to her strong early childhood background and experience. She notes that she has "been here so long that they really just leave me alone. They like what I do. Nobody has complained." Other teachers, however, are less fortunate and Alison admits that more prescriptive curricula have their place.

She explains,

I know that there are lot of teachers out there that got into teaching late or they were taught through a test and so they don't really understand how to put together a curriculum or what it is the children really know, really need to know, and so it's needed. These curriculum are needed, I understand that.

Alison offers this not as a criticism of her less experienced colleagues but rather as an acknowledgment of the simple fact that many preschool teachers have less background knowledge and may appreciate the support and structure provided by a more prescriptive curriculum (Campbell, Torr, & Cologon, 2012).

Role of School and District Administration

When asked who has the biggest influence on what her curriculum and instruction, Alison responded that it was district curriculum coordinators. This is not, however, something she would consider a positive influence, and she still claims to "choose to ignore 99.9% of what I'm told [and I'm] going to do what I know is appropriate." Alison strikes me as exceptionally

candid, but the one point in our conversations at which she became concerned about confidentiality was when we hit upon her opinions about school district curriculum personnel. The majority of her frustration seems to be aimed at district curriculum coordinators of whom she holds a low opinion. Her frustration and perhaps borderline anger with district coordinators seems to stem from her perception of their lack of expertise and understanding of young children, in particular their failure to understand the developmental starting point of the children in her classes. She explains:

None of them have a degree in early childhood, not a single degree much less any higher education. Um, and so they are trying to come up with activities for early childhood and then the principals tell us what it is they said and they come over and they try and “teach” us what we should be doing. And a lot of the teachers like I said feel, they feel that it’s coming at them from all angles and they have all of this stuff they are suppose [sic] to be teaching the kids. And what they really feel like is it’s not appropriate but they don’t know what else to do so they keep pushing it at them. I unfortunately have no patience for those people. And so they come in and I watch what they’re doing and the second that I realize that it’s not developmentally appropriate and it’s not something that is even cognitively possible at this age because if you have a child that is at a point at which they can’t, you know, feed themselves they can’t make a fist hardly, I don’t really understand how you think I’m going to have them doing all of these other skills. You have to start at the lowest. While it’s great you want them here... Wonderful. That’s a lovely thought for the perfect child in a typically developing world where the, you know, unicorns fly and rainbows are, are all of it, are every day. But in the real world where I live, children are all at different levels and I do what I need to do for each child.

Alison views the district administrators as out of touch with her reality. She is dismissive of their lack of background in the field of early childhood and their lack of understanding of the population of students with whom she works, and she clearly views herself as having a better understanding of what is appropriate and doable for the children in her classes.

Fortunately for Alison, she feels that in large part she is given a long leash and has the freedom and support to work with her children and families in the way that she believes is best for them. This freedom comes in large part from the support of the school administration. In talking about her principal, Alison comments,

My principal is very happy with what I do, so she doesn't bother me...She is supportive because she knows that I have the training and background to know what I am doing. Other teachers may not be given as much leeway because they may not have the background and training. I've demonstrated that I know what I am doing.

As was seen in her comments on curriculum, Alison touches on this issue of training and experience frequently, highlighting her own strong background and occasionally addressing the challenges for her colleagues who do not have her background knowledge or experience working with preschool-age children.

With a 12-year history at the school, Alison has established herself as a veteran teacher and explains that parents frequently demand to have their children placed in her class, saying they "are knocking down the school door" and threatening to "raise holy cane" if their child does not end up in her class. She also describes herself as having a long history of being a vocal advocate for what she believes is appropriate for the children with whom she works. According to her, whenever she speaks up, district personnel "just go, 'All right. Fine. Whatever. I'm not going to argue with you.'" She describes herself as being fairly well known in the community, not just among parents, but also by the superintendent and district administration:

I live in a town that is pretty large but I've been here long enough that I have met most of the bigwigs and they've all figured out pretty much, "Well, if you just kind of let her do what she wants to do, she does it appropriately. She's not hurting the children, they're learning, and she's really obnoxious when you try and push her too far. And she'll just get loud and she'll protest and she'll get everybody in an uproar so just kind of let her do what she wants."

She goes on to say, "The superintendent learned a long time ago just to ignore me." Despite her tenure and reputation and her obvious disdain for inappropriate ideas that come down from the district, there are still times Alison must reluctantly comply, such as using the Prekindergarten Guidelines, administering assessments, and begrudgingly asking the children to engage in various activities that she does not believe are developmentally or individually appropriate. She

does all this, she admits, because you can only fight so much and at the end of the day she still needs her job.

Parental Involvement

One of the reasons Alison decided to teach public prekindergarten as opposed to private was her strong feeling that “there are a lot of children out there that need support and assistance from teachers that are good at what they do and that are loving of children no matter what their background is.” Alison is a white teacher who has intentionally opted to work in a school that serves children who are ethnically diverse in an economically disadvantaged community because she believes they are equally worthy of a high quality education. In her experience working in private schools, Alison felt that the parents of private school children were “very privileged” and had a sense of entitlement that led them to feel they should have a say in classroom activities and also believe that she should treat their children as if they “deserved more than another child.” This parental over-involvement, in which parents attempted to set the tone for instruction and teacher-student interaction, stands in sharp contrast to the role of parents and Alison’s interactions with families at Adelfa Callejo.

Alison works primarily with lower income families and describes the majority of her parents as working long hours to “make ends meet.” Many of the families are non-English speaking, single parent families, and/or have one spouse in the military who is away for extended periods of time. Regarding the level of parental involvement in her classroom, she comments, “While I love having the assistance of parents and having them be involved, I realize that that’s not an opportunity for a lot of them, and so I do send things home that they can do.” Alison spends a lot of her time preparing activities and materials for parents to do with their children at home and also explaining to parents what her literacy goals are for the children. She says the

typical literacy goal of parents for their children is to learn the alphabet, so she sees a significant portion of her job as dedicated to educating parents about the importance of reading with their children and helping their children develop a connection to language and letters. She talks to parents about helping children to connect to the letters in their name because they are more meaningful rather than focusing on the children learning the alphabet song, something she notes is frequently the single stated literacy goal of many families. Alison's responses to my questions about how parents influence her were in actuality more about how she influences and supports them.

Alison says she sees the majority of her parents as wanting to be involved and to understand what is best for their children, but lacking information and resources. She notes, "Just because they're lower income and they may not have as high an education as many doesn't mean that they don't want to learn. They just don't know where to go." There are, however, some exceptions to this, and those are the parents of the children in the Preschool Program for Children with Disabilities [PPCD]. As she describes,

[S]ome of the PPCD parents—because PPCD children don't have to be in the Pre-K, um, box—they can be higher income, they don't have to be at risk other than just have the 'differently abled' status—then sometimes there's more education there and they kind of understand, they've been working with it more and know where to go to get resources and who to ask. And they're not afraid to go, "This is going to happen."

PPCD parents, as she describes them, are thus sometimes more vocal about saying that they, in her words, "want to see certain things" whereas she sees herself as having to advocate and inform many of the other parents. She notes, however, that she does not feel that parents ask or expect her to change anything she is doing in the classroom to meet their literacy goals for their children.

Relationships With Other Teachers

Adelfa Callejo is a large public school that only serves 3-5 year old children. Alison's class is an ESL class and also the only blended or inclusive pre-kindergarten class. There are also other types of classrooms at the school including Head Start, public prekindergarten, ESL, bilingual, and special education classrooms. Teachers are divided into teams or pods that typically include a bilingual class, a special education class, and either an English-based Head Start class or pre-K class. Teams have a scheduled meeting once a month to plan, develop themes, ask for help, share information from various committees on which teachers serve, and to discuss issues or concerns with children and/or families. These topics represent a wide range of different areas to try to pack into a monthly meeting, however, and this time is just as often taken up with paperwork, procedural issues, and other school-wide concerns or topics as it is an opportunity for true collaboration and discussion of individual needs or concerns from their own classrooms. Alison's pod, like the other pods at the school, shares an office where they typically meet up at the end of the day and have informal conversations. As is often the case, these informal conversations between teachers either within the pod or throughout the school are the times when teachers develop relationships and collaborate with and support one another (see Wells, 2017). As Alison notes, "We just don't have a lot of time to get together as a whole group," which means that, although Alison views the general culture of the school as supportive, there are few opportunities to intentionally and meaningfully collaborate and share ideas.

While Alison says she has picked up various activities and ideas from colleagues over the years, it seems that now her role in her relationships with co-workers is often as the mentor, sharing ideas and helping support less experienced teachers when they are able to find the time. She explains,

I have a lot of teachers that do come to me and they go, “I really like what you’re doing. Can you show me things?” And I try and get down and help them when I can, but 45 students [shrugs]. We just don’t have—we literally don’t have the time to structure that. And they get frustrated, and they try and follow the curriculum, which is not developmentally appropriate. And it’s just a big cyclic mess.

Alison describes her colleagues as being largely inexperienced, noting that many of them are new and also pointing out that she believes she is one the very few prekindergarten teachers in the entire district who have a degree in Early Childhood Education or a related field. She also touches on the problems of high turnover seen in the field more broadly (Bullough, Hall-Kenyon, & MacKay, 2012; Jeon & Wells, 2018) that contributes to the general inexperience:

What typically happens is, um, I hate to say this, but many early childhood educators are those type of people that want to get married, have their own babies and stay home with them, which is nothing wrong with that. But then you have all these people with this wonderful education that aren’t utilizing it with those that need it. And then we have a push down and we have a bunch of people that don’t know what they’re doing a hundred percent.

Alison is placed into a mentor role by virtue of a general lack of experience and qualifications amongst her colleagues. The “cyclic mess” she is describing is one in which teachers, particularly those who are inexperienced and/or work with children who are often labeled as “at risk,” rely upon more prescriptive and narrow curricula that ignore the knowledge, needs, and interests all young children bring with them into the classroom (Dyson, 2003; Siegel & Lukas, 2008; Stipek, 2006). Within this cycle, teachers become frustrated and overwhelmed and perhaps see children struggling, which in turn creates a negative teaching experience. While Alison would ideally like to be able to support her colleagues and help guide them toward more individually appropriate practices for early learners, there is not any time in her day to make that happen.

Description of Literacy Practices

Alison's curriculum is theme-based, utilizing weekly themes throughout the year that she develops with her team before the school year begins. Literacy activities, which Alison pulls from supplied curricula, workshops, colleagues, or other sources she has encountered during her career, are then connected to the theme. For example, children may engage in various activities centered on the story of *The Three Little Pigs* during a unit on family. This can include conversations about different types of shelter, books that tell stories or contain ideas that related to the three pigs, or acting out the story.

Throughout the day, there are many planned literacy activities in Alison's classroom. The first thing the children do when they walk in the classroom is write their name to the best of their ability. This is something that Alison has reluctantly incorporated into her daily routine, stating:

They do come in and we do have name writing, which I know is not 100% developmentally appropriate, but when they go into kindergarten, developmentally appropriate or not, they have to be able to do it and I just don't want them to be blindsided.

The children then gather together for a morning meeting on the rug, which Alison views as an opportunity to develop vocabulary through repetition as they discuss the weather, calendar, daily routine and rules, and say the Texas and national pledges. They also sing songs together, including good morning songs in Spanish and English.

Following the morning meeting, the children break into their small groups. There are four small groups who rotate through four activities, one per day, for the week. On the fifth day, the children do a large group motor activity together. Each small group has an adult working with it, and it is notable that most weeks three of the four small groups are literacy-related. Children are not "ability grouped" but rather have ESL students and children with disabilities "intermingled within them so when you walk in, any given group can have any amount of different types of

students within each group.” Throughout the year, small groups are an opportunity for Alison and the other adults to work with the children on specific skills. Children may play games, do a math activity, or work on an art activity that develops motor skills and color name vocabulary. During the third week of school, Alison introduces journals as a small group activity. Some children are able to write in their journals but some children are still learning to hold a pencil, so Alison views this group as an independent activity that allows children to develop emergent writing skills at their own pace. An additional small group activity may be using Scholastic magazines to support the weekly theme and develop oral language, vocabulary, and knowledge about different topics.

Every day for about 25-30 minutes, children have center time, during which they are able to move freely around the classroom. In addition to fairly typical literacy centers such as a writing center, computers, listening center, and books, as well as literacy opportunities in the art, blocks, and dramatic play centers, one of Alison’s favorite centers is the puppet theater. Alison hollowed out and carpeted an old television set and children use puppets to act out stories for their friends. Alison notes that she feels the English Language Learners in particular develop their oral language skills as they tell stories in their native language or in English. Books are also a central component of the curriculum and stories are read at least once a day to the whole class. Parents are invited to read to the class, including ELL parents who are invited to read in their home language.

With multiple languages represented in each of her classes, it is important to note that all of the children are expected to participate in all of the same activities. This is a full immersion class, not a bilingual class, and all instruction, except for the good morning songs in Spanish, is in English. However, Alison does ask parents for “cheat sheets” to help her learn a small number

of significant words in each child's language. While Alison notes that she is perfectly happy for the children to speak whatever language they are most comfortable with in the classroom, she states that "their parents are very, very strong, typically, that they want their children to only speak English at school." She also notes that parents of ELLs often seem to push their children harder to learn and do well in school, and that therefore she feels that her ELLs "are the ones that have a better understanding of writing," despite often coming to her with extremely limited English knowledge at the beginning of the school year.

One of the weekly literacy activities in Alison's class is the "letter of the week." During the third week of school, Alison introduces a "letter of the week," meaning each week the class studies a different random letter. During large group time, a letter is introduced, noting how it is written as a capital and lowercase letter as well as the sound(s) it makes. Small group activities then focus on that letter as children decorate the letter, find words that start with that letter, and practice writing it. Alison also creates a "word wall" that is supposed to change every week to include different words that start with the letter of the week (Jasmine & Schiesl, 2009; Wingate, Rutledge, & Johnson, 2014). The introduction of a letter of the week and creating a word wall to introduce vocabulary with the weekly letter are activities that Alison is required to do by her district. They are also activities that highlight rare instances of Alison's practice being overtly and, in her view, negatively influenced by external interests.

Beliefs About Early Literacy Development and Curriculum

According to Alison, "At this age, almost everything has to do with literacy." As she defines it, "Literacy for me means language and any way that they get language. Seeing it, hearing it, making it with their hands, writing, art, anything that requires them to utilize some

type of language is literacy to me.” Having this broad definition of literacy means that Alison views any activity that involves speaking and language as a literacy activity.

Because Alison views literacy so broadly, it is virtually impossible for the children to be engaged in any activity and *not* develop literacy skills and knowledge. Alison believes the most important literacy activities that children can be engaged in are conversations, interactions with books and stories, and playing with words and rhymes in songs and books such as those by Dr. Seuss. She provides the following list:

They’re hearing stories read by me. They’re listening to stories. They’re playing on the computer and hearing them. They’re working with letters and sounds. They’re seeing the words. They’re seeing the letters. They’re seeing the shapes they’re working on. They’re recognizing words. They’re learning new vocabulary. In many of my children’s instances they’re learning a new language, something that’s completely different, not like English or Spanish but Farsi, Punjab, Shona, Arabic, Bengali to English. So, they’re learning the vocabulary. They’re learning and recognizing how to put them together to make them that much more successful as they grow to know what the words are, to recognize how to use them, to put them together. At this age typically they’re not learning how to put a sentence together on paper. But they’re learning how to say it, because if you recognize that a sentence sounds appropriate, it’s much easier to put it down on paper later, using oral language to build on.

Many of the literacy moments that Alison describes as important to literacy development are informal, unplanned for, and child-driven opportunities such as conversations during center time, breakfast/snack, or outside on the playground. She views these conversations not only as moments to build relationships but also times during which she helps children—and children help their peers—develop oral language, conversational skills and vocabulary. Oral language development receives heightened significance for Alison and her students because it is an ESL class, and she has observed that the ELLs will frequently come to her for help with new words. However, while she believes language learners view her as a resource, she notes that peers are often even more helpful in understanding, communicating, and translating for their classmates. She comments,

The kids should just teach each other because they're so much better at helping each other than I ever am. They pick up each others' language better than I do. And they understand each other better than if an adult is talking with them.

This perspective highlights how Alison sees the children as central to their own and one another's learning.

When Alison talks about literacy development, she places less value on the teacher-directed activities—such as name writing or letter-of-the-week activities—as being central to children's learning. She is more enthusiastic when she talks about the child-directed moments—the conversations and opportunities found through play, social interactions, music, and stories—and ascribes more value to these activities than she does to the planned literacy activities described earlier. This is because Alison firmly believes, and repeatedly states, “Children learn best by doing.” This holds for her English Language Learners as well: “The English children learn the same way as the ELL children and vice versa. They just need to be doing, to be active participants in the language and learning, and they learn language.” Alison holds a child-centered philosophy that leads her to believe that the most supportive curricula and instruction are about providing and supporting opportunities to develop language and literacy through more playful interactions, and she frequently references the importance of valuing what is developmentally appropriate as well as individually appropriate over predetermined objectives that fail to take into account children's different life experiences and positions along a developmental continuum.

Alison believes the best approach to learning, including literacy development as well as all other domains, is based on the Reggio Emilia approach (see Cadwell, 2003). She explains, “I love the Reggio approach. Go with what the kids love. Run with it. Let them do what they want. Kind of gear it toward them.” Alison believes that a more emergent curriculum, one that takes the children's interests as a starting point rather than strictly adhering to a lesson plan, is more

engaging and therefore creates better learning opportunities. Teachers maintain overall learning goals and objectives but are granted flexibility in getting there. The Reggio approach sees the children and teachers more as collaborators, with children and their interests playing a central role in what is learned and how. This is not to say that the teacher takes a backseat, however, as he or she plays a crucial role as observer, nurturer and guide, weaving in opportunities for learning to support children's interests and knowledge. In keeping with this, Alison sees herself as a "facilitator of learning. Children are going to learn no matter what, so I'm here to guide them."

Alison emphasizes the importance of five different elements for a classroom that is supportive of literacy development: environmental print, routine, music, story, and social interaction. While Alison is not in favor of the word wall she is required to display in her classroom, she still believes that children need to be surrounded by print. Alison's classroom is a print-rich environment in which words are literally everywhere: children's names, labels for centers, books, calendars, a list of classroom rules, a daily schedule, etc. The key difference for Alison is that the words and labels she prefers to have up in her classroom are ones that are relevant to the children: their names, objects in the classroom, or words they are interested in or use frequently. Alison believes that a word wall displaying disconnected words that begin with a seemingly random "letter of the week" is not meaningful or beneficial to her students and their learning.

Children learn best, in Alison's opinion, through doing, interacting, having exposure to concepts and words in context, and also through repetition. Alison places a lot of value on routine, in particular the value of a morning meeting during which children sing the same songs, go over the calendar and rules, and discuss the weather on a daily basis. Routine builds

vocabulary, and she believes this is particularly important for the children in her class because they are primarily English language learners and also come from households with a lower family income. Alison asserts that typically children who are from lower income families “don’t have the opportunity to hear all the words that someone whose parents read a lot or who are in education or watch a lot of TV other than blow ‘em up movies.” Here she echoes the influential work of Hart and Risley (1990, 1995, 1999) regarding “language rich” and “language poor” homes, which has been interpreted by some researchers as representing a deficit view of children that privileges the routines and experiences of middle class families (Goodwin, Cheruvu, & Genishi, 2008).

Oral language is supported not only through routine but also through the incorporation of literature and music. Alison views books and stories as critical because they help develop vocabulary, exposing children to new words but using them in context to help develop understanding. She likes to revisit stories and books, reading the same stories over and over to help children learn through repetition as well as develop a sense of how stories and characters develop. Alison also loves music and believes that songs help children develop vocabulary as well as exposure to the rhythms and rhymes, creating a fun, interactive way of supporting the development of phonological awareness. Songs are also useful, Alison believes, because “I really think that not only do children need to see the words, they need to hear the words.” Songs and rhymes also provide a more natural context for words and expose children to the rhythm of language and rhyming, rather than relying on flash cards to develop an understanding of rhyme.

Compatibility Between Beliefs and Practice

While the activities Alison offers as examples of what her children are engaged in on a daily basis align with the broad definition of literacy seen in descriptions of developmentally

appropriate practices (NAEYC, 2022), her opinion of what the district coordinators expect to see the children doing stands in contrast, something that deeply frustrates Alison. District curriculum coordinators expect children to be “doing sheets, working on their letters and recognizing letters by writing them and tracing their names and learning to write their names and...looking at books and recognizing how books are used, recognizing words in print.” In order to comply with district expectations, Alison feels she is forced to include activities that she does not believe are appropriate. This means she has the children writing their names or some approximation of them every day as they enter the classroom. She comments, “I don’t like the way we write our names. I don’t like the way they are forced to do that.” She also reluctantly does a letter of the week in which multiple activities involve developing letter recognition, including letter sounds, as well as vocabulary words that start with that letter. Using a “letter of the week” as a means of introducing letters and developing alphabetic knowledge has been criticized as rote and lacking in meaning (Caspergue, 2017; Neuman,2006). These concessions are something that Alison struggles with:

I try to be as developmentally appropriate as possible, knowing that I do have to bend my beliefs enough to keep my job. You know, I really want to do what’s best for children, but at the end of the day I need a place to live and things to eat. If I want to continue to be able to do as best as I can for the kids with what they give me and what I’m able to do, you know, then I have to do a little bit of what they want to appease them.

Goldstein (2007) describes the tension teachers like Alison feel in the face of increasingly specific standards as resulting in one of three approaches: integration, demarcation, and acquiescence. Goldstein defines demarcation as the following:

When using a demarcation approach, clear boundaries are drawn around those activities expressly designed to teach the standards and around those activities designed to offer children developmentally appropriate learning experiences, and the two types of activities are kept distinct and separate. (p. 390)

In her descriptions of her teaching and curriculum, Alison very clearly distinguishes between what she does because she believes it is appropriate and what she does solely because of requirements or readiness expectations. Alison creates space in her tight schedule for children to play and initiate their own activities, whether they are outside or playing freely in centers, but also has moments that are teacher-directed or guided by requirements and/or standards. She intentionally minimizes the amount of time spent on activities that she reluctantly incorporates and, when possible, finds ways to embed them in activities that are still playful and meaningful for all of her students.

Alison believes that a Reggio approach offers children an ideal learning environment, one that takes into consideration their knowledge, prior experiences, and interests. However, she laments, “That’s not something that you’re ever going to be completely allowed to do in a public school classroom. It’s extremely hard to do and I’m already doing things that are extremely hard to do for most public school teachers.” Rather than having a more emergent approach, Alison uses a thematic curriculum, finding “loopholes” when she can, such as forgoing recommended flash cards of rhyming words and introducing rhyme through songs and nursery rhymes, activities she describes as more appropriate and enjoyable. She concedes, however, that a more structured curriculum makes it easier to keep track of how she is incorporating and working toward the Pre-K Guidelines. In many ways Alison has been granted the trust, freedom, and flexibility to creatively work toward district and state requirements, but she still sees herself as constantly fighting against constraints on what she views as a better, more appropriate approach to working with young children.

Shifts in Literacy Practices

Amidst all of these immediate factors, Alison cannot escape the broader contextual debates surrounding literacy and early childhood education. When asked about shifts in her own practice, Alison immediately references the whole language versus phonics debate (see Purcell-Gates, McIntyre, & Freppon, 1995), calling it “the same pendulum swing that has been going on forever.” While commenting that researchers seem to constantly change their minds about which approach is “best,” Alison says that in her opinion, “somewhere down the middle is where you need to be because not all children learn the same way.” She advocates for introducing multiple methods for decoding and understanding language so that children have multiple opportunities to develop language and literacy skills.

Frequently throughout our conversations, Alison talks about how she is able to work around requirements and do what she believes is developmentally appropriate because she has a long tenure and proven track record at the school. As she says, “I’ve been here so long that they really just leave me alone.” Because of this attitude, I expected her to feel that the surrounding literacy debate was essentially an annoyance but had little actual impact on her or her teaching. While she concedes that the “pendulum swing” and its resulting impact on curricula has less of an effect on her than it does on some of her colleagues who are less experienced and/or knowledgeable about early childhood, she explains that she is not immune to the consequences of these continual shifts. She notes:

It affects me in that the assessments for the children change...And the children need to be successful on the assessments or they go into kindergarten and their teachers think they don’t know anything. And then I get graded down on my assessments of me, and then my job is in jeopardy and unfortunately teachers have to worry about that. We can’t worry about what’s best for the children. We have to go, “This is best for the children *and* this will keep my job.”

Throughout the majority of the interview, Alison takes a more rebellious stance, so for her to admit that she feels this pressure and to articulate how frustrating it is for her to have to turn her focus away from the children and what she believes is best for them in order to keep her job, is a rare moment of vulnerability. She admits to few concessions in the face of district expectations with which she disagrees, and it clearly frustrates her that she has to put someone else's needs, including her own, ahead of what she believes is right for the children.

As she discusses the pressures that the continual shifting of expectations and requirements put upon her and how it leads to constantly changing assessments, Alison also points out that the district frequently adopts new curricula to keep pace with the changing viewpoints on what is "best" for young children. She re-emphasizes that these shifts affect her, and continues on to explain how:

I mean, because then there's new curricula that come in and they want you to do this and here's another curriculum you need to try and integrate with your day of 3 hours, half of which is going to the bathroom and eating, you know?

This notion of constraints on time is also seen in Goldstein's (2007) qualitative study with kindergarten teachers who were negotiating new standards. New standards put increased pressures on children and teachers, and the teachers felt the curriculum constraints reduced their flexibility and that "their daily schedules had to be fuller and their instructional pace had to be quicker in order to teach all the required material" (Goldstein, 2007, p. 387). Suddenly the teachers perceived themselves as having less control over their own classrooms.

For her part, Alison claims to disregard many of the changes, although still frustrated with the overall culture in her district. She trusts in her own experience and background knowledge, and notes that her principal and superintendent also maintain a high level of confidence in her expertise and therefore largely "leave her alone." While she does make compromises and is not always able to integrate standards in a way that she would like, the

curricular changes are, in her opinion, felt most strongly by less experienced teachers. She explains:

Now it doesn't affect me as drastically as it does a teacher who, say, taught sixth grade and then moved down to Pre-K thinking that this would be an easy job and "I'm just going to take this curriculum and teach it. But wait a minute, they just gave me another one that says something completely different. What do I do, what do I do, what do I do?"

Like the more experienced teacher in Goldstein's (2007) study, Alison describes herself for the most part as able to integrate new requirements into her knowledge of developmentally appropriate activities, while the newer teachers or those without a background in Early Childhood Education are depicted by her as being more overwhelmed by the constant changes.

The final shift that Alison acknowledges is the "push down" of academic expectations.

She describes it as the following:

The push down is something that I definitely feel, and I hate it. When I started teaching, I didn't need to worry about teaching the children what a stupid worksheet was or how to hold a pencil at the age of four when they don't even have the fine motor skills yet to do that and it frustrates them and I know it frustrates them. And I hate it because it frustrates me watching these poor children struggle and be upset and frustrated because they're not developmentally ready to do it. But it's been pushed down. What I did in kindergarten or what I did in first grade they're now doing in kindergarten. They want us to do kindergarten curriculum. And I keep telling these dingbats, "Don't tell me that. Well, that's nice and all but if a child doesn't have the physical ability to hold a pencil how do you think they're going to write a sentence or their name, you know? If they don't know how to hold a fork, how do you think they're going to do this or that? If they don't recognize a book or how to hold it, how do you think they're going to read?" So, yes I definitely feel the push down. And typically I just try and push back. It doesn't get me very far, but I always feel as though as long as I'm fighting for what is right, whether I win or lose, at least I'm trying. I hate it when I lose. But at least I'm trying as opposed to just laying down and taking it."

The push down of expectations and activities has forced Alison into a position of advocacy.

Fortunately she has the confidence, knowledge, and tenure to strive to create a responsive, inclusive classroom environment that holds space for all children and their varying interests, abilities, needs, and experiences.

Summary

Intentional in her decision to teach at a public school that serves an ethnically diverse, economically disadvantaged community, Alison believes that all children deserve access to a high-quality early childhood education. She resists requirements from state guidelines and district curriculum coordinators that she believes are inappropriate for young children, largely because they are too advanced, and her resistance is empowered by her background knowledge, education, experience, and track record of “success.” While at times she has to reluctantly acquiesce to the influence of these outside forces, the most significant influence on Alison’s beliefs and pedagogy is the notion of developmentally appropriate practice, and she strives to create a literacy environment that is language-rich and meets the individual and developmental needs of all students. Alison believes in hands-on learning, an approach to teaching that incorporates different methods to meet the different learning needs of students, and that children are developing literacy skills and knowledge throughout the entire day as they listen, talk, read stories, write, draw, and sing. The most valuable and impactful early literacy experiences are the ones that are playful and child-driven, and she reluctantly incorporates more direct instruction activities, such as daily name writing and those that support a letter-of-the-week, in order to maintain job security and also to accustom children to activities and expectations they will see in kindergarten. Alison speaks out strongly against the negative impact of a push-down of literacy expectations on children and less experienced teachers, and she continually seeks to find creative ways to create an educational environment that emphasizes “learning by doing.”

Chapter IX: Deborah

If you ask Deborah how she feels about being a preschool teacher, she will tell you the many ways in which it makes her feel “blessed,” a common choice of words for Texans when they are talking to you about how fortunate they feel in one regard or another. A lifelong Texan in her 26th year of teaching, Deborah frequently expresses how much love and affection she feels for the children she works with and how lucky she is to have a job she cares about so deeply. She explains:

I just literally feel like it’s my passion, and I just feel like that is what I was supposed to do—to teach these little ones...It’s just my gift is with the little tiny ones. So I love it...At this age this is a good thing that I love it because it’s a hard thing to do sometimes [laughs], but I just love it.

Deborah has a degree in elementary education and certifications in special education, kindergarten, and early childhood education. Despite her extensive education and training, she feels that most of her learning has occurred on the job and from observing other teachers and attending workshops. This particularly holds true in regards to teaching preschool, and she notes that after leaving college, “I was disappointed in how I was prepared. I felt like I was exposed to things but not to the degree that I needed to really know what to do when I got out there.”

Deborah’s first 16 years of teaching preschool were at a private school, and she is now in her fifth year as a prekindergarten teacher at Esther Jackson Elementary School, a suburban prekindergarten through fourth grade public school in an affluent community. Because all of the elementary schools in this district do not have a prekindergarten program, children in the program can be zoned for any of the elementary schools within the district and therefore could possibly move schools for kindergarten and beyond. National Center for Education Statistics (2015) data describe the student population of Esther Jackson’s district during the year of this study as 79% white, 8% Asian, 7% Hispanic, 2% African American, 3% two or more races, and

1% American Indian. Two percent of the students met criteria to be labeled economically disadvantaged, 9% of the students qualified for special education services, and 1% were considered English language learners. Deborah is white as are a significant majority of her students who hail from a relatively homogenous suburban community.

While Deborah loved the private school where she used to work and points out that her husband still teaches there, she is very passionate in her belief that “public school is very important to our nation” and that there is a need for “strong public schools for our children [because] not everyone can go to private schools.” Deborah describes Esther Jackson as “the best of both worlds” in that she believes they provide “a private school education in a public school setting.” The prekindergarten program in Esther Jackson’s district is open to all children in the community who qualify for the state-mandated public pre-kindergarten program as well as children who are eligible for a Preschool Program for Children with Disabilities (PPCD), with the primary goal of being a “Blended Prekindergarten Program” of children with and without special needs. If spots remain, there is a lottery process for tuition-based students and students of employees. While Deborah has had students over the years who were eligible for state-funded pre-k because they were foster children, children of members of the military, English Language Learners, or who were eligible for free or reduced-price lunch, the primary eligibility criterion her students meet is qualifying for PPCD. According to Deborah, each year approximately one-fourth of her students qualify for PPCD while the majority of the students are tuition-based. Given her background in special education, Deborah was drawn to the program at Esther Jackson because it is an inclusive setting. As she describes it,

There’s not very many preschools that are tuition-based along with the blended to bring in the special needs children. And they learn together, they work together, and we’re doing this with the children all through the system so it’s a great time to start them right at this time. So I’ve had a great experience with it.

Factors Influencing Literacy Practices and Curriculum

Esther Jackson is a school community that Deborah feels fortunate to be a part of, yet at this point in her career she feels there are few people, including colleagues, who exert a strong influence over her teaching or her ideas about literacy.

Parents' Expectations

When we are talking about the influence of parents on her literacy curriculum, Deborah discusses how she really feels it is the other way around in that she works hard to encourage parents to become more involved in their children's literacy development and to spend more time reading with their children in particular. Although Esther Jackson is in an affluent community, which typically is conceived of as having highly involved parents with high expectations for their children (Cooper, Crosnoe, Suizzo, & Pituch, 2010), Deborah really feels like prekindergarten escapes this stereotype. In fact, when asked about parents' literacy goals, she notes:

I just think they want them to be ready to go to kindergarten...I also think they don't take some of it as seriously as they do in kindergarten. It's like they leave preschool and the minute they're in kindergarten, then they take a lot of the things that I don't think they take very seriously now, they take it more seriously when they're in kindergarten.

Parents have literacy expectations for their children, including letter knowledge, letter sounds, and early writing, but they are not too concerned about it at the prekindergarten level, and Deborah feels like they support the fact that she is taking what she describes as a more developmental and "well rounded" approach to their children's early education.

Influence of School Administration

Deborah also describes her administration as both "very supportive" and "very positive." She explains that the administration has very little direct impact upon the specifics of her work with children other than "buying us the programs and things," but this is not meant to be a

dismissive evaluation of the influence of her principal and vice-principal. Rather, she believes it reflects the fact that they trust the pre-k teachers to make decisions and have ownership of what they do in the classroom. While her administration does not directly influence her beliefs and decisions about curriculum and teaching, she recognizes that her work exists in relation to the school's philosophy and approach to learning and literacy. Deborah describes a school culture that values differentiation and finding ways to support each individual child. She frequently cites the importance of tying what the children are doing in pre-k with what happens in the older grades, and she points out that the principal recently ordered a new reading program, which "goes along with her desire to help with the literacy here in the pre-k before they go to K." Continuing with this thread of connecting to the older grades, a topic that comes up frequently for Deborah, she also talks about how she wishes she could spend time observing the kindergarten teachers so "then we could figure out how to bring it down to make sure we're doing the right thing here." As Ayers (2001) notes, spending time in other teachers' classrooms is a critical aspect of effective staff development that, in Deborah's scenario specifically, would enable her to observe what is happening in the next grade level and actively make decisions about how she can align her teaching and curriculum to what children are expected to do in kindergarten.

Collaboration and Relationships with Other Teachers

Because of "my age and my experiences," Deborah feels that she likely influences the other preschool teachers' ideas about early literacy development rather than them influencing her. She comments, "I think I feel really good with what I've done, and then with what's come out it just usually kind of reinforces what I've been doing over the years." However, Deborah also acknowledges that the new teachers on the pre-k team offer fresh ideas, particularly when it

comes to using technology. In reflecting on the ways in which the preschool teachers influence one another, Deborah observes:

A couple of us have been teaching a really, really long time so we have ideas, and then we've got some brand new teachers that have different ideas. So it's good to work together. And I think I would like us to share even more.

The preschool team at Esther Jackson meets weekly and then has monthly meetings with the teachers from the other preschool program in the district, yet Deborah notes that these meetings are often taken up with paperwork and “housekeeping” rather than providing real opportunities to share ideas about working with young children. As is commonly seen in the literature regarding teacher collaboration (Hopkins & Spillane, 2014; Ingersoll & Strong, 2011; Wells, 2017), teachers at Esther Jackson will informally share ideas about something they feel is useful; but without a shared planning time this exchange of ideas typically happens after school when the teachers often stay until 5 or 6 o'clock or when they are, as Deborah describes, “grabbing each other in the hall or in the car line or whatever and saying, ‘Well, we're doing this.’”

Influence of Curriculum and State Standards

Like all public prekindergarten teachers in Texas, Deborah is required to incorporate the Texas Prekindergarten Guidelines. The guidelines are attached to her lesson plans and are put on report cards that go out every six-week period. This is done not only to communicate with parents about how their children are progressing, but also to provide the teachers with an explicit guidepost to keep them on track with the guidelines. Deborah notes that the guidelines are largely compatible with her own ideas regarding literacy development and instruction, commenting, “I think on the whole they're good guidelines.” However, she also acknowledges that there are a lot of different guidelines and it can be challenging to make sure you are addressing them all. She also says that sometimes she thinks to herself, “[S]ome of the things

seem a little hard... That really just seems a little bit above where they are, but they'll get what they can out of it and we'll just work towards it, I guess." She says this is infrequent, however, and that she believes the prekindergarten guidelines are "pretty well developmentally where they should be" and are "pretty well thought out, and make sense for this age."

As a way of meeting the state guidelines, public prekindergarten teachers like Deborah are required to use a state-approved curriculum that has been selected based on its alignment with the state standards. This year, the preschool teachers in Deborah's district have started using a new curriculum from Scholastic. Adjusting to a new curriculum has been a challenge, and Deborah comments that the teachers are still working their way through it and figuring out "the good and the bad." She comments that it has "been a stretch for all of us just trying to keep up with it because there's so much to do. But we like it and I see a lot of good points with it." In particular, Deborah really likes the literature that comes with the Scholastic curriculum and notes that it includes books that she has been reading with her students for many years. She also likes that, as a thematic curriculum, it devotes more time (4 weeks) to each theme and also provides weeks off during which the teachers have the flexibility to plan their own lessons. Deborah is a very positive person and she feels fortunate that although adjusting to a new curriculum has certainly been a challenge, she still likes it because, "I think it's made me grow and stretch in areas and learn new ways of looking at things so I think that's always good."

Strict adherence to the curriculum is not required, and Deborah notes that "we have a curriculum as a stepping-off point and then we can add in things." While Deborah has the freedom to stray at times from the new curriculum, she is only accorded this flexibility as long as she is still addressing the state guidelines. She describes the curriculum more as a "road map" that helps keep the teachers on track with addressing the state guidelines and also to "make sure

we're doing what we need to be doing for the children that, at this point, someone deemed is the right way to do it." In fact, in talking with Deborah, it quickly becomes apparent that her personal approach to curriculum is an amalgam of ideas and programs. Deborah not only incorporates the state-approved curriculum, but she also weaves in activities that she has used and liked over the years. In addition, she uses two different handwriting programs: Handwriting Without Tears (Olsen, 2013), because they are an inclusive classroom and the occupational therapists feel like it is "really important for the children with special needs," and also the Zaner Bloser handwriting program to align with what is utilized in the older grades. Deborah acknowledges that it is "a little bit confusing" and challenging for the teachers as they move back and forth between the two writing programs, but she does not feel like it is confusing for the children.

These different curricular requirements become a lot to balance and incorporate, particularly when you recall that Deborah also has to keep track of IEP goals for some of the children, yet Deborah is matter-of-fact as she discusses it. She acknowledges that it requires a lot of work and frequent adjustments to make sure she is complying with requirements, but she discusses it all without a hint of complaint or frustration. When I ask her how she feels about trying to juggle the different curricula, all the while keeping the state guidelines in mind as the ultimate goal, Deborah responds, "We feel like this year we really kind of have a lot going on. And it's a lot. But I think we're real happy with the new curriculum." There are times when Deborah's comments hint at challenges and perhaps even some frustration, but she immediately follows them up with some type of positive assessment about how overall she is happy with everything. Deborah's constant reversion to positive statements could stem from several factors, including the nature of our relationship as researcher and participant or from her desire to portray

herself and a school she is clearly proud of in the best possible light. However, based on my conversations with Deborah, I think it most likely stems from the fact that she appears to be a generally positive and optimistic person and applies this attitude to her teaching. In fact, as we are talking about her efforts to balance everything, Deborah comments,

If I'm stressed trying to handle these things, they [the children] are going to pick up on that. So I just have to take a deep breath and figure out, 'Okay, this is going to be great.' And sometimes it is, and sometimes it isn't, and we adjust and move on because that's how life is.

This matter-of-fact attitude about staying positive and adjusting to change has likely been a great benefit to Deborah throughout her teaching career as requirements, curricula, and ideas about "best practice" have shifted.

Shifts in Literacy Expectations

A lot can change in twenty-six years, and Deborah's tenure in early childhood education is certainly not an exception to this rule. This particular school year has been one that involved the introduction of a new curriculum, but Deborah notes that change is a regular occurrence in early literacy: "[I]t seems like every year there's new buzz words and there's new ways to do it. And there's, you know, there was whole language and pull-outs and just different ways of doing things." The challenge for Deborah personally, is that "some of the things they're doing now, to me, is not as natural teaching as it was." Deborah seems to feel somewhat conflicted about the shifts she has seen happen in preschool expectations. While she states that she believes the push-down of skills and expectations is "still very, I feel like, appropriate developmentally for them," she also at times seems frustrated:

I think I would put all children in school at age 3 and for sure by 4. I don't think they should wait 'till kindergarten because we've had to bump up what they're expected to do. And kindergarten, developmentally, is so where I would like to see them. I would like to still have kindergarten like it was years back. I think that they still need to play and have centers. And the stress on our teachers who all know that and they believe that, but they have to do so many other things to fit in with the state mandates that it makes it difficult.

Deborah believes that there is “a lot of validity in new things and moving forward,” but she also seems to acknowledge a sense that increasing expectations put pressure on teachers and reduce the amount of time pre-k children can spend learning through play and exploration.

Description of Literacy Practices and Beliefs

Deborah’s overarching goal for her students is to “think learning is fun [and] ‘I can learn whatever I want to learn.’” As she discusses her specific literacy goals, she always circles back to emphasize that the most important thing is for the children to have fun and how much she “want[s] them to be excited [and] to understand that what we’re doing is important.” This emphasis on a joyful attitude toward learning extends to Deborah’s primary literacy goal, which is for the children to “love to read and love books...and just to be excited about literacy.”

Deborah understands, however, that there are a lot of different layers to children’s literacy, and she speaks about helping the children: “meet the goals that we have to about the letters and sounds;” to be “writing in their way;” to become confident story tellers; to learn that words can be broken down into sounds and syllables; and to understand that stories have a beginning, middle and end. She is quick to point out that for the most part her goals are purposefully broad and that she has a range of expectations for different children. In keeping with this, Deborah also notes that when it comes to teaching, there is no “one best way for everything, so I think all educators pick and choose and supplement and try to always be looking” for different ways to reach children. She adds that teachers should provide a variety of entry points to knowledge and “present new ways for [children] to learn about it in many different ways” so that all children can learn and succeed.

As Deborah discusses her goals and some of the activities she uses in her classroom, she frequently brings up kindergarten readiness—that “they are ready for the teaching that they’re

going to be getting in kindergarten”—and how important it is for her to “keep them moving towards May so that they’re ready to move on.” Deborah previously taught kindergarten, which she believes has been useful in giving her a sense of what is expected of her children when they go into the next grade. In addition, being part of a pre-k- fourth grade school means Deborah is extremely aware of and connected to the older grades and the idea of preparing for kindergarten is omnipresent. This notion of interconnectedness means “we have to make sure we’re teaching the basic skills that they need to help them in kindergarten, and kinder has to help first.” She notes that the constant awareness of and concern with getting children ready for kindergarten is somewhat different from when she first started, but because this is simply a reality, she is going to do her best to make sure her students are prepared.

Deborah’s conception of kindergarten readiness is not restricted to specific skills but rather she often references helping the children become comfortable with curricular activities that they will see in the older grades. There is a little dissonance for Deborah here, however, because while she thinks it is important to prepare the children for kindergarten, she does worry that sometimes certain activities might not be appropriate:

[L]ike the when you’re telling the children to sit and turn and talk and in the reading workshop and those type methods, at this age that doesn’t work very well because they’re just not there yet. So I’ve tried to incorporate a little bit of those lessons and how they’re doing it in kinder and on up, but it’s quite...it’s a little bit challenging because they don’t understand.

The older grades at Esther Jackson all do Reading Workshop (Calkins, 2017), so the prekindergarten teachers begin having the children turn and talk with a friend to discuss a book they have all read together. Deborah is trying to incorporate this “turn and talk” idea with her students, but she worries that it is not a useful approach with preschool age children and that “sometimes I think the old methods work just as well, so I try to do a little bit of both.” These moments—when the curriculum or approaches used in kindergarten seem to be an inappropriate

for her children—are the times when Deborah relies on her years of experience and weaves in activities that she thinks are more supportive of young children’s learning. For Deborah, while it is in some ways a challenge to help the children be “ready to do the more structured things” that they will see in kindergarten, she believes that prekindergarten teachers are fortunate that they have the “privilege” to still be able to have fun with the children and “share that [fun] with them and have the joy.” It is disconcerting that she sees prekindergarten as the last opportunity for children to have this kind of fun while they are learning.

As noted earlier, Deborah and the other prekindergarten teachers at Esther Jackson incorporate two handwriting programs into their curriculum. While the Zaner Bloser handwriting program is not a prekindergarten state requirement or part of their state-approved curriculum, Deborah provides similar reasoning for her use of principles and approaches from Reading Workshop and says she utilizes aspects of the Zaner Bloser program so that it will “be very familiar to them when they get into kindergarten.” Zaner Bloser is an explicit approach to writing found in a series of grade-level specific workbooks used throughout her school district. It focuses younger children on learning to write and use vertical, horizontal, circular, and diagonal strokes as the four basic strokes used for all letters and numbers. Deborah and the other pre-k teachers use Zaner Bloser activities to have children practice tracing and forming letters. At least twice a week they also use Handwriting Without Tears with all of the children since it is an inclusive classroom and this is the program that has been selected for the children with special needs. Deborah likes Handwriting Without Tears because she feels it is hands-on and she likes the different materials that are used to form the letters, which are particularly beneficial in that they allow children to begin noticing and manipulating different line shapes to create letters without requiring the small motor skills necessary to write lines and letters independently.

Students in kindergarten through fourth grade at Esther Jackson are assessed at the beginning of every school year to determine their reading level. Students then bring home reading bags every week with books that they have selected that are on that level or one level below or above. In another example of how the prekindergarten program connects itself to approaches and practices used in the elementary grades, the prekindergarten children also bring books home to read with their families and have two writing activities that are affiliated with their book bags. The first is a “report” that the children do with their families about their book and bring to school on Thursdays. At the beginning of the year, the children draw a picture for their report, but throughout the year they are working towards writing about things such as their favorite part of the book and then sharing their ideas with the class. Deborah views this activity as part of her “support for the higher grades [and] to show them about reading and how important it is for the child and the family.” Each week, the book bags also have a different small toy animal inside, and on Thursday the children draw their animal at school and write the type of animal. The children are also encouraged to respond to prompts such as “How does it sound to you?” and “What do you think it is?” This book bag activity is not from the curriculum but rather an activity that she has done over the years and likes. She feels like it combines repeated readings of one book with developing letter knowledge, phonological awareness, and writing development.

It is important to pause for a moment and clarify what Deborah means when she talks about the children writing. Deborah believes that pre-k is “still early” to expect the children to be able to write, as defined by conventional understandings of writing as putting together letters to form words and then connecting words to form ideas and sentences. Deborah takes a broader definition of writing for prekindergarten children, observing, “Well, at this age, drawing pictures

is considered, you know, we consider that writing.” Deborah views writing development as a process of exploration and discovery that exists on a continuum (Clay, 1998; Coates & Coates, 2016; Dyson & Genishi, 1993; Gerde, Bingham, & Wasik, 2012; Puranik & Lonigan, 2011; Puranik & Lonigan, 2014; Schickedanz & Collins, 2013; Sulzby, 1992) and notes that all of the children will not be in the same place on that continuum at the end of prekindergarten: “So they’ll be different levels...I always have some children that are writing like on a kindergarten level and then I have some that are just beginning to get there.” For Deborah, the key is that the children progress over the course of the year, starting perhaps with drawing pictures to express themselves and then moving through writing letter strings that are at times random to inventive spelling to possibly being able to write correctly spelled words. She elaborates by noting that some of the children will

know about spacing, they’ll tell you about periods where we stopped, they’ll be able to go left to right and some of them will just have letter strings but then they can read it back to me so I can interpret it.

Deborah will collect their writings into different books throughout the year as a way to highlight their writing development, noting, “I like to just show their progression and when they start to have their little letter strings and little beginning writing. It’s really exciting to kind of see the change.”

Deborah provides a few different reasons for why she devotes so much classroom time to supporting children’s writing development. For example,

I think that for them to express themselves, that’s a wonderful way for them to do that and to feel empowered that they can write and share. And it could just be a picture but then it is a way for them to get across their idea. And I just think anything that we can do to get them ready next year for kindergarten is very helpful.

Deborah’s intentional focus on writing is seen by some as unusual for prekindergarten, with Gerde, Bingham, and Wasik (2012), for example, noting that writing is often “underrepresented”

or even “non-existent” in early childhood classrooms (p. 351). On a daily basis, children in Deborah’s classroom are drawing in their journals, working with different materials on writing letters, using the wooden pieces from *Handwriting Without Tears*, and are exposed to different ways of forming and writing letters. Deborah notes that integrating all of these different activities from different sources has “been kind of interesting to...get it all to fit in.” Part of Deborah’s motivation is also to help the children become comfortable with writing, both the technical aspects of it as well as how it can be used for a process of “meaning making” (Gerde, et al., 2019). Some of Deborah’s students are more comfortable writing and drawing, but others “have high expectations. They worry about trying to write because they know they do not know how to do it like their mom or their dad or their teacher.” This means that Deborah finds herself having to be more encouraging of their efforts.

For Deborah, a primary goal is to help children realize the connection between reading and writing, developing an understanding that they can create their own stories. This “ties [literacy] all together.” Deborah’s main literacy goal is “for them to love to read and love books,” and she speaks often about modeling her love for books, having books available to the children throughout the day, and spending a lot of time reading with her students. When she speaks about the school day becoming overwhelming at times or how busy the children’s lives can be, she explains a goal that she has for them: “[T]o get them to understand that it’s a wonderful time to just sit and quietly go pick out a book and sit and read it and think about it and enjoy it and then go pick out another one.” She wants children to understand that reading is relaxing and pleasurable and what a gift it is to stop, slow down, and bury yourself in books.

In order for the children to develop as readers and writers, Deborah spends time focusing on a range of explicit skills or knowledge that are in her curriculum, in the Texas

Prekindergarten Guidelines, or have a connection to activities done in the older grades. For example, in kindergarten through fourth grade, children at Esther Jackson do word sort activities to help them practice spelling and identify word patterns. The prekindergarten classrooms tie into this by having the children sort pictures into groups based on the initial letter in the word. Deborah also does a letter-of-the-week to help develop alphabet knowledge. This is an activity that she has always done but is also in the new Scholastic curriculum. Beginning the second week of school, after they do their morning work (which is usually one of the previously mentioned writing activities), the class has circle time, which includes reading a book and learning about the letter of the week. Deborah and the children sing songs and read stories about the letter and/or about whatever the current theme is. With the Scholastic curriculum, there is a built-in review week every six weeks or so, and Deborah likes that there are these opportunities for them to go back over the letters they have learned about so far. For each letter of the week, Deborah's class colors a picture of an animal that starts with that letter, and Deborah collects all of these and puts them together at the end of the year so each child has her own "ABC book." In recent years, Deborah has decided that "it's important that they realize the letter and different fonts...[that] they can be printed in different ways." For each letter of the week, Scholastic has a booklet that shows the letters written in different styles, and this is something in particular that Deborah really likes about the new curriculum. The booklet shows different ways to write the same letter and has a word bank with words for them to copy and then pictures to color. Deborah points out that this activity, which is part of the curriculum, can be a challenge because "it's hard a lot of times at this age to look and transfer."

The Texas Guidelines' goal for letter knowledge is 20 upper and lowercase letters, and Deborah notes that all of her students will surpass this goal. Deborah prefers to teach the letters

in order because she says this is what is familiar to children as they all know the alphabet song and they “know what comes next and they like to look for it.” She gives the example of one student who started the year and did not know any letters but was able to learn them “from our repetition and our singing when we wash hands.” Children’s familiarity with the song and knowing the names of letters in order provides a “comfort level” for the children and a predictability as they go from week-to-week focusing on and learning to recognize new letters. Nonetheless, while Deborah spends a significant portion of her time focusing on the letters and helping the children learn to identify and name them, she does question exactly how important it is to focus on this so explicitly as a prerequisite to learning to read. She muses,

I’ve been thinking back in my own history how important it is for reading. To me, it’s important but I’m sure that even my own children probably learned to read things without realizing that they learned their ABCs very early. So it just seems to me that it’s a starting point, and then you have to move forward from there and just do lots of things with the ABCs from different activities...We tie it in with science. We tie it in with math. We tie it in with poems. But it’s everywhere, I guess.

Deborah’s questioning of the importance of knowing letter names is supported by Spencer, Spencer, Goldstein, and Schneider’s (2013) assertion that “[i]dentifying the names of letters, as an isolated skill, does not have a direct influence on learning to read” (p. 47). The ability to name letters has utility when it facilitates and is connected to phonological awareness and making the connection between letters and sounds (Spencer, et. al., 2013).

Deborah explains this possible tension she holds between narrowly focusing on explicit skills while she holds a more holistic understanding of the process of learning to read when she discusses phonological awareness. She observes,

I think some children can just start reading without really concentrating on these, but for some children, they need the concentration on it and it doesn’t just come naturally to them and they need help and that helps them to be ready to read.

Deborah muses that the focus on explicit skills, be it alphabet knowledge or phonological awareness, might not be necessary for all children but it remains an important part of Deborah's teaching because it is helpful to some children, demonstrating her continued understanding of individual variations in learning and development. To help develop phonological awareness, Deborah does a lot of rhyming activities with the children, whether introducing poetry such as *Chicken Soup With Rice* by Maurice Sendak, or singing a lot of different songs. Deborah points out that not only does poetry help children focus on the sounds in language, but it is also an opportunity for vocabulary development. Deborah says that prior to our conversations and the survey, she did not realize how much she works on vocabulary. She describes her vocabulary instruction as such:

I just try to bring the meaning down to their level where they understand it. I also try to stretch and make them think beyond where they usually would be at this time. And it's amazing how much that they can move forward with you if you talk to them that way.

As a whole class activity, the children do "share bags," which helps them work on alphabet knowledge and phonological awareness. For each letter of the week, the children bring home a bag and put an item in it that starts with that letter, such as putting a toy dinosaur in the bag when they are focused on the letter D. Near the end of the week, the children stand before the class and give clues about what is in their bag. After their classmates have guessed, or, alternatively, have been "stumped," the whole class spells the word, Deborah writes it down, and they count and clap out the syllables. Deborah points out that she is the only teacher at her school that does this particular activity, which is not from the curriculum, and that she likes it because it addresses phonological awareness, letter identification, gets parents involved, and, most importantly to Deborah, is fun for the children.

Deborah also points out that the share bags are an opportunity for oral language development. Initially, Deborah is a little perplexed as we talk about oral language, in part because it seems like such an obvious, intrinsic part of a preschool classroom to her. She responds, “I mean, we’re doing oral language all day long!” However, after a moment, she elaborates, saying that oral language development is “part of a balanced curriculum.” As a blended classroom, several of the children have speech goals, so a lot of conscious emphasis is placed on “getting the children to request and to ask.” Deborah acknowledges that she incorporates a lot of opportunities, such as show-and-tell with the share bags or creating a comfortable environment for the children to share stories and ideas, for the children to practice speaking in front of a group. She asserts:

I think the children, to feel comfortable, they need to be able to speak and carry on conversations with children, they need to learn the nuances of having a conversation, they need to be able to feel comfortable speaking in front of a group, of speaking with an adult.

Deborah also notes that oral language is an obvious part of the curriculum with English Language Learners. The year before I spoke with her, Deborah had two boys from Russia who did not speak any English, and Deborah does not speak any Russian. She describes their year as an immersive language experience and observed that the boys patterned their language use after the other children and herself. Deborah has had little experience with English language learners, however, so she rarely speaks about specific strategies or experiences she incorporates to help with their language development.

There are a host of opportunities for children to work with materials and engage in activities that Deborah believes support their literacy development. Deborah’s classroom is the very definition of “print rich” and there are words everywhere. She explains that this is because she believes “they need to be exposed to the print.” This extends beyond seeing words on the

printed page, so Deborah often looks to environmental print, asking the children to “read or write the room” or school as they go around with clipboards, copying words or searching for letters that they are studying. Other materials are available throughout the classroom to support literacy development, including: materials to trace letters, alphabet blocks, magnetic letters, letter stamps, alphabet games to be played with a teacher, magnet games that focus on beginning and end sounds in words, and different types of books such as early readers, picture-only books, and books related to the current theme or specific to each center. Deborah will also write out a poem on a long sheet of paper and lay it out on the floor for the children to walk along and develop understanding of left to right progression.

Deborah hopes that “sharing my love of reading with the children and just from the beginning of the day to the end having reading and writing” creates an effective environment for literacy development. Deborah believes that the key to helping children learn is to “meet them where they’re at” and to personalize instruction in a fun and hands-on environment. Deborah is passionate about reading and learning, and she hopes that this attitude will be contagious. Something that Deborah really appreciates about Esther Jackson is that she feels “like here we’re working more developmentally and we want more well-rounded” approaches to curriculum. While the children spend part of every day at a “teacher direct instruction table” as they rotate through four learning centers, Deborah points out that “it’s not sit down and do phonics” and she repeatedly emphasizes how much she wants the children to be having fun while they are learning.

A key aspect of both Deborah’s teaching as well as the packaged curriculum is repetition. Deborah discusses how important a consistent routine and repetition are because “I think that helps them learn, and they’re able to assimilate quicker if we do it that way.” In particular,

Deborah notes how repetition seems to have benefitted the few English Language Learners whom she has had in her class over the years, especially the introduction of different songs that they sing throughout the school year. Repetition not only gives the children multiple opportunities to learn but it also provides an opportunity for flexibility because she can set aside planned activities knowing that the material either has been covered or will be in the near future.

She comments:

Sometimes I just decide that whatever we wrote in there, we've handled it or we're going to touch on it later and it'll be okay. And right now we just need to have a day that we all sit on our blankets and pick books out and read. And a lot of times, I'll just change something if we're doing it and I see it's going off in a great way...Because we can get back to it. And...the curriculum, it scaffolds and it builds but it also repeats and goes back and builds on [itself]. And sometimes the children just need to sit and read a book.

Deborah feels like as long as she knows what the objectives are, she has some space to step away from the curriculum at times and come back to a topic or skill later. She seems to cherish these moments when they all get to stop, observing that in her class there are “a lot of very excitable children that have a lot going on in their little lives,” and she feels like sometimes they just need to slow down and take a break. Reading and access to books are almost always a part of this slow down and departures from the curriculum.

Relationship Between Beliefs and Practice

Deborah's articulated internal conflicts between her beliefs and what she is able to do in practice have less to do with the content of the curriculum and more to do with external factors that feel out of her control. In particular, the need to connect with curriculum and approaches used in the older grades appears to restrict her practice and wonder about their appropriateness in a prekindergarten classroom. Her aforementioned positive attitude means that she is wary of being critical and chooses instead—in both our conversations and, I believe, in her overall approach to teaching—to be optimistic and focus on what she is able to control. When I ask her

about conflicts between her own beliefs about how she would ideally be able to teach and work with young children and the reality of what is mandated by the state and contained within the curriculum, she is slow to respond and ultimately brief. She notes that she hopes she is “aiming towards an ideal approach” to teaching literacy and that she really enjoys her colleagues and the materials that have been provided for them. While she concedes that she wishes she had more freedom and flexibility in her teaching, she says:

I also think it helps to have a guideline and keep everyone moving towards the goal...because you could just go off. I could see doing lots of fun things and maybe missing things. So I think it is helpful, but I do think it's fun if you had just 30 minutes a day you could do your own little things.

Gerde, et al. (2019) similarly found that experienced teachers who were given layers of new curricula, much of which was very prescriptive, reported feeling “marginalized by curricula” and that it was “perceived as limiting their decision-making abilities about how to teach” (p. 102).

Deborah is able to see the positive attributes of having the structure of having guidelines in that they help keep you on track, but she also admits she wishes she could inject her “own little personality” into the day. She has some hesitations each time they are asked to implement a new curriculum, noting:

Well, it's just like some things that I've done for 26 years you just know, well, it worked then and it will work now. But somebody new has written some new curriculum and so you think, “Well, I understand what they're saying, but I also know what I did worked.”

This “layering of the curriculum” (Bullough, et al., 2014, p. 62), in which new programs are piled on top of other programs, can become challenging to negotiate. As a veteran teacher, while Deborah can appreciate how a new curriculum can be a “reflection of improved understandings about best practice and how to work with young children” (Bullough, et al., 2014, p. 61), she also feels she has learned through personal experience and years of trying and implementing different ideas what typically is and is not beneficial for young children and their learning.

A new curriculum also means that Deborah is not able to be as spontaneous and responsive in the moment as she has been: “[B]ecause of this new curriculum, it’s not coming to me as easily as in the past because I have to stop and think about more of what we’re doing.” This lack of spontaneity is troublesome for Deborah because she thinks children learn best when they have a responsive teacher who is able to “tweak” something or make small changes so that children get excited about learning. She continues, “And I like to meet them where they’re at and then move forward and just change things up.” Deborah thinks young children learn best when they have the “freedom to express themselves and move around and really kind of decide what they want to do.” A prescriptive curriculum and state guidelines, even with the small degrees of flexibility she says are accorded to her by inherent repetition, prohibit Deborah from fully actualizing the kind of spontaneous, responsive, and child-driven teaching that she believes is better for young children.

Summary

Deborah is an experienced white educator teaching in an affluent, predominantly white community that prides itself on the success of its students and their schools. There are high expectations for student achievement in the community, and while Deborah does not perceive that parents place much importance on pre-k, she feels the ways in which the pressures on the higher grades, particularly regarding expectations for the state-wide exams that begin in third grade, are pushed down to her students. She feels a strong responsibility to ensure her students are ready for kindergarten, and acknowledges that this exerts a significant influence on her literacy teaching and goals. Expectations for kindergarten readiness leave Deborah navigating multiple curricula and trying to link activities with approaches used starting in kindergarten all while meeting the Texas early learning standards.

Deborah believes in an early literacy curriculum that is joyful and encourages children to get excited about literacy. Her understandings of learning, development, and pedagogy are highly reflective of a belief that every child is different, leading her to incorporate different instructional approaches from more explicit, direct instruction to more open-ended and playful opportunities to explore. There is not, she believes, one best way to teach. Deborah also emphasizes individual progress rather than believing that all children can or should reach the same predetermined goal, and this is only due in part to her classroom being an inclusive setting. These beliefs and practices can be challenged, however, by what Deborah views as a “bump” in expectations that can make teaching more stressful and simultaneously leaves less time for play in the school day as teachers try to ensure children are ready for increased kindergarten expectations of readiness.

Chapter X: Cristina

A teacher in a bilingual Head Start classroom, Cristina's story contains a theme common to many of the teachers in this study: she never intended to be a prekindergarten teacher. The difference, however, is that while other participants consider it fortuitous that they stumbled upon a career in early childhood that they are committed to, she has no intention of spending her career working with young children. Cristina was an undergraduate student in Rehabilitation Counseling with a concentration in Addiction when she began spending time with parents and teenagers and decided she could have a broader impact by becoming a school counselor. Texas law requires a school counselor to have 3 years of teaching experience so Cristina decided to obtain a second bachelor's degree in Early Childhood Education. While working on her degree, Cristina, a native Spanish speaker, began teaching adult ESL classes in the evenings at an elementary school and developed a relationship with the school's principal. When a position opened at the school for a bilingual teacher, the principal approached Cristina, and having just received her early childhood teaching certification, Cristina says:

I was just like okay. I need a job. I want to be a counselor and I need to teach 3 years. And so I've stayed since then, and I've changed my route...so now I'm working half-way through my masters in Education Administration.

Cristina has now been in her teaching position for 7 years but says she feels pulled toward an administrative position, whether that is as a center director, a district-wide position, or ultimately getting on to a local school board. Cristina reflects that perhaps she is not well-suited for working with young children:

[T]eaching this grade level is just a little bit difficult because they're younger children, and I tend to have really really high standards for them. And so I think that other positions where I'm working with adults would just be beneficial for me, beneficial for everybody else.

She also comments that she is “really looking forward to moving to an upper grade level. I think that would be also beneficial to see those different areas and implement what I’ve been learning and implement it in an upper grade level.” While being a prekindergarten teacher is just a step along the way, Cristina frequently talks about how much she loves the children and what she is doing, even if, as she says, “I think that I want to grow into another thing.”

Cristina works at the same school as Alison but their jobs are very different. While Alison’s classroom is a district prekindergarten class, Cristina’s classroom is a Dual Language Head Start class, all of which creates differences in their jobs from having an entirely different daily schedule (Alison has two half day classes) to working with different curricula and requirements. The Adelfa Callejo School for Young Children is a public school that only serves preschool children and heavily emphasizes social development, kindergarten readiness, and parent involvement. During the year of this study, Adelfa Callejo had 333 students, with nearly 93 percent of students identified as economically disadvantaged. Sixteen percent of students were White, 21 percent were African-American, 57 percent were Hispanic, and over 37 percent were English Language Learners (<https://tea.texas.gov/texas-schools/accountability/academic-accountability/performance-reporting>).

Head Start has been conceptualized as being born out of a “culturally deprived paradigm” (Goodwin, Cheruvu, & Genishi, 2008) in which children of color and children from low-income communities are seen as needing “compensatory education” (p. 5) in order to make up for perceived deficiencies, most notably in comparison to standards set by white, middle class children (see also Souto-Manning, 2010; Wilson, 2000). While this paradigm has good intentions in that it seeks to help all children have “equal opportunity in later schooling and life” (Goodwin, Cheruvu, & Genishi, 2008, p. 5), its foundation rests on a position that “labeled the culturally

and linguistically diverse and poor as deficient or culturally deprived, and sought to ‘fix’ them” (p.5). In contrast, a “cultural difference paradigm” posited that “‘different’ was not synonymous with ‘deviant’ and that the lives of people of color were grounded in and informed by values, beliefs, and norms that were culturally specific” (Goodwin, Cheruvu, & Genishi, 2008, p. 5). From this perspective, integrating and building upon children’s different cultures, experiences, and ways of knowing into the curriculum is viewed as an asset to learning.

In some ways, Cristina seems to operate within a cultural deprivation viewpoint in that, despite speaking frequently about loving her students, she also sees them as lacking in some ways, and it is her responsibility to help compensate for this. For example:

A lot of the families we serve, I guess the socioeconomic status and the needs that these children are in great need of, and they’re not exposed to many, many things. And they might not ever be exposed to some of the things.

Or:

One of the new things I did this semester I’m doing the piggy bank on Mondays. So the children go home on the weekends and some of the parents are using it for behavioral and I’m like, “If you want to, but that’s not the point in the classroom.” It’s just so that the students understand that they can also be consumers and about saving. And I’ve also tied it into the different community workers about bankers. I think a lot of schools are about teaching this way like they teach your child like, “Oh you could be a teacher, or you could be a this.” And I’m like, “Oh my gosh there’s so many things.” Because at the beginning of school you’re like, “Well what do you want to do.?” They’re just like, “A teacher” or “I want to clean homes” or “I want to work at whatever” wherever their parents are. And I’m like, “Oh my gosh no! You could do so much.” And you start exposing them to it.

Cristina is implying that aspirations of being a teacher or a housekeeper are too limiting, and because of the population with whom she works, Cristina sees part of her responsibility as helping children and families develop knowledge and skills that will help them be successful and expand their conceptions of what is possible.

Factors Influencing Literacy Practices and Curriculum

Adelfa Callejo subscribes to a broad conceptualization of literacy, one in which Cristina notes, “Everything counts as literacy for us. We just want to expose them.” While children are not expected to learn to read before they leave for kindergarten, there is heavy emphasis on reading to and with children, making books readily available to students throughout the day, and encouraging parents to read with their children regularly. She explains,

We push a lot on the home reading. Make sure they have the book available. Make sure that if parents don’t know how to read, make sure you find a way that they’re able to do this practice with their student, with their child.

School Administration

Other than emphasizing parent involvement and reading, Cristina says the attitude of the administration of her school is essentially “Here’s the plan. Here’s the curriculum. Here’s the different materials you can use. Stay on it. Follow your TEKS [Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills], which are the most important, and build on that.” What this translates to is little involvement or oversight from the administration and teachers are given a lot of independence and autonomy to implement curriculum, develop lessons, and plan instruction. Oftentimes teachers appreciate autonomy and being trusted to make decisions for their own classrooms. For Cristina, however, minimal oversight has translated into a school environment in which everyone functions independently, with little collaboration amongst teachers and a lack of focus and cohesive goals. As she explains:

I wish that we would not have so much autonomy though because it’s just gotten to where I feel where now we have so much autonomy it’s just like nobody really knows what their real purpose is or where the path is.

Curriculum and Policies of Multiple Programs

The biggest influence the administration has on literacy is in the selection of curricula, which becomes a complicated area for Cristina given her position as a Head Start, Dual Language teacher in a public school. The school selects a curriculum, giving teachers flexibility

in how they utilize it and not expecting them to strictly adhere to it, yet Cristina notes that sometimes it can feel like they are “throwing a thousand things at the students and at the teachers [and] teachers are getting burned out.” Under the auspices of what essentially amounts to three different programs (1) a dual language, 2) Head Start classroom in 3) a public school), Cristina subsequently has ended up with multiple curricular options. The district adopted DLM [Developmental Learning Materials] but did not provide DLM materials for Cristina’s classroom because it is Head Start and not a district class. This means that she rarely uses DLM other than incorporating some of the books. The Head Start program adopted Scholastic, a thematic curriculum that is also approved by the state of Texas and therefore aligned with the Texas Prekindergarten Early Learning Standards. Because Cristina views herself as first and foremost a Head Start teacher, she uses Scholastic the most and then supplements with materials from other sources while other teachers in the school are using DLM. The Dual Language program does not have a specific curriculum to follow but it does have guidelines and expectations, some of which conflict with those of Head Start. A mixed-methods study with Head Start teachers by Bullough, et al. (2014) concluded:

[T]he layering of the curriculum, new programs piled on top of new programs even before the older programs have been mastered, proved overwhelming to even the most accomplished of Head Start teachers. (p. 62)

From Cristina’s viewpoint, the amount of autonomy teachers at her school have, combined with the need to negotiate the different programs and curricula, is in many ways detrimental and becomes yet another burden on teachers.

As Cristina deals with “proliferating and competing policies and practices” (Bullough et al., 2014, p. 55; see also Wilson, 2000), she feels like the three programs together close in around her and restrict her flexibility as she tries to determine and incorporate expectations, requirements, curricula, and goals. The “three demanding things” that come with being a part of

three different programs mean that Cristina describes herself as feeling overwhelmed and she feels like it results in burn-out and a loss of focus. The different sets of curricula and goals, some of which Cristina says “complement each other” such as working toward letter recognition, understanding print concepts, and supporting hands-on learning, at other times contradict and compete with one another. For example, Head Start requires that the children have a name tag at the table, so that, Cristina says, “they’re able to see their name, see the letters, and maybe start making out sounds.” In contrast, the Dual Language program discourages name tags and instead wants teachers to encourage the children to work together and sound out their names and learn to write them through a more collaborative process. The Head Start curriculum also incorporates a “letter of the week,” a practice that is discouraged by the Dual Language program. Currently Cristina is part of a team of teachers in the bilingual program who are working to align Head Start requirements with those of the Dual Language program in part, she explains, “because next year will be a review year for both Head Start and Dual Language.”

One area that is particularly overwhelming for Cristina is the amount of paperwork and assessments that are required (see Bullough, et al, 2014; Gallant, 2009; Wells, 2017; Wilson, 2000). According to Wells (2017), Head Start teachers in general typically have more responsibilities for documentation and data collection that teachers in other settings do not have, leading to an overabundance of paperwork. This finding resonates with Cristina’s experience, as she observes,

I think it’s safe to say that most of the Head Start teachers, that’s one of the things that just overwhelms them—the paperwork. It’s just like you’re doing it for Head Start and you’re doing it for the district so it’s overwhelming.

Assessments in particular seem to comprise most of the paperwork. Cristina has to do three assessments for Head Start, each of which is ten pages long and is designed to align with the state learning standards. The district then requires an assessment every 6 weeks that cover

different learning areas, and the Dual Language program requires all new students to take the Learning Accomplishment Profile-Diagnostic (LAP-D), which she typically uses to help set her learning goals for each student. Cristina says that during the fourth 6-week period alone, she had six different assessments for each child, all of which require one-on-one time with each student. She believes assessments can be a beneficial tool for individualizing learning goals and instruction (Piasta, 2014), and she says they can be a resource for teachers to see “if the child is advancing or if the child has really grown or if the child really learned the content area that needed to be learned.” However, the sheer volume of tests makes them “redundant” and she has heard from other teachers that in order to avoid spending so much of their time on assessments, they start to fill out assessments for children on their own based on other test results. She describes her coworkers as thinking, “This is crazy. I have so many assessments, so on this one assessment I’m going to just check off.” Cristina herself does not do this because she says she wants the information to be “accurate” but she is sympathetic to teachers’ frustrations with the number of required assessments, many of which cover the same skills and concepts.

Relationships With Colleagues

Wilson (2000) noted that one of the consequences of time-consuming amounts of paperwork in a Head Start program can be that it “discourage[s] teachers from developing personal and professional relationships” (p. 34). When Adelfa Callejo was constructed as the early childhood school for its district, classrooms were built in clusters of three or four with the intention of creating a collaborative work environment for teachers and a more open and fluid educational environment for students. The school has what it calls a “pod system,” which essentially divides all of the classrooms into teams that include different types of classrooms:

typically a PPCD (Preschool Program for Children with Disabilities) class, a bilingual class, and then either an ESL or “regular” pre-k class. As Cristina explains:

[T]he intention was that we would plan together, and that’s why the school was built in such a manner. That way we could plan together, and it would make inclusion a lot better for our students. But that’s never happened. I’ve been here 7 years.

Cristina explains that historically there has been a lot of teacher resistance to collaboration. Some of this might stem from the autonomous environment that exists as teachers have become accustomed to making decisions independently for their own individual classrooms.

This year, Cristina has been paired with two teachers who are new to the school and she feels like this has been an opportunity to create more collaborative relationships. Head Start requires teachers to demonstrate collaboration and team planning, and the message from the district is that they would also like to see this happening. This year, Cristina says:

So we are required to meet at least once a month with our team pod meeting and so we do. And so what I’m trying to do this year is plan with my teachers because they’re new...And before it’s been teachers who have been here a long time and they just don’t want to do that. They don’t need to do that or they want to do their own things.

Her new co-workers are more open to collaboration and “the resistance is not there.” Cristina is hoping to make the sharing of ideas and planning together more intentional, but currently it frequently occurs informally and in “quick passing” (Wells, 2017, p. 110) rather than through scheduled time for collaboration or the monthly meetings, which are often consumed with broader school issues and communications.

Cristina’s colleagues have not had much influence on her ideas about literacy or how to help children’s literacy develop because, as she explains:

My experience on this campus is everybody just kind of stays in their area. And you share out when you’re in staff development or whatever but it’s not so much that I go to another classroom or I’m going to another teacher.

This year has been a little different, and Cristina has been particularly excited that the new ESL teacher used to be a Reading Recovery teacher and has been sharing ideas with her. Cristina says that teaching literacy is “not my strength but I’m like, hey, you have to at least try to collaborate and try to do something.” Cristina is hoping to be given the opportunity to observe other teachers in their classrooms and “see what they’re doing differently now and see if I can build on some of their techniques that they’re using in their classroom.” She is also planning on building upon the collaborative relationship she is developing in her pod and inviting the former Reading Recovery teacher to come to her class on English day. Ideally, she would like the Reading Recovery teacher to come during the literacy part of her day to “expose my children to her teaching, to some of her techniques, so that they’re not only getting my modeling but they’re also experiencing somebody else’s modeling for them and teaching them a different strategy that I may not be using.” In turn, she would like to teach some children in the other class some Spanish. She acknowledges, “I don’t know how free we are to do that” but clearly Cristina has a vision to learn more from her colleagues, particularly about literacy instruction, and create a more collaborative dynamic.

Parent Involvement and Influence

While teachers are not heavily involved in each other’s classrooms, parent involvement and the “home-school connection” are central components of the school philosophy. Like many teachers in this study, Cristina feels that parents have little influence on her literacy practices and that in the parent-teacher relationship she is the one who helps them understand how literacy develops, what appropriate literacy goals are for prekindergarten, and what they can do to support their children. Parents have broad literacy goals such as name identification and name writing, but Cristina articulates and outlines more specific and individually appropriate goals and

expectations and enlists parents' support. Cristina works hard to develop relationships with parents and get them engaged in their children's education, believing that it is important to involve parents in engaging their children in literacy-related activities outside of school (Gallant, 2009).

The school has different programs that are intended to encourage parents to be involved in their children's literacy lives, including a literacy fair as well as a program specifically for fathers. The literacy fair is "where we try to motivate the parents to read to your child: 'It's very important that you read to your child 15-20 minutes every day, and these are some of the activities that you can do.'" They help parents develop a broader understanding of literacy, not only encouraging them to read regularly with their children but to also see conversation, drawing, and dictating stories as other avenues for literacy development that they can engage in with their children. The school also has a program called "FRED," which stands for "Fathers Reading Every Day." Cristina explains that FRED emphasizes that "reading is really important, especially at this age, and how the fathers make a greater impact on their children because fathers are normally the ones working, and they don't really have enough time to sit down and read with children."

While working in the school programs, Cristina says she is the only teacher in the school who also has monthly meetings with parents. Cristina tells parents that these meetings are basically mandatory and are an opportunity to discuss curriculum and "techniques you can use at home that I'm using here to develop their language, to develop that literacy process." She talks to parents about the importance of reading, the value of repetitive readings of the same book, and the ways in which parents can support and encourage reading. Cristina sends her children home

with a book from her classroom library every day. And while the books are typically in Spanish, she comments:

I send English books home, too. And their parents are like, “Don’t do that. I don’t know how to read it.” And I’m like, “Oh, you don’t have to. You can have your children make up a story just on the pictures. What do you think is happening? Start asking him or her questions.”

She helps parents understand ways in which reading can be interactive and that repetitive readings of the same book frequently mean the child can retell the story independently, memorize details and wordings, or even begin to try to sound out and decode words.

Cristina also develops activities for parents to engage in with their children both in the classroom and at home. Parents are encouraged to spend time in the classroom with children. Often times this might be reading a book or doing an art project, but Cristina also likes them to write down children’s words for them, and she encourages them to guide the children as they dictate or answer questions to make sure that “whatever they’re saying has meaning.” Cristina also sends home activities and projects, emphasizing to parents that it is critical that they do the projects at home with the children because “it’s not only the teacher, it’s the parents and you guys are part of the team in everything.” She emphasizes the notion of being a team not only because she feels it is beneficial for the children to have concepts and ideas reinforced at home, but because it is critical to her that parents understand how important it is that they are actively involved in their children’s learning and that they feel confident having a relationship with their child’s teachers. Developing this connection is something that Cristina speaks very passionately about and how “if the teacher can make that connection with the parent, oh my gosh I think the student would be ever so successful.”

Getting parents involved in their children’s learning is not always an easy feat, however. Cristina shares the story of some resistance she met with when she sent home a science project

for the parents to do with their children. The project involved learning about colors, and the children were encouraged to experiment, hypothesize, predict, ask questions, and come back and share their results. Some parents balked and did not want to do it, and this is a moment when Cristina's work on developing a foundation and relationships with parents really helped her reach a critical understanding and breakthrough. Rather than accept the parents' resistance and dismiss them as being uncooperative, Cristina began to ask questions to try to understand if there was an issue or if there was any way in which she could help. She explains:

Well what I found out was that some of them didn't have the materials. Some of them didn't even know what food coloring was. And so I invited them in and I said, "Tomorrow get me three water bottles. Bring them to the classroom. I'll show you how to do it. We'll do it here in the classroom." So sure enough we did it yesterday after school with the families that didn't understand, the families that didn't have the material. They came in the classroom and worked with their child. I mean, it was a blast. I took a picture of it. But I took pictures because I was just like, okay, the parents are getting motivated and I'm letting them know like, hey, I'm here. There's help. You just have to ask for help. When you go to elementary, you ask the teacher. You don't have the materials, ask them. Don't limit yourself and don't limit your child just because you'll feel like they're not going to help you or I'm going to be ashamed that I don't have the material.

Cristina works hard to establish trusting relationships with parents and to help them view themselves as critical partners and advocates in their children's learning. Listening to her talk about this story and all that she does to engage parents makes it clear that so much of her passion for education lies in helping parents develop the knowledge and confidence to work with teachers to support their children's education. Some of the parents of her students do not know how to read, and Cristina sees it as vital to encourage parents, particularly ones who might feel like outsiders to the educational process, and empower them to get involved. Bullough et al. (2014) sees this level of involvement with parents and families as a common occurrence amongst Head Start teachers and notes that it adds "a thick layer of complexity to teaching rarely found elsewhere" (p. 56).

Description of Literacy Practices

Cristina’s descriptions of her classroom evoke images of a social environment in which relationships—between her and her students, her and the families, between children and their families, and amongst the students—are at the heart of all learning. Language and literacy learning in particular are viewed as socially embedded and while Cristina sees herself as having a large role to play, she also encourages the children to view one another as a resource.

One of the most important elements to her teaching is pairing children as bilingual partners. The children work with their bilingual partners in a variety of different activities and are encouraged to use their bilingual partners as a resource for learning. Partners brainstorm together, work on projects and activities together, and are intended to be the first person a child goes to if she has a question. Partnerships are rotated throughout the year and are strategic, as Cristina often pairs a child whom she considers strong in one area, whether social-emotional or more academic, with a child who might not, for example, know as many letters or be quite as comfortable in social situations. In one example she provides, Cristina paired a 3-year-old student who was new to the class with an older student. As the children worked together, Cristina describes the older student, Matias, helping the younger student, Manuel, spell his name using techniques and strategies that Cristina employs. Matias asked Manuel to slow down and make the sounds he hears in his name and used gestures and movements that Cristina pairs with different letter sounds as a tool to help the children remember. For Cristina, this example of bilingual partners working together not only demonstrates the way in which the partnership benefits Manuel, who is receiving the support and help from an older peer, but also benefits Matias as he sees himself as someone who can be an “expert” and a resource for a classmate.

Cristina’s children are learning in English and Spanish in a bilingual classroom, but English acquisition and goals are secondary to the literacy learning the children are engaged in in

Spanish. Days are split between English days and Spanish days, but literacy and science are always taught in Spanish while math is always taught in English. The Dual Language program that her school has adopted does not want teachers to dictate when students should speak English but rather let the children make that decision. However, Cristina says she will “cue them because I think it’s important” that they try speaking English. She will say, for example, “Today is blue day. Can you try the language?” If a child does not understand what Cristina or the assistant teacher are saying in English, they are asked to first check with their bilingual partner for help. She tells the children, “You’re the translator” and empowers them to help one another. At the mid-point of the school year, Cristina says a general goal she has for her students in regards to speaking English is “not to be able to express themselves fully in the English language but to be able to communicate to me their needs, their wants, to use maybe a complete sentence with five words or more.” She is careful to point out, however, that when she discusses goals and expectations that these differ for individual children and are developed based on her observations as well as more formal assessments.

In Cristina’s classroom, a lot of literacy instruction and learning occurs during large group time. The children have a morning circle time to greet one another and do the pledge; a second circle time to review activities, objectives for the week, and go over the shape, letter, number, and theme they are learning about; a third circle time after centers to go over the calendar and do some math; and a final group time to read a story and talk about the day. On Mondays, there is an additional large group literacy activity. Although Cristina says she likes to get the children moving so that she is “just not sitting there and lecturing,” she seems to subscribe to the ability of circle time or large group time to provide “an opportunity to deliver literacy knowledge to all children in the classroom as a group” (Zhang, Diamond, & Powell,

2015, p. 324). In contrast to Piasta's (2014) argument that whole class instruction is inefficient and means children spend time reviewing, for example, letters they may already know or not spending enough time on letters that are unfamiliar, Cristina views having this singular point of delivery as a means to ensure that all of the children are getting the content and information that she wants them to be exposed to and learning. Circle time in Cristina's classroom also does not always look like her speaking while the children are passively sitting in front of her but instead frequently involves conversation between children, particularly with their bilingual partners.

A central piece of Cristina's literacy curriculum is what she refers to as the "focus letter," or what is often referred to elsewhere as a letter of the week. Every day during one of the large group lessons, Cristina and the children go over the entire alphabet in Spanish, first saying the names of each letter and then making the sounds for each letter. For example, with the Spanish letter "a": "I'll say, 'La a dice...' and then I'm like, '¿Qué dice?' And then they're like, '/Ah/'." After they have reviewed the entire alphabet, they will begin to discuss the focus letter. If the focus letter is a consonant, one of the concepts they will work on during large and small groups is putting sounds or phonemes together, specifically, asking the children to put a vowel after the focus consonant letter and try "building on those sounds." Cristina provides the following example of what this might look like during a typical circle time:

And after that, I'm like, "Okay. Now remember our focus letter is ñ. And we already made the sound for the ñ. So what do you think the ñ would sound like with the 'e'? ' Put those together." And then [speaking Spanish] "Ñ con la e" go through the whole vowels. And then, "Oh. Do you think you can make a word for me now with the ñ?" And so they go on and do that. So they'll call out and I'll go, "Can you talk to your partners? And can you come up with a word and then you can raise your hand and tell me?" So they'll do that. And so they'll get to talk to their partners and then they're like, "What do you think?" Some of them will be like, "Well we'll do this." And I'm like, "Okay. Yeah." So then somebody else will whisper to them, "I think it's like-" and they use the word. "I think it's da da da." And then they'll say it.

And I never like to say that they're wrong. They'll tell me [speaking Spanish] "perro." And then I'm like, "Really? Everybody does it say niño?" And so I'll include

that letter with the word they said so that they can hear that that sound is not correct in that word that they just said. So we do that as a whole group. Then during small groups, it'll be reinforced because we'll actually get to go back and write the letter. And they work kind of individually, but they still have their partner next to them in case they can't. And then they use those little tubs and identify the words that might sound out.

The process Cristina utilizes for her literacy instruction is fairly routine. Concepts are introduced and modeled by Cristina during circle time, the children talk with their bilingual partners to try to come up with answers and ideas related to the concept, and then small groups are used to work with individuals and to do related activities more independently or with Cristina. The focus letter is discussed daily and used as a means to work on letter identification and the alphabetic principle. Cristina provides another example of a whole group activity that occurs after she has written the focus letter on a board:

And then they get to talk about it with their partners. And they get to make out the sound. And they get to ask each other, "Well. Okay. Making this sound. Where do you think we can make this sound? What word can we spell out together?" And what they do, they draw out the picture that they think that goes with that letter. For example, the focus letter this week is ñ, which is not in the English language. So they came up with words that they thought started with an ñ. And so they sounded it out and I'm like, "Yeah. Yeah. That's a good one." Then I'm like, "Well, why don't you draw the picture?" And then some of the people that—some of the students that can already make out words, they're able to write the words out. And they get to talk about it with their partners. And if the partners don't know, then they get to talk to the other pair that's behind them. And if that pair doesn't know, they get to talk amongst each other.

Cristina uses this partner work so that children realize that they can "also teach each other, work with each other, communicate with each other." Partner work not only is an opportunity for literacy learning, communication, and conceptual understanding, but also social-emotional empowerment and connection with one another.

Tuesday through Friday, children spend approximately 15 minutes in small groups or rotations. Typically, the small groups are divided by subject, with a science activity, math activity, and a social studies activity that is most often an art project. The fourth activity is a literacy activity that "focuses on the letters and on the writing and the sound and identifying

letters.” Piasta (2014) claims that small group instruction “has been demonstrated to be more effective than whole-class or even one-to-one instruction in supporting young children’s early literacy development” (p. 208), and Cristina often uses this opportunity to individualize instruction for each group that she is working with. Small group activities may involve magnetic letters used to make words; sentence strips with words on them to either decode or arrange to make a sentence, and letter cards that they move around to spell words. One of her goals is for children to be able to write their names, and she will also use the letters in their names to help develop understanding of other literacy concepts. For example, one small group activity is to “take your name apart and see how many vowels it has.” While Cristina often gets pushback from colleagues who tell her this activity and others like it are “too advanced,” Puranik and Lonigan (2011) note that “drawing attention to letter-sound relationships for their own names and their classmates’ names” (p. 585) is an appropriate and helpful teaching strategy to develop understanding of the alphabetic principle. Cristina also finds herself pushing back against criticism by asserting, “Oh god, they’re like sponges. If you teach them, if you continuously stay on them and have them work with each other and teach each other, they’ll get it!”

Although some research indicates that writing is underrepresented in early childhood classrooms and that early childhood teachers are often more familiar or more comfortable emphasizing reading in comparison to time spent supporting writing (Gerde, Bingham, & Wasik, 2012; Gerde, et al., 2019), writing is actually a central piece of Cristina’s literacy curriculum and teaching. Cristina says writing “occurs in every content area...[It] just doesn’t have to be, ‘Oh we’re going to focus on the letter of the week.’” She incorporates writing across disciplines including writing numbers, spelling number words, drawing, writing their names, writing in their journals, adding words to or copying from the word wall, and also regularly models writing for

them. During the second semester, Cristina estimates that the children spend approximately 30 minutes a day writing in some capacity, including a move toward writing a sentence with correct punctuation and capitalization. Before the school adopted the Dual Language program, Cristina would have a separate journal for each child to work on writing in English. The Dual Language program, however, wants learning English to focus exclusively on oral language and all written language should be in Spanish until the second semester of kindergarten.

Children trace or write their name every morning upon arrival to sign in, and then they sit down with their journals and their bilingual partners to “free think” and draw, write, work on letters, or perhaps draw a picture inspired by a book they read. The children must always write the date and their first name, and sometimes she will also ask them to copy and write “Mi nombre es” (“My name is”) and then write their name. Cristina views the dual language journals as a space for children to “be a little more free” and collaborate with their bilingual partners. She refers to it as a time of “pre-learning” where children can draw and write together, help one another, and there is a lot of conversation surrounding the writing and drawing. Viewing lined paper as confining, Cristina uses unlined paper and encourages the children to “express themselves freely” in their journals and says journals should be about “[t]heir ideas, what they’re working on.”

In addition to writing in their Dual Language journals, the children also have a journal where they are creating their own alphabet by working on the focus letter. These journals, she explains, “target that letter, focus, they write it again, we make the sound, they pick out pictures or little toys that they think would start with that letter.” Having the two different journals seems to indicate a distinction between a focus on the mechanics of writing in this journal and a broader conceptualization of writing as a mode of communication and self expression in the Dual

Language journal (Gerde, Bingham, & Wasik, 2012). These second journals are typically pulled out as a small group activity and are more teacher-directed. They might trace a letter, practice writing letters, or they will pick out a manipulative to draw and label. For this activity, the words are written on the container lid so the children can copy the word and then find the object that goes with it. During the second semester, Cristina often observes children moving away from copying letters and wanting to write more independently. This is often when the two word walls in her classroom, one in English and one in Spanish, come into play. She provides an example of what this might look like and how she responds:

For example, if they're like, "Oh, I wanna write this" then I'm like, "Okay, let's make the sound. Can you read the sound? Can you try to see what the word sounds like?" Actually, we don't really focus on literacy for English or how their sentence structure or vocabulary so much as we are in Spanish for the Dual Language. But it's exciting to see that even using the word wall in English. Just on my English days, I will go through the language and I'll point out certain words on the word wall. And it's exciting to see how they're making those connections. Because one of my little girls spelled out cat, you know, by making sounds. I guess she had remembered, you know, we make the sound for the C. And so she made the sound and she was able to write cat. And she drew a picture of a cat. And I was just so impressed. I was just like, "Oh. Okay." English day, she's writing in English. So she was trying to make a sentence in English, and then I went ahead and that's when I helped her... I'm like, "Okay, what letters do you hear? What letters do you think are here?" So I said, "Make the sound."

Cristina uses this particular student as an example of how she individualizes her instruction based on observations and assessments. This student is the only one in her class who is already writing sentences in Spanish and wants to try writing in English. While the Dual Language program discourages writing in English, Cristina sees this as a child-initiated interest and Cristina is following the child's lead.

Opportunities like this in which Cristina can work one-on-one with a student are rare, largely because Cristina feels like there is in general a "lack of time" to teach the way she would really like to, including working more with students on an individual basis. Policy requirements, particularly the high volume of assessments, consume her time and prevent her from working

more intensively with children and using her time in what she believes would be a more meaningful way. She explains:

[I]t's all these requirements and all these things that have to get done first before I can do what I would love to do. But it's just like, "Okay, here it is. This is what needs to get done so let's get this done first." But then you have no time.

Without these requirements, Cristina believes that the children "could achieve a little more" and could even be reading were she able sit down individually with children and work on things such as sight words, reading one-one-one instead of always with the group, or working with one student as she makes a puzzle with the letters in her names and Cristina helps her make the sounds for each letter. Overall, she laments:

The lack of time with so many other things I would like to do with the children... We're only here for a certain amount of time. How much can I really get into? But I would love to implement with the children as far as literacy *more* literacy activities.

Beliefs About Early Literacy Development and Curriculum

Cristina has a broad definition of literacy that is both interdisciplinary and heavily grounded in language. She explains that "speaking comes back to writing, helps them with writing and making sounds, with the whole reading process." Everything she does in the classroom is "about encouraging their language and helping that literacy-based learning for them" and while there are obviously activities that are specifically geared toward explicit aspects of literacy she believes that "literacy is in every discipline or in every area." Cristina really enjoys science and trying to incorporate more exposure to the scientific process in her classroom, and she also recognizes that the process of hypothesizing, investigating and sharing discoveries is an opportunity for building understanding as well as developing vocabulary and supporting oral language.

Cristina strives to individualize her instruction so that she appropriately challenges her students but does not leave children behind when they are still working on learning something.

She explains that the reason she reviews all of the letters and letter sounds on a daily basis is because she believes children “learn in chunks” and that exposure to multiple letters and ideas at a time is beneficial. Simply focusing on one letter each week and then moving on the following week is not only not in keeping with her idea about learning in chunks, but also risks leaving children behind who have really not yet learned that letter. As she explains,

[T]he Dual Language program wants them just to keep moving, but I don’t want to leave the children behind. Because the ones that are 3-year-olds they’re not at the same level as the 4-year-olds. So for me to move from one letter to the other, to the other and just be like, “Okay, you got it? You didn’t? We’ll come back and review it some other time.” No.

While Cristina does not want to leave students struggling and confused, she also has a firm belief that prekindergarten children are often capable of learning more than people assume. Cristina’s teaching of letters and the alphabetic principle demonstrates her belief in “learning in chunks” and her intention to include children of all levels through constant exposure. At the same time, she also describes activities that are significantly more challenging than learning letters, such as writing in complete sentences, with correct punctuation and capitalization, in their journals. She explains that she wants to challenge her students because “if you don’t do that, you have your behavior issues...They start getting bored and instead of moving forward, they start to move backward.” She continues,

I have high expectations for the children, and I don’t really believe in this, “Oh, that’s not age appropriate.” Or, “Oh, they’re little. They’re not going to read.” I’m like, No. Because I’ve been in the classroom and I’ve seen how they are like sponges, and if you set high standards, they will reach for them and they do it. Yeah, it might take a little bit of time, and yeah, you might have to work a little harder as a teacher to get them to rise. And I’m not saying that—Not everybody learns the same, but if you find whatever that student, that specific way is that he learns, who cares? So I mean I’m constantly assessing, “Where are you at now? Where can I go? Okay, you’ve done this goal, now you’re going to move on to something a little harder.”

Individual appropriateness is the central belief that drives Cristina's teaching. It is a balancing act of trying to find ways to individualize goals and activities for each student while also creating a community that leaves no one out.

During the school day, Cristina's class spends a lot of time together as a group and, as noted earlier, there are a lot of whole group or circle times throughout the day. Typical depictions of and discussions about whole group activities are often critical, viewing it as inefficient and teacher-driven, with children sitting on the floor as passive recipients of instruction and information (Piasta, 2014). Cristina, however, seems to both view it and utilize it very differently. As she explains:

I think a lot of people make the mistake that, "Don't talk right now. You're gonna listen to me." And it's like, no. They need to be able to experience it for themselves and talk and get different ideas and, you know, learn from each other and all that.

Whole group time in Cristina's class is not didactic and passive. For her, this is when she can create excitement and community and have them all learning and having fun together. She wants them talking and moving and engaging with her and with one another and sharing this communal experience. Cristina views "connection" as the single most important aspect of teaching and her whole group times are an opportunity to further the sense of community she seeks to establish. Relationship is a central tenet of Cristina's teaching and she explains that if "they don't feel loved and wanted, then nothing's going to happen... We just need to make those one-to-one connections first and then the process of learning comes... Especially with this age group, they need to feel secure and safe and loved." The bilingual partnerships are part of this support system and they not only learn from one another, like when Matias helped Manuel learn to identify the letter and sounds in his name, but also "they're learning that they have someone to support them and communicate with them."

Relationship Between Beliefs and Practices

Cristina values a framework for her curriculum and her teaching, yet she also wants flexibility within that framework to be more creative and to maintain and support broader ideas about literacy and literacy goals. She wishes she had “more freedom where it comes to not just staying strict with the curriculum,” and she believes that the district’s emphasis on letter and sound identification is an overly narrow goal: “But it’s like oh no. There’s more to letters and sounds like expanding their vocabulary, their language. The whole process of it should come naturally, especially at this age.” She repeatedly reflects that literacy instruction so often is highly teacher-directed and leaves little time for the children to be more engaged in their own learning. She calls for more movement, art, music, creativity, and exploration as pathways for literacy learning and not just, “Okay, well here is the curriculum and this is what it calls for. You’re gonna read this book.” Cristina gets most animated and excited when she talks about what she wishes she could do if she had “more freedom where it comes to not just staying strict with the curriculum.” She envisions a classroom that is more animated, where children are moving and engaged and excited and “free to move.”

Shifts in Literacy Practices

The notion of community and encouraging students to talk and be engaged is something that has developed over the course of Cristina’s career. When she first started teaching, she notes:

[I]t was all about structure in the classroom, and I guess during my teaching of literacy I was like, “Listen, you guys can’t talk. You have to listen. You have to see how I make out sound.” You know? And I would model but I wouldn’t let them communicate.

Now, she says, she understands that the children need to be talking, both to develop relationships as well as literacy. Her understanding of what literacy is as well as how it develops has shifted over the years, and she now feels she has a broader definition of literacy, one that moves beyond phonological awareness, reading, and speaking in Spanish. In particular, she sees how important

it is to have the students engaged and talking, for learning to be more hands-on and less passive, and to encourage the children's writing development.

Writing receives heavy emphasis in Cristina's classroom, and this is a marked departure from both her earlier teaching as well as, she thinks, the typical emphasis in packaged curricula on reading that she believes is an overly narrow and simplistic view of literacy. She describes other teachers and the curricula as taking the following position: "You want to expose children to literacy? Read to them. Tell parents to read every day. Make sure they're reading. Make sure you're reading. Make sure they're reading at least three times a day." She counters this position, saying,

And I'm like, but it's more than just reading. Like they should be writing more. They should be experiencing sounds a lot more. More vocabulary... That's how they are going to become successful in everything that they do. Because literacy... just builds on everything else in their lives.

Through her own experience and self-reflection, Cristina has shifted to a broader conceptualization of literacy and the importance of embedding literacy development, teaching, and learning in relationships amongst the members of the classroom community.

Summary

While Cristina does not view pre-k as the final stop in her career in education, she is a dedicated teacher who, over the course of her career, has come to believe in a language-rich environment in which learning and literacy development are socially embedded and the teacher is not the only resource for information and knowledge. Relying upon bilingual partners, Cristina creates multiple opportunities for children to collaborate and share ideas about words, stories, language, and the development of alphabet knowledge. Cristina describes herself as having high standards for students and wishes she had more time to individualize her instruction more for each student and spend one-on-one time with each child to help them reach their greatest

potential. Time, however, is a significant obstacle for Cristina, due in large part to a “layering” of competing policies, requirements, curricula, and assessments that shape a lot of her literacy teaching. This layering is particularly cumbersome for Cristina as she is a Head Start teacher in a Dual Language classroom in a public school district, leaving her to determine how to juggle and meet different program requirements. Cristina describes the school culture, in which teachers are given a significant degree of autonomy and flexibility as to how they guide students toward the early learning standards, as chaotic, with many teachers feeling like they lack direction and are over-burdened in particular by paperwork and frequent assessments.

Chapter XI: Dana

[I]t's going to be a really silly analogy, but I kind of feel like I am the conductor of an orchestra sometimes. Where I just kind of sit up there and I do what I do. But every now and then I have to go and talk to, you know the brass section, "Hey let's work on this." And we start doing something and then go back to, "OK something isn't right here." And you know I go and fix that... I don't necessarily want my fingers to be in the till the whole time, you know. I kind of want to be able to sit back and just watch what's going on because that's when I can make the best judgment about how to help one kid, two kids, all kids, by watching and being able to do that. But then, at the same time, I'm able to go over there and work with said group and everybody else is still learning and not lost.

Dana, in her third year teaching at a Head Start center in Texas, strives to create a smoothly running classroom, here viewed as an orchestra, wherein children are engaged harmoniously. Furthering her analogy, Dana describes how children are often practicing different pieces of music as they work toward the goal of playing one common song at the end of the year:

I feel like it's a private lesson in that case. They have their own little pieces that they are working on and we're on different levels, and we're aiming for the same goal. We're all going towards the same goal, but we're just at different areas in reaching that goal.

The metaphor of a conductor and her symphony demonstrates Dana's understanding of children as individuals, learning different things at different rates and able to take a degree of ownership of their own learning, all while working toward common literacy goals.

Dana began working with young children 10 years ago and has worked in after-school programs with kindergarten through fifth grade students at a childcare center; has been a substitute teacher in a local school district; and is nearing the end of her third year as a pre-k teacher. Dana is certified to teach prekindergarten through fourth grade and has a degree in Early Childhood Education from a program that she says emphasized learning through play and the value of creating some space for children's interests and needs to direct teaching. Although she has the degree in early childhood, Dana never intended to become a pre-kindergarten teacher and

says she ended up teaching pre-kindergarten simply because that is where she found a job. She explains,

I did not want to teach preschool, actually, honestly. I wanted to teach school age, and I kind of came to this as an opportunity to teach period, because a lot of districts around here don't hire, aren't hiring right now.

Even though Dana had spent some time in preschool classrooms while she was in college, she describes becoming a pre-k teacher as a “big struggle at first because I was not used to this age, used to the limitations that this age has.” Like any new teacher, Dana says she has “learned a lot about teaching” but she also adds that it was not until she was in her own classroom every day that some of the ideas that had been discussed in college in a general, decontextualized way began to “really sink in.” Dana’s ultimate goal remains working with older children, empowered by her experiences working with pre-k children and having “learned so much about building that foundation for everything that they are going to do beyond here.”

The center where Dana teaches is part of an organization that has 13 Head Start locations across Texas and bills itself as “the largest child development nonprofit organization in North Texas” (Child Care Associates [CCA], n.d.). In total, CCA serves approximately 17,000 children a year, with approximately 2,000 of those children scattered throughout 114 Head Start classrooms. In addition to working with Head Start, the organization has Early Head Start programs, partners with school districts on state-funded programs, and provides subsidized child care for families that qualify, managing approximately \$38 million in state funding for child care subsidies for working families using a sliding-scale tuition based on family size and gross monthly income. On top of income requirements, the program also requires a single parent to work a minimum of 25 hours per week, and two parents must work a combined minimum of 50 hours per week. The center where Dana works is primarily Head Start but does mix childcare children into the classrooms, and four of the 14 children in Dana’s class are enrolled through the

childcare program. Dana describes her school as “a big cocktail of children” who, while perhaps economically less diverse, represent a range of different cultures and different ethnicities.

Dana describes her current position as a “leg-up from daycare” and mentions several times how she feels like parents see her as “a professional versus how you are just their daycare teacher.” Her interest in differentiating between daycare and the “little bit of professionalism” she is accorded as a Head Start teacher references an ongoing distinction that is often made in the early childhood field (Fromberg, 2003; Gomez, Kagan, & Fox, 2015). Kirp (2007) notes that this distinction is often seen in the way policymakers frame discussions about the early childhood field:

Pre-K, to their way of thinking, is tied to education...It’s supposed to prepare youngsters to succeed in school, and there is considerable evidence that good preschools can do just that. Child care, by contrast, isn’t usually regarded as preparing infants and toddlers for anything. It’s a fill-in for parenting, a way of getting, and keeping, mothers on the job. (p. 137)

Similarly, the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics distinguishes between “preschool teachers” and “childcare workers” as separate occupations, although Head Start teachers are mentioned under childcare workers alongside nannies and home childcare providers. Dana’s need to distinguish between her own professionalism in comparison to childcare professionals is likely a factor in both her initial reluctance to become a pre-k teacher and her ultimate goal of teaching elementary school.

Factors Influencing Literacy Practices and Curriculum

Dana continues to wrestle with ideas about professionalism when she talks about the influence of different people on her literacy teaching and curriculum.

Relationships With Parents

Dana believes that being a Head Start teacher accords her some degree of elevated status versus being a childcare provider, however she still notes that some parents “see us just as glorified daycare and really don’t see what we do as anything important. I often get told, ‘Oh, that’ll be important when they get to big kid school.’” Similarly, when she sets and communicates goals with some of the parents, they dismiss her and will say, “Oh, that’s just not important.” Dana is dismayed by this unwillingness of some parents to view prekindergarten as an important stage of education, and it limits her ability to get them on board as partners in their children’s education. As she explains:

I want my parents to be involved. I want them to take pride in what their kids do here at school. I want them to go home, and I want them to continue doing what I have taught here. And I want them to take my input and apply it. And with that being said, I want them to also remember that this is school. This is not daycare. This is not, you know, just this place that their kids go for eight hours of the day.

Despite having this hurdle in her relationship with some parents, Dana works to develop a relationship with parents and build a “bridge between home and school” so that there is continuity between what children are working on and learning about at school and what they are doing at home. Home visits are required twice a year for the Head Start children in her class, although she notes, “Personally, I find it just being they don’t want us there. We’re a nuisance to them.” Rather than developing the home/school connection, home visits seem to have become largely perfunctory and superficial for many of the families, although she does concede that some of the parents do view it as an opportunity for her to learn more about their child. In addition to home visits, Dana also has two conferences per year with parents, during which they typically go over assessment results. There are also a lot of informal opportunities to engage with parents and Dana says parents are encouraged to “be a part of their kids’ education.”

In her conversations with parents about literacy expectations, Dana feels like they typically fall into three different groups. She notes that a lot of parents in general “don’t know what to expect,” and therefore in many ways part of her responsibility is to help parents learn about reasonable expectations for pre-k children and how they can work together to help children reach different goals. The first group of parents responds to her discussions about literacy and assessment outcomes with, “Eh, we’ll worry about it later.” At the other extreme is the group that Dana describes as “having higher expectations than what are feasible.” These parents expect their child to be reading and to “know everything,” and oftentimes are comparing their child to older siblings and wanting to know why he or she cannot do all of the same things that the older siblings were able to. For these parents, Dana is careful to emphasize, “Well, every child is different. Every child learns at a different level and a different pace. They will get there, you know. Don’t freak out about that.” Thankfully Dana feels like she does not have to regulate expectations for most of the parents and that the majority of them are in what she describes as the middle group. These parents are the ones “who take what we say seriously” and try to work on things at home that support what their child is working on learning at school. A significant part of Dana’s job is communicating with parents and managing their expectations for their children. In terms of directionality of influence in her relationship with parents, Dana sees them as exerting very little if any influence on her practice and rather sees herself as helping them develop an understanding of their child’s developmental process.

Collaboration and Support of Colleagues, Specialists, and Mentors

Although Dana similarly feels like her colleagues do not influence her ideas about literacy, they do have an impact on her practice as she will at times turn to them as a resource for

activity suggestions or ideas on how to reach children who might not understand a concept she has introduced. While they may give her ideas for activities, she explains,

I don't think that necessarily changes my overall perspective of it or ideas about it [literacy]. I do think there is input that they give and sometimes they give me another viewpoint, like I have said before, but I don't think the ideas themselves change.

Dana's classroom is connected to the one other pre-kindergarten class at her school by a partition wall that is opened at the end of the day when the classes merge as the school day ends and aftercare begins. Dana says the two classes "typically run along the same lesson" and the teachers will discuss what they are going to do each week. These discussions and collaborations are informal as there is not time set aside in their days for planning together. The other pre-k teacher has been at the school for 11 years, and Dana feels like she is a helpful resource at times such as when she reads something in the curriculum that does not make sense:

I have read some things in the curriculum and I'm like, "I just don't understand, like, I'm not seeing it." I'll talk to her about it and she'll see it from a different perspective and I'm like, "Oh! Oh, that makes sense." And vice versa. It all makes sense when we discuss it.

Dana will also reach out to other teachers when she feels like she is struggling to help a particular student understand something. She gives the following example:

Maybe if I have a child that's just not understanding rhyming and I've come at it from, you know five or six different angles and he's just not getting it. And I go to some other teacher and she goes, "Have you thought about just doing the ending sound?" And maybe I didn't think about that. And I'm like, "Oh, let me try that." And that kind of helps me understand maybe how to reach that child. They may see something that I don't.

Teachers are a resource for activities and pedagogical approaches without her feeling like they are necessarily impacting her broader understandings of literacy and literacy development.

Dana notes that there are several specialists who work at the school to help children with any special needs or learning differences. Similar to teachers, the specialists—in particular occupational and speech therapists—have become an additional resource for helping her learn

different strategies and activities. Dana gives the example of asking an occupational therapist for help with a child who was struggling to hold a pencil correctly. Dana acknowledges that working on pencil grip is “just not something I know exactly how to do” so she takes advantage of access to someone with expertise in that area. Similarly, Dana says she has a lot of students with undiagnosed speech delays who might be having trouble understanding or producing individual sounds and/or blending sounds together. Dana says that while having a “cheat sheet” that provides a developmental sequence of sounds children are able to produce is a helpful resource, it does not tell her “how I help them get to that point of getting that sound.” In instances such as these, the speech therapists have been able to give her suggestions of different strategies to try.

Oftentimes one of the reasons Dana has to take it upon herself to reach out to therapists and other specialists is because many children come to her class undiagnosed and the referral process for evaluation and any useful services can be lengthy. She gives the following example:

I had a kid at the beginning of the year that I said, “He needs speech.” And he was Head Start, and he didn’t start getting speech from the school district or from an outside source until spring. And it’s like I’ve just spent the entire year with him not, half the time not understanding him, him getting to frustration. And here we are and he’s about to go to kindergarten...And again I had that speech therapist coming in here and I’m like, “So how do you work with this?” And she would give me input.

Dana takes the initiative on her own to solicit advice for strategies and techniques while both she and the child wait out the long referral, evaluation, and diagnosis process. Federal law, under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, gives a 60 day timeframe for an evaluation to occur after the receipt of parental consent, so this long wait time that Dana talks about is not uncommon. However, she views it as indicative of some of the bureaucratic issues that come with working both with Head Start and also with an organization that runs what she estimates to be between 40 and 60 different centers throughout Texas. While she notes that people working in myriad contexts deal with “hoops that you have to kind of jump through to get certain things,”

she finds the long “chain of command” frustrating and gives the example of having to wait months to get a replacement light bulb for the smart board in her class. The multiple levels of people to go through slow down decision making and leave teachers in a type of limbo or force them to move on as they wonder, “What was the point of going through all of that because [now] we’re like ten steps ahead!”

Being a part of such a large organization is not all negative, however. Dana has two different mentors—a Head Start mentor and a Texas School Ready “coach”—who visit her classroom, provide feedback, and are people she can turn to with questions. Texas School Ready (TSR) is a training program for preschool teachers run through the Children’s Learning Institute at the University of Texas (see <https://texasschoolready.org/>). TSR is intended as a support for preschool teachers to help them become more responsive to children’s needs, although Dana notes that sometimes she feels like TSR is more about “checks and balances” and that there is not a lot of relationship building at its core. In contrast, her Head Start mentor comes at least two times a month and provides feedback and suggestions. As someone who values collaboration and notes that it was “one of the key features of our educational department,” Dana appreciates the suggestions and that she can return to her mentor and discuss what happened when she tried doing what was suggested. She notes, “And we kind of bounce ideas off of each other. I think that’s important because I’m human and I’m not perfect and I’m still learning, so I enjoy hearing what other people have to say.” Some people who come to observe her teaching are less engaging and collaborative, and she feels like they just tell her what to do without any back and forth. With these people, she notes, “I feel like their expectations are my expectations. How we get there differs at times, but we are on the same page.” Overall, Dana likes having mentors

because “I enjoy that kind of direction” although the most impactful relationship is with her Head Start mentor and she likes having her feedback and support.

School Administration

Dana’s school has an “open door policy” in which the director frequently stops by classrooms to observe and visit and also encourages teachers to come to her with questions or concerns. The school’s general philosophy emphasizes a play-based approach and sees both students and teachers as individuals, understanding that “every teacher kind of might have their different style” and also that children learn and develop in different ways and at different rates. Dana notes that the school expects teachers to “make sure we are getting to all the kids. We need to make sure that we are making time for every child.” These relationships and the time spent with every child maximize the teacher’s ability to individualize teaching to help all children get to where they are expected to be. While valuing individualization and teaching the whole child, there are still literacy expectations such as learning the alphabet and “engaging in some form of communication...Just talking, just communicating, making their thoughts verbal and making them either verbal or written.” Dana notes that this emphasis on language seems to be particularly important for the Head Start kids because

a lot of times the kids that are in this program are not exposed to things that other kids are exposed to on a regular basis before kindergarten. They want the kids exposed to as many words, vocabulary, the meanings behind those, before they go to kindergarten.

While this position represents a deficit or deprivation view of children from low-income communities that seems to either disregard or fail to see the value of language and literacy experiences these children have outside of school that they bring with them into the classroom (Ballenger, 1999; Dyson, 2003; Goodwin, Cheruvu, & Genishi, 2008; Wilson 2000), it nonetheless serves to motivate Dana and the school in general to provide what is oft-described as a “language rich” environment.

Role of Mandated Curriculum

While having an effect on Dana's general pedagogy by encouraging individualization and a lot of language, the biggest way in which the administration of Dana's school specifically influences her literacy teaching is in the selection of curriculum. Although she says she is not really sure what the curriculum selection process is, she believes, "Teachers really have no input on that. You are just told, 'Hey, this is what we are doing.'" This is Dana's first year working with Frog Street curriculum, and she does not have high praise for it:

I don't hate it. I have worked with other curriculums before that I absolutely despise...I am not a huge fan of Letter People. Things are just sometimes one-dimensional. You know, you can get things—these kids are smarter than we give them credit for half the time, you know? You give them a little bit of something and then all of a sudden you see what they do with it and it's like, "Wow! Okay. So if we are there, let's start talking about this."

Dana seems to feel that Frog Street in some ways underestimates preschool children, and she prefers the curriculum that they used previously, *We Can*. She explains the difference by describing *We Can* as

very all-inclusive from the social studies to the vocabulary development, I mean, I was just able to do so much more. Even from choosing books. I was able to pull books from my library that had to do with the theme that weren't based off of "This is the curriculum and this is the book I want you to use."

The books that come with Frog Street really present a problem for Dana and she describes them as "boring," "very simplistic," and says "there's not a lot of meat in them." The Frog Street curriculum tells you what books to use "for this day, this unit, this time" and Dana notes that the simplistic nature of the books means that the children complain about hearing it several times.

Fortunately, Dana has the autonomy to read other books "on top of the book with Frog Street" and she notes that she will "make my own little teacher decision" and read something else. She explains, "I let the kids kind of dictate what we need to do at that point. If it's something they're not going to pay attention to, what's the point of reading it?" This flexibility

to make changes in response to the needs and interests of her students is an integral part of Dana's teaching and one of the aspects of her school that she really appreciates. The director trusts Dana to have the knowledge of curriculum content and general goals and expectations as well as understanding her students and being capable of making good decisions about how best to support their learning. Dana appreciates being able to work "within the confines of the curriculum, but you're actually making it more right for your kids, your classroom, your pace, whatever." Frog Street is a very detailed curriculum, and Dana likes having the framework of a curriculum and then the flexibility to work within that framework. She explains,

Some people came up with those things and can improve upon an already great lesson. Some need a little bit more guidance. So I think being able to have a framework and then improving upon it is better than having no framework at all. Because when you have no framework at all, you're kind of starting from, "Well what do I do know?" So like half my work is already done by having something already in place.

Dana works within that framework but also attempts to create opportunities to be responsive to individual children's needs.

Head Start and State Level Learning Standards and Expectations

As a state-approved curriculum, Frog Street provides a very specific and clear framework intended to help children work toward both Texas' and Head Start's literacy goals. Dana, again, likes having this framework in place in part because it makes incorporating the Texas Early Learning Guidelines "really easy for me because they've already lined them up with the curriculum and I just kind of go with it. That's already in line. And typically the Head Start guidelines overlap what the State expects." In addition to Frog Street, Head Start also uses the Circle Manual, which Dana uses for small group and circle time activities as a supplement to what Frog Street provides.

Dana describes the Head Start learning standards as "realistic" but is careful to point out that "you have to base all of that on an individual basis." Some children will be "flying through"

new content and she incorporates different activities for them to make learning more challenging and “meaningful.” Other children may need more time or different entry points, so Dana adjusts her expectations and has different goals for each child. She explains, “I feel like individualization is something that this company and Head Start and everything kind of completely supports and backs up.”

The ability to individualize her teaching is an aspect of Head Start that Dana really subscribes to. This focus on individual paths for learning and the merit of differentiated instruction, however, seems to stand in conflict with the three assessments that Head Start requires over the course of the school year. These assessments cover areas such as phonological awareness, alphabet knowledge, vocabulary, various print concepts, as well as writing, and they are a requirement that Dana grudgingly complies with:

[T]his is so going to be a soapbox, so I should warn you now: I am not a fan of standardized testing. I understand its purpose. I understand why our government and state and all that want us to do it. But, especially at this level, I feel like it’s not accurate. You’re getting, really any level, you’re getting a picture—a snapshot—of a child’s abilities, and you are making decisions off of that snapshot that are not accurate to the child always. Not to say that they’re not sometimes accurate, but they’re not always accurate. And I think that assessment in conjunction with the notes, anecdotal notes and just constant informal assessment throughout the year is probably better. But I don’t think it’s necessarily always looked at it like that because the company as a whole only looks at those assessments that we do three times a year.

Standardized assessments are an incomplete representation of a child and she likes to supplement them with writing samples and what she observes children doing in different contexts throughout the day. As she explains, “I don’t base anything strictly on the assessments because they’re not necessarily an accurate picture of that kid.”

A broader perspective of assessment is more meaningful to Dana and provides a better understanding of what a child knows and is able to do. She goes on to explain:

I don’t feel like having a kid sit in front of a computer screen and tell you the letter in three seconds necessarily tells you whether or not they know the letter. Yeah, it tells you

whether or not they know the letter in three seconds without any help in any other area, but I don't necessarily think that tells you that this kid knows that's the letter B. You know? What sound does a B make? What word begins with the letter B? You know, I think that there's so much more that is involved in that. I never ever thought that I would say this, but I like the idea that Montessori kind of the whole learning, you know. And I feel like we kind of get away from that when we're so worried about a test and being able to pass a test.

Standardized assessments, while reflective of the different literacy goals and expectations of Head Start as well as the Texas Prekindergarten Guidelines, are by their nature overly narrow and restrictive in her opinion. While she begrudgingly states that "there is a purpose for it whether I agree with it or not," Dana says working with children in one-on-one or small group activities is a more accurate way to "gauge, 'Okay, where are we really?'" Dana appreciates having a framework for what she and the children are doing in the classroom, but she wants the freedom within that framework to make decisions about ways in which to best meet individual children's needs and the opportunity to use broader means of assessment to inform herself and others about what a child knows and is able to do.

Description of Literacy Practices

For Dana, one of the most important aspects of her teaching is being responsive to individual children's needs and making learning relevant. She explains:

I've been in classrooms before where every day we go "A /a/ alligator, or B /b/ bear, C /c/ cat," you know...It's too rotary [sic], it's too... I don't know. To me it just doesn't make it authentic enough, it doesn't make it meaningful enough. And that's not fun. I get bored. I get bored, they get bored. If I'm getting bored, it's possible that they are, too. So I want to make it more meaningful. I want to make it more normal, I guess, in the scheme of conversation moving through it.

Dana sees literacy as "a broad spectrum of communication" that encompasses reading, speaking, writing, and self-expression. Given this view of literacy as "a part of everything," she wants to be careful to make it engaging and meaningful, seeing literacy opportunities in every conversation and every activity and hoping to support children in their efforts to communicate,

read, and write. The challenge for Dana is working out the balance between the school's belief in the importance of individualization and also the expectation that they adhere to the curriculum as much as possible. She notes that "nine times out of ten you go with the plan... [but] every now and then the kids take you kind of on a different path and you just kind of go with them."

With a broad understanding of literacy, Dana sees it as occurring naturally throughout the day and also strives to create opportunities for children's understanding of oral and written language to develop. When children arrive in the morning, they take their names off of the "I'm at home" board and move it to the "I'm at school" board then sign their name on a sign in sheet. Byington and Kim (2017) point out that having children write their name every day is an important activity because it is not only personally meaningful to the child but also incorporates alphabet knowledge, spelling, print concepts, and letter writing. After signing in, the day starts with a family-style breakfast and then children play quietly on the carpet as they wait for everyone to finish eating, clean up and brush their teeth. The first circle time of the day consists of calendar, weather, attendance, songs, and a morning message. At the beginning of the year, Dana writes the morning message correctly but as the year wears on, she will write it incorrectly and encourage the children to help her fix it. She explains:

I think of it a lot like DOL's when I was in school—daily oral language—where I write it up there and I write it incorrectly. I make it a lower case at the beginning of the sentence. I don't put the period at the end or whatever punctuation mark. I leave a word out that they can obviously fill in and I call them "quality sticks" to come and fix it.

When she first starts writing it incorrectly, they fix it as a group, progressing to the point where they are able to notice and make changes more independently. Dana sees this quick, daily activity as a way to engage children in the relationship between oral and written language.

After circle time, the children go to centers for 15 to 20 minutes and Dana works with one small group. During this center time, children are able to choose where they play, but there

are limits on how many children can play in each center, not all centers are open, and the children cannot switch to a different center because she feels like this is just too short of a time period and she wants them to engage and focus. One of the aspects of Frog Street is suggested materials and activities for different centers. In what it refers to as the “Pretend and Learn Center,” for example, the curriculum lists materials to have for that week as well as different activities to suggest to the children for each day of the week. During the unit on Family, one day children are encouraged to pretend to cook and serve a meal while on another day teachers are to provide a list of items (with pictures of each item) to ask children to put in a suitcase for a trip to their grandparents’ house. During that same week in the curriculum, children in the writing center are asked to write letters to different friends and family members each day and also to practice writing upper and lower case letters. Across all centers and including outside play, Frog Street provides activities, games, and materials for teachers to suggest to children each day. Characteristically, Dana does not always feel like she has to strictly adhere to the materials suggested for centers by Frog Street. She explains that while she likes to have materials in the centers that are “purposeful and meaningful to what we are talking about,” she will also leave materials out when the children are still having fun playing with them.

While the children are in centers, Dana works with small groups throughout the day. Groups are given color names, typically have four to five children in them, and Dana meets with each group at least once a week. Dana gives herself flexibility with the groups and acknowledges that some days not all of the children need to work on whatever is being addressed during small groups, so she will just call over the one or two children who need more support with that particular concept. Dana views small groups as an opportunity to individualize learning and instruction, and she caters this time to meeting children’s specific, individual needs. The small

group lesson is either math or literacy-related and is based on the learning goals and vocabulary in Frog Street that week. Dana will also refer back to We Can, the curriculum from previous years, for activity ideas as well as vocabulary words that she thinks are relevant to the current unit.

Dana is one of three teachers at her school who participate in the aforementioned program called Texas School Ready (TSR). As part of its aim to help make teachers more responsive to individual children's needs and learn how to make any necessary adjustments, TSR includes a program called Preschool Response to Intervention (PRTI). The four children who score the lowest on a vocabulary assessment are grouped together in the same small group and they spend more time than the other small groups on vocabulary development, based on the assumption that vocabulary is an integral part of literacy. The intention is that this group of four always works together, but Dana admits that sometimes she feels certain activities are better suited to two children "just so I could get a little bit more in-depth." While Dana does not necessarily work with each of her small groups every day, she does work with the PRTI group every day and she feels that the time and focus on vocabulary are making an impact:

[O]nce they got that kind of under control, I saw other areas starting to blossom as well. All of a sudden we understood a little bit more about rhyming. We understood a little bit more about writing. We understood a little bit more about this, because now we weren't so confused when it comes to the words that were being spoken around us.

Two of the four children in Dana's PRTI group are English language learners; one speaks Spanish and the other speaks Burmese. Many of the children start at the school when they are younger, so by the time they get to Dana's class, they have learned not only some English but also a lot about the structure and routine of the school, which she feels means that even though a child may technically still be considered an English language learner in her class, often times "they have learned enough English at this point that it's not difficult for them." The two children

that Dana then refers to when talking about ELLs are the two who began the year not knowing any English. Dana does not speak any languages other than English so she says she relies on gestures and speaking slowly, although she does try to learn some words in other languages to “make them feel more comfortable.” As she talks about the ELLs in her class, she focuses less on what she does to help them understand her and more on what she does when she is struggling to understand them. She will ask them, orally and with gestures, to keep trying to help her understand and maybe even draw a picture. Dana has observed that the children who are learning English seem more comfortable making efforts in English with their classmates, perhaps because it is “a lot less threatening” and they feel safer making mistakes around their peers than with an adult. Dana laughs as she talks about how her most talkative students seem to gravitate toward the children who are learning English, speculating that perhaps it gives them more of an opportunity to talk with less of a chance of interruption. This benefits both students in her opinion, however, because it not only immerses the ELLs in English as they play and go about their day, but it also builds relationships.

In addition to her PRTI group, Dana also has what she refers to as her “target kids” who “are having issues with their alphabet.” When Dana sees that some children are struggling to learn letters, she makes a concerted effort to focus her small group time with them on activities that develop alphabet knowledge. She will use “different forms of letters, different prints, different textures” and point to letters and ask the children to name them. For her, this is a slowed down version of the assessment she is required to do. It helps her understand what a child knows given more time and also helps her look for patterns in the child’s response such as repeatedly confusing different letters like K and R. She also looks to see if a child is able to name

and identify a letter when she points to it and/or is able to find a letter if she names it. Dana uses this time and the information she learns to individualize lessons for children.

After the first small groups and center time, Dana has two more circle times, one of which is primarily for reading a story. She will “work with some vocabulary” during this circle and weave in class discussions about the book. As noted earlier, Frog Street determines a theme-related book to read each day and outlines a very specific, step-by-step process for each book.

For example:

Figure 2: Sample Activity from Frog Street

✦ IIB.3, IID.1, IID.2, IVD.1, VIA.2, VID.4, IIIA.3, IIIA.2, VA.3.

Meet My Grandparents • Conocer a los abuelos

- Display the cover of the book. Invite a volunteer to point to the photograph. Ask another volunteer to point to the words on the page. Read the title, pointing to each word. Have children predict the relationship between the two people in the photograph and determine what they are doing.
- Turn to the table of contents. Explain that this section of the book tells us where to find information. Demonstrate by pointing to the words *Meeting Grandfathers • Conociendo a los abuelos*. Tell the children that this information is located on page 4.
- Turn to page 4. Explain that this part of the book is about a grandfather who came to the United States from Cuba. Point to the map. Say: *The map helps us locate different places where people live. This is Cuba. El mapa nos ayuda a ubicar los diferentes lugares donde vive la gente. Ésta es Cuba.*
- Ask children to listen carefully and look closely at the photographs as you read. Explain that both the words and the photographs provide information. Provide examples of things seen in the photographs but not mentioned in the text (color of clothing, time of day).
- Read and discuss pages 4 through 13.
- Review the different names the grandfathers • *los abuelos* are called. Have children share the names they call their grandfathers. Record their answers on chart paper. Count the number of different names.

(Frog Street Press, n.d., p. 33)

Books are one of the obvious areas where Dana departs from Frog Street. Because she says she and the children sometimes find the books boring, she will read other books that are related to the theme but are more engaging. One activity that Dana likes to do near the end of the year is to read a book and not finish it and will instead ask the children to come up with an ending. Dana values encouraging imagination and she tries to incorporate activities that encourage the children to be creative. With this activity, she explains:

[T]hey’ve taken that opportunity to come and let their imagination work and finish telling me the story. And that’s kind of neat to see their little minds engaged in that because I think imagination’s something that a lot of the kids aren’t really getting the way I did when I was a kid. You know, that creative side doesn’t always get engaged. It’s just we

got to do this, this, this, and this. And we don't let them really explore that creative element, which is so important.

In addition to reading books, circle time is also an opportunity for singing songs, playing games, reviewing the day together, or engaging in other activities that connect to the theme or help develop phonological awareness or alphabet knowledge. Dana will sometimes pull ideas from a curriculum resource called Circle Manual that the school provides access to (see https://circleonline.uth.edu/pre-k/en/activities_list/). Circle Manual has small and whole group activities, most of which are in literacy-related domains such as phonological awareness, writing, and print knowledge. Dana says she probably uses Circle Manual daily to find activities. She gives the example of an activity called "Wiggle Worm" wherein she holds up a card with a letter on it, calls on a child to say what letter it is, and mixed in the stack are cards with worms on them. When she pulls out a worm card, the children get up and do a quick dance, then sit back down and keep playing. Dana says, "I probably could have come up with something like that on my own, but it's so much easier just looking at a book!" As with Frog Street's books, Dana warns that "too much leaning" on Circle Manual can lead to boring and repetitive activities, so she also incorporates activities from other resources.

Circle time is also an opportunity to work on phonological awareness, letter knowledge, and vocabulary. When Dana introduces a new word, she will define the word, ask the children to say the first sound they hear in the word, say what letter makes that sound, and then clap out the syllables of the word. In this way, Dana feels like she is not only supporting vocabulary development but is also working on phonological awareness including onset-rime and syllabication. Onset-rime is something that Dana explains was "really hard for me at first because that's one of the phonological awarenesses [sic] that...is pushed aside a lot of times because we've worked so much on rhyming and we've worked so much on syllabication." With

experience, she has discovered that it “kind of came very naturally” when she sounded words out with the children, and she even observes the children slowing down and articulating onset and rime when they are communicating with their classmates.

Phonological awareness activities consume a lot of Dana’s literacy curriculum. In addition to activities during circle time, Dana also incorporates small group activities “working on rhyming, working on understanding what rhyming words are, giving rhyming words, and things like that.” In addition, she notes that there are materials available in different centers that support phonological awareness concepts. She explains,

It’s just kind of ingrained in every area that it possibly can. I kind of want to go overkill on it just so that they’re getting it at some point. If they’re not getting it here, well maybe they’ll get it over here.

If she follows the Frog Street curriculum, Dana is supposed to do a letter of the week. However, she prefers to introduce letters at a different, faster pace noting, “I feel like we waste way too much of our time learning the letters at that slower pace. I’ve learned that a lot of the times that the kids can learn it a little faster and then we’re not spending so much of the year focused on that.” Dana introduces the letters in alphabetical order and does the upper and lower case versions as well as the phoneme(s) for each letter. She will move on from a letter regardless of whether or not the whole class has learned it because, she explains, spending two weeks talking about the letter B is “not really helping the whole group.” She uses her small groups to spend more time working with children on different letters, sounds, etc. rather than feeling compelled to work with the entire class on all of the same content and concepts.

One activity that Dana likes to do in circle time is KWL charts. Children are asked what they know, want to know, and what they learned about a topic. Most of the children will draw a picture and she will write what they want to say next to their picture. They will then read a book on the topic, spend time learning about it during the day or even throughout the week, and then

write what they learned. This activity, which is not part of Frog Street, incorporates many different areas of literacy but in a less scripted way, accepting their writing in whatever form it takes and allowing children to express their ideas and ask questions. For Dana, this represents her intention to engage her students and make learning more meaningful to them. Dana believes that “half the battle for a lot of these kids is the desire” to do something and notes, “If they don’t have that, they’re not going to do it.” What Dana tries to do then, is provide multiple opportunities to learn different literacy concepts such as letters, rhyme, and phonemes and to work on these concepts in different ways, including sharing ideas, brainstorming, and having a lot of time to talk and play.

Like many early childhood teachers, Dana has a word wall in her classroom, which she refers to as the “letter wall.” Vocabulary words are introduced “on a regular basis” through a set process: “They learn what they mean. They learn the beginning sounds of the words. They learn syllabication through the words.” They will then write the word down, draw a picture for it, and put it up on the letter wall. This process applies for both words she intentionally introduces to the children as well as words children might ask her about. It is important to Dana that the children are contributors to the letter wall as they help with writing the words and drawing the pictures as well as sometimes inspiring new words to add. For her, the importance of being intentional with vocabulary in this way is that not only are children improving their vocabulary but it also engages them in the process of putting letters together to form words, to see that words have meaning, and by including them as contributors, she validates their questions and contributions. Dana concedes that some years children will actually reference the letter wall more than other years and believes that it “really depends on the kids.” Dana is a strong believer, however, that “a lot of times something works with one kid and I turn around and try it with another kid, and it

doesn't work." While the letter wall may not be utilized by all of the children, she believes it is helpful for some of her students as an opportunity and support for emergent writing, which is reason enough for her to continue using it in her classroom.

Dana views pre-kindergarten as the first point in children's education when they are really encouraged to sit down and write, so she tries to create frequent opportunities for children to develop emergent writing skills. However, she is quick to clarify that she wants writing to "not be required but desired. I want them to want to write." The children in Dana's class write in a journal each week, an activity that Dana says she includes because "it is encouraged by the TSR program." Each child has a scheduled day during the week for journal writing but journals are available all week in the writing center. Dana encourages the children to journal whenever they want because she wants writing to "be very authentic, very just the norm" and something that children are intrinsically motivated to do. Dana says writing for her students primarily consists of pictures and sometimes the children then dictate content for her to write down for them. By equating drawing with writing, Dana seems to understand that "at this stage the drawing stands for both print and image as the child's storytelling and visual imagery is subsumed into a single multi-layered [image]" (Coates & Coates, 2016, p. 60).

Dana will occasionally work with a child to sound out a word or words for the journal as well, but this is done on an individual basis when she sees that a child is ready for this. Even at the end of the year, writing activities such as creating their own ending to a book are primarily accomplished through dictation. Some of the children might try to write some words or will write letters that they will then "read" back to her, but she also accepts pictures as a written response to the activity and will then ask them to dictate their story to her. By accepting whatever stage of

emergent writing her students are in, Dana aims to encourage writing to “com[e] from somewhere inside them, not me forcing them.”

Beliefs About Early Literacy Learning and Development

Dana believes that an ideal approach to teaching literacy needs to be “authentic, like it needs to really come from them.” While Dana does work under the structure of a prescribed curriculum, she seems to see this more as a framework. The “real learning” occurs when she is responsive to children’s interests and needs: “They need to be the one guiding all of that...Because if it’s not meaningful, what are they really going to get out of it?” While Dana describes herself as “type A” and how important it is for her to have goals and expectations for her students, she simultaneously acknowledges that sometimes “you just kind of have to change it up a little bit...You see what kids need and you redefine your idea.”

Using Wien’s (1995) framework, Dana is seen as having two ideologies, similar to the teacher in Wien’s study who “valued and constructed both teacher dominion and developmentally appropriate practice” (p. 21). As Dana explains, “I try to plan things, but honestly, and the way I like to run my classroom is letting the kids kind of direct me.” Dana likes the structure and direction provided by a set schedule and a curriculum. However, she also strongly believes that children learn through play and social interaction with their peers and teachers, and that the best way to promote children’s literacy development and learning is not through teacher-directed, planned activities but rather through conversations and through talking and listening. In particular, she highlights the importance of her playing and listening to children so that she can introduce activities and materials that are more relevant, meaningful and therefore more engaging for children. Wien viewed some of the teachers in her study as “struggling between two different directions at once” as they moved between teacher-led and child-led

activities and frameworks. Dana does not, however, represent any type of similar struggle. If something that was planned seems boring or is not engaging the children's interest, she is perfectly willing to shift gears and let the children be "the driving force" behind their own learning. The "type A" side of her sees value in having a schedule and structure and she does not seem to see this as in conflict with her belief that children's language and literacy develops best when they "do more of the talking and the directing."

Much like she holds two positions as defined by Wien's (1995) study, Dana also seems to move between the two approaches to phonics instruction described by Campbell (2015). In a study seeking to describe Australian early childhood teachers' views on phonics instruction, Campbell reports two broad categories, play-based/child-directed and a more explicit, formal approach to instruction. The child-centered approach focuses on areas of literacy such as conversation, singing, rhyming, environmental print, and "drawing attention to letters and sounds within meaningful contexts and teachable moments" (p. 17). In contrast, a more teacher-directed approach involves doing a letter of the week, teaching letters and phonemes in a systematic order, regular whole group instruction, and learning that is "isolat[ed] from children's everyday experiences" (p. 19). Dana incorporates both of these approaches in her teaching and believes that early literacy can and should be supported in a variety of ways: "Let them play. Guide that instruction during play, talk about things in whole group and in small group that help when they are playing [so] they are pulling back those vocabulary words and other things to make it all tie in."

Dana wants reading and writing to be "natural" and not "a forced thing" so she works to balance explicit instruction with meaningful opportunities to engage with oral and written language. Her eclectic approach seems in some ways to depend upon which areas of literacy

development she is discussing. For example, she views oral language development as something that is primarily child-directed and a more informal, less didactic component of literacy. One of her goals is for writing, including the range of stages of emergent writing, to be similarly child-led and an activity that children engage in voluntarily and with creativity and self-expression. In contrast, for print concepts and phonological awareness she sees more value in teacher-directed approaches. Dana spends a lot of time on activities and instruction related to phonological awareness, referring to it as “a building block of language.” As she further explains:

They understand language so much better once they’ve had that addressed. You know once they understand what rhyming, what onset-rime, what syllabication, what words. They understand language. They understand what they’re saying. What they’re doing. Again, it makes it more meaningful. All of a sudden we’re talking about the *Cat in the Hat* and they’re picking up rhyming words left and right. And I’m like, “Yeah, I know. Isn’t that cool?” And so they, it makes it just like they get it. And those are those moments when you see the light bulb go off and you’re like, “Ah, it worked!”

She believes that phonological awareness helps children begin to decode language: “If you don’t have those concepts, it’s just a big jumbled mess.” Whether providing phonemes associated with letters or breaking words down into onset-rime and clapping out syllables, Dana incorporates explicit instruction on aspects of phonological awareness into circle time on a daily basis as well as frequently including small group activities in this area.

Shifts in Literacy Practices

The need to emphasize phonological awareness in a prekindergarten classroom is something that Dana sees as a concept that has been pushed down from elementary school expectations. She explains how this comes up when she is talking to parents about their child needing help with phonological awareness. Parents respond, “Well, don’t they learn that in kindergarten?” and I am like, “Well, yeah, but that’s a goal now” in prekindergarten. Concepts that she says were once learned in kindergarten are now expected to have some degree of

mastery when children begin kindergarten and Dana feels that “kindergarten has a lot higher expectations” now than it did when she was in school.

Dana spent time subbing in kindergarten classrooms prior to teaching preschool, so her initial thought was that she would just have to go “one step lower” in order to adjust her expectations. However, she says her goals were still “a little lofty” and says, “I wanted to do some things that really weren’t the best for this age.” Despite feeling like she knows what comes next and understanding that there are now higher expectations for pre-k children, Dana still resists having blanket expectations for all of her students. She explains, “I think you want to aim for mastery, but I think it’s okay to look at the individual as it comes.” She keeps her high expectations and believes that “you’re going to get a better result from kids than if you make your expectations really low,” but she maintains her desire to individualize and help children grow from where they are.

Summary

Although Dana has only been teaching for a few years, she is a thoughtful and deliberate practitioner who balances intentional instruction with opportunities for play and meaningful learning and exploration. Dana is fortunate in that her school is aligned with her belief that the best approach to teaching is having a curricular framework that provides direction and structure without requiring strict adherence, offering opportunities to pivot and follow children’s interest. This is, in fact, a critical approach to teaching for Dana as she strongly believes that teaching and learning should involve individualized instruction and meeting children where they are. Dana scaffolds her support for her students, and, as part of a state program, spends extra time with children who have scored lower on vocabulary assessments. She believes that this intensive focus is effective and impacts the children’s overall understanding of other areas of language and

literacy. Dana caters her activities and instructions to students based on both observations as well as assessments, but she is not shy to discuss her aversion to standardized tests and their questionable efficacy for representing what children do or do not know. Contextual factors, including curriculum, assessments, policies, and colleagues, do not heavily influence Dana's beliefs about literacy or her pedagogy, but she actively seeks out advice and suggestions from specialists, other teachers, and her Head Start mentor for activities and other ways to grow as a teacher. Dana believes pre-k children are now asked to develop knowledge and skills that were once a part of kindergarten, but she is not overly critical of a push-down in early education and believes that, even with a wide variety of developing abilities and skills, young children are highly capable and enjoy opportunities to grow and learn.

Chapter XII: Survey Results

In addition to participating in two interviews, the teachers were also given a self-report questionnaire at the end of the first interview to complete on their own time and either mail back or return at the onset of the second interview. Survey questions were selected from two different sources: the first section was adapted from the “Preschool Literacy Beliefs Questionnaire [TBQ]” (Seefeldt, 2004, cited in Hindman & Wasik, 2008). The second and third sections of the survey were adapted from the “Preschool Literacy Practices Checklist [PLPC]” (Burgess, Lundgren, Lloyd, & Pianta, 2001).

Preschool Literacy Beliefs Questionnaire (TBQ) Results

The TBQ (Seefeldt, 2004, cited in Hindman & Wasik, 2008) was developed with the intention of representing how teachers’ beliefs align with common conceptions of best practices in early literacy (e.g., Neuman, Copple, & Bredekamp, 2000; Schickedanz, 1999; Schickedanz & Collins, 2013; Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998). Teachers are presented with a series of belief statements and then rate their agreement from “strongly agree” to “strongly disagree.” These responses are converted to a five-point scale, with a one corresponding to “strongly disagree” and a five corresponding with “strongly agree.” The higher the score the greater the correspondence with ideas about best practice that are commonly found throughout the research literature. In contrast, lower scores are interpreted as corresponding with more didactic, drill-and-skill activities that are widely viewed as less beneficial or appropriate. Items that are not consistent with general conceptions of best practices, such as “Children should not waste time scribbling and drawing when they can be learning to write” are reverse coded. Table 6 presents individual responses to each of the statements on the TBQ. The original TBQ has 30 statements but only 20 were used in this study.

Table 6*Individual Responses to the TBQ*

As a teacher I believe preschool children:	Tameka	Margie	Angie	Rodrigo	Alison	Deborah	Cristina	Dana
Should not write until teachers show how to form each letter (R)	N	D	D	SD	D	SD	D	SD
Need plenty of drill and practice to learn new letter sounds (R)	A	D	D	SD	D	D	A	N
Do not need to learn the meaning of a lot of words to become good readers (R)	D	A	D	SD	D	A	N	D
Do not need to be taught the names of each letter because children learn to read without knowing each letter and its name (R)	D	D	D	D	N	A	D	D
Should write without worrying about spelling	A	A	SA	A	A	SA	A	SA
Learn ending sounds by circling pictures of things that rhyme on worksheets (R)	A	D	D	SD	SD	D	A	D
Learn language by talking about ideas and expressing feelings	A	SA	SA	SA	SA	SA	SA	SA
Should look at books to help them learn to read	A	A	SA	SA	SA	SA	SA	N
Should not waste time scribbling and drawing when they can be learning to write (R)	D	SD	SD	SD	SD	SD	D	SD
Learn ending sounds in words by listening to nursery rhymes	D	A	A	A	N	A	A	A
Do not need to hear many stories in order to become good readers (R)	D	D	SD	SD	SD	SD	D	D
Learn new words as teachers define them when reading books to children	A	A	A	A	A	A	D	A
Learn to write in part by watching teachers write	A	A	SA	SA	A	SA	A	A
Learn new words by connecting them to real things, objects, or activities they are doing	A	A	SA	SA	SA	A	SA	SA
Should not talk with each other during the day (R)	D	SD	SD	SD	SD	SD	SD	SD
Learn to read before learning to write (R)	N	D	A	A	D	A	D	N
Should play with words, such as making up rhymes and jump rope chants, to learn to hear ending sounds in words	D	A	A	SA	SA	A	SA	A
Need to learn a lot of words so they can learn to read	D	D	A	N	A	A	A	D
Should learn to identify beginning and ending sounds in words	A	A	A	A	N	A	D	A
Need many experiences, such as going to the zoo and talking about it, in order to learn new vocabulary	N	A	SA	SA	SA	SA	SA	A

(SA=strongly agree, A=agree, N=neutral, D=disagree, and SD=strongly disagree; (R) indicates an item that was reverse coded)

With an acknowledgement of the small size of the sample and the limitations this imposes on extrapolating from the data, a simplified quantitative analysis looked at means generated across participants, across individual statements, and within subscales. Determining means across subscales and participants permits both cross-study comparisons to other studies that presented data for the TBQ (Hindman & Wasik, 2008; Lynch & Owston, 2015; Schachter, et al., 2016) as well as an approach to developing an understanding of responses to statements, trends within and across subscales, as well as patterns within and across participant responses, locating them within descriptions that emerged from the interviews and depicted in each participant's narrative portrait.

Table 7

Subscale Results of Preschool Literacy Beliefs Questionnaire

Subscale	Mean	Range
Writing (5 statements)	4.15	3-4.75
Code-related (6 statements)	3.79	3.5-4.125
Oral language and vocabulary (6 statements)	4.25	3.125-4.875
Book reading (3 statements)	4.25	3.75-4.5

Items from the TBQ factored onto four different subscales: code-related skills, oral language/vocabulary, book reading, and writing (Hindman & Wasik, 2008). Table 7 presents the mean and range for each of the four subscales, and reveals that teachers agreed (mean scores greater than or equal to four) with best practices related to writing (M=4.15), oral language and vocabulary (M=4.25), and book reading (M=4.25). The mean score for code-related skills, however, demonstrated weak agreement (M=3.79). Overall means as well as the ranges indicate that teachers did not, on average, disagree with ideas about best practice on any of the subscales.

Table 8 demonstrates that these results are largely consistent with other research studies that utilized the TBQ and presented descriptive data (Hindman & Wasik, 2008; Lynch & Owston, 2015; Schachter, et al., 2016). In particular they closely mirror the means that Hindman and Wasik (2008) found in their study involving 28 Head Start teachers and that Schachter, et. al (2016) found in their study with 222 early childhood teachers. Educators in Lynch and Owston’s (2015) study, however, had lower means, which the authors interpreted as suggesting “that preschool teachers in general have uncertainty in areas of their language and literacy beliefs” (p. 97). In all four studies, including the present study, teachers seem to be most uncertain about what best practices are for code-related skills.

Table 8

Cross-study Comparison of Subscale Means

	Code-related	Oral language and vocabulary	Book reading	Writing
Present Study	3.79	4.25	4.25	4.15
Hindman & Wasik (2008)	3.61	4.25	4.27	3.98
Lynch & Owston (2015)	3.5	3.74	3.70	3.53
Schachter, et al. (2016) ³	2.65	3.22	3.32	3.31

³ Schachter, et. al. (2016) scored items on a scale of 0-4, with 0 representing strongly disagree and 4 representing strongly agree. A mean of 3 or above therefore demonstrates agreement with research-based practices.

Table 9*Subscales, Affiliated Statements, and Corresponding Means*

Subscale	Statements and means— <i>As a teacher, I believe preschool children:</i>
Writing	1....should not write until teachers show them how to form each letter. (R ⁴ ; 4.25) 5. ...should write without worrying about spelling. (4.375) 9. ...should not waste time scribbling and drawing when they can be learning to write. (R; 4.75) 13. ...learn to write in part by watching teachers write. (4.375) 16. ...learn to read before learning to write. (R; 3)
Code-related	2. ...need plenty of drill and practice to learn new letter sounds. (R; 3.5) 4. ...do not need to be taught the names of each letter because children learn to read without knowing each letter and its name. (R; 3.625) 6. ...learn ending sounds by circling pictures of things that rhyme on worksheets. (R; 4) 10. ...learn ending sounds in words by listening to nursery rhymes. (3.875) 17. ...should play with words, such as making up rhymes and jump rope chants, to learn to hear ending sounds in words. (4.125) 19. ...should learn to identify beginning and ending sounds in words. (3.625)
Oral language and vocabulary	3. ...do not need to learn the meaning of a lot of words to become good readers. (R; 3.5) 7. ...learn language by talking about their ideas and expressing feelings. (4.875) 14. ...learn new words by connecting them to real things, objects, or activities they are doing. (4.625) 15. ...should not talk with each other during the day. (R; 4.875) 18. ...need to learn a lot of words so they can learn to read. (3.125) 20. ...need many experiences, and to talk about them, in order to learn new vocabulary. (4.5)
Book reading	8. ...should look at books to help them learn to read. (4.5) 11. ...do not need to hear many stories in order to become good readers. (R; 4.5) 12. ...learn new words as teachers define them when reading books to children. (3.75)

Disaggregating the statements in the four subscales presents a more nuanced picture of how teachers responded to individual concepts. Table 9 outlines the four subscales, statements from this study that correspond to each subscale, and the aggregate means for each statement based on participants' responses. Statements are intended to represent beliefs about how children learn to read and write, developmental pathways to literacy learning, as well as ideas about best

⁴ R indicates items that are reverse-coded

practices for helping children on their way to becoming readers and writers. The code-related subscale includes items related to both alphabet knowledge as well as phonological awareness. The writing subscale primarily focuses on classroom practices but also includes procedural statements regarding how children learn to write. Statements on the book reading subscale focus both on what teachers should do when reading aloud as well as the value of independent reading. Finally, the oral language/vocabulary subscale includes items regarding how children learn new words as well as opportunities in a classroom that support oral language and vocabulary development.

Teachers were most uncertain on items that reflect code-related skills, in particular those that seem to reflect developmental pathways for literacy learning. This finding mirrors the results that were seen by Hindman and Wasik (2008). For example, some of the lowest levels of agreement in this study concerned whether children learn to: read before they learn to write (item 16; M=3); need to learn both a lot of words (item 18; M=3.125) as well as their meaning (item 3; M=3.5) in order to read; and whether or not children learn to read without knowing each letter and its name (item 4; M=3.625). Teachers seemed to have stronger beliefs when it came to more procedural elements, particularly when it comes to emergent writing (item 9; M=4.75) and invented spelling (item 5; M=4.375), encouraging children to talk (item 15; M=4.875) and share their ideas and feelings (item 7; M=4.875), and looking at books (item 8; M=4.5) and listening to stories (item 11; M=4.5).

Table 10

Individual Participant Means

Tameka	Margie	Angie	Rodrigo	Alison	Deborah	Cristina	Dana
3.55	3.95	4.35	4.5	4.3	4.15	3.85	4.05

In addition to calculating means to get a broad picture of what teachers in this study collectively believe, means were also calculated for individual participants to provide a picture of how much each teacher's beliefs correspond with ideas about best practice (see Table 10). Three of the teachers—Tameka (M=3.55), Margie (M=3.95), and Cristina (M=3.85)—had total means that were below a four, indicating weaker agreement with ideas about best practice. Both Tameka and Cristina were more likely to agree with statements that involved the use of worksheets and more drill-and-skill type practices, and Tameka was also less likely to agree with statements that involved playing with language and sounds (see Table 6). These positions are consistent with how they talked about teaching and learning in their interviews. Tameka, in particular, described more didactic, large group activities that involved more rote, prescriptive engagement from the children such as all being asked to decode a written color name on a worksheet and then looking for and holding up the same color crayon.

Margie's mean of 3.95 was just below the level that is seen as agreement with best practice, but the pattern across her responses differs from that of Cristina and Tameka. Margie only responded to an item with either strong agreement or disagreement in three instances, but her responses overall were more likely to coincide with ideas about best practice, just without taking a strong stance on the statements. Somewhat similar to Margie, Tameka never responded with a strong agreement or disagreement. In fact, on two items—children learn language by talking about ideas and emotions (item 7) and children should not talk with each other (item 15)—she was the only teacher to not respond with strongly agree or strongly disagree, respectively. Her apparent uncertainty coupled with her tendency to favor worksheets and more teacher-directed activities led to her falling below the range representing beliefs that coincide with best practice.

Rodrigo (M=4.5), Angie (M=4.35), and Alison (M=4.3) had the highest overall means. Rodrigo was the most likely to respond to items with either strongly agree or disagree, which Lynch and Owston (2015) describe as representing a greater degree of certainty in one's beliefs. There are certain items, such as the statement claiming children need a lot of drill and practice (item 2) or the one regarding the positive impact of a large vocabulary on reading (item 3), on which Rodrigo was the only participant to take a strong position. Alison overall agreed with what the TBQ defines as best practice, but she was neutral on three statements: learning ending sounds in nursery rhymes (item 10), whether or not children learn to read without knowing each letter and its name (item 4), and whether or not children should learn to identify beginning and ending sounds in words (item 19).

Preschool Literacy Practices Checklist Results

Compiled from other literacy surveys, the Preschool Literacy Practices Checklist [PLPC], piloted with 240 public prekindergarten teachers, was developed to “sample teachers’ beliefs and self-reported practices on early literacy acquisition” (Burgess, et al., 2001, p. 4). The survey is divided into multiple sections, two of which were used for the current study. The first section concerns teachers’ beliefs about early literacy and the importance of teaching 16 different literacy-related skills to young children. Teachers are presented with a series of statements regarding the importance of teaching children certain literacy-related skills and are asked to rank the importance of each skill on a four-point scale of zero to three, with zero indicating that a skill is not important and three indicating that the teacher views that skill as essential. Unlike the TBQ (Hindman & Wasik, 2008), which makes explicit connections between statements on the instrument and extant research on early literacy and ideas about best practice, the PLPC does not make those connections as clear nor do the pilot authors (Burgess, et al, 2001) spend much time

connecting items directly to research. Nonetheless, there is considerable overlap between the skills and knowledge represented in both the TBQ and the PLPC. Table 11 presents participants' responses to the first section of the PLPC.

Table 11

Individual Responses to the Preschool Literacy Practices Checklist, Section 1

How important is it to teach children to:	Tameka	Margie	Angie	Rodrigo	Alison	Deborah	Cristina	Dana
a. Name letters	2	2	3	3	1	3	2	2
b. Say the sounds that letters and letter combinations make	2	2	3	3	2	2	2	3
c. Understand the meaning of words	2	2	3	3	3	2	1	2
d. Write letters and words	2	2	2	1	1	2	1	1.5
e. Understand concepts of print	2	3	3	3	3	3	3	3
f. Recognize basic sight words	2	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
g. Write their own name	3	2	3	2	1	2	3	3
h. Write a story	1	1	1	2	1	1	1	0
i. Respond to stories by talking	2	3	3	3	3	3	3	2
j. Relate their experiences to those in a book	2	2	3	3	3	3	3	2
k. Tell their own stories	2	3	3	3	3	3	3	3
l. Tell a story from pictures	2	3	3	3	3	3	3	2
m. Recognize letters in a book, story, or other text	2	2	3	3	2	2	2	3
n. Recognize words in a book, story, or other text	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2
o. Separate words into sounds	2	1	1	1	1	1	1	2
p. Identify elements of a story	2	2	3	3	3	2	1	2

3=Essential, 2=Pretty important, 1=A little important, 0=Not important

Overall, teachers displayed a large degree of consensus across individual statements. Teachers valued story-telling (items k and l) but did not see much importance in children being able to physically write the story (h), which was the lowest rated across the participants and received the only zero of any items. Tameka rated everything as a two, or “pretty important”, other than two statements: she said writing their own name (g) is essential and the ability to write a story (h) is only a little important. Rating everything a two placed Tameka as an outlier on a few different statements: understanding print concepts (e) and telling their own stories (k) were seen by everyone else as essential, while recognizing basic sight words (f) was only viewed as a

little important. There were also three items on which only Dana and Tameka differed from the others: everyone but Dana and Taniqua viewed responding to stories by talking (i) and tell a story from pictures (l) as essential and separating words into sounds (o) as only a little important.

Descriptive statistics (namely means) were used in both the current study as well as the pilot study (Burgess, et. al., 2001) to demonstrate how much importance teachers give to particular types of knowledge or skill. In the pilot study, statements from this section of the PLPC factored onto three different subscales: alphabet knowledge, word and story knowledge, and verbal language. Disaggregating the subscales into their individual statements and means illuminates teachers' responses to individual ideas or concepts within the different subscales. Table 12 shows the three subscales (plus the one statement that did not factor onto any of the subscales), corresponding statements for each subscale, and the aggregate means for each statement from this study as well as from Burgess, et al. (2001). The alphabet knowledge subscale includes statements involving both letter and phoneme identification as well as name writing. The word and story knowledge subscale includes statements involving word recognition as well as the ability to write a story and identify elements of a story. The third subscale, verbal language, includes statements involving story-telling, self-expression, and vocabulary. The item that did not factor onto a subscale concerns print concepts, and a mean was not included for this statement in Burgess, et al. (2001).

The items that teachers rated the highest, or the most essential, were largely clustered on the verbal language subscale. Teachers seem to place high value on children's oral language abilities, including story telling (k; M=2.86) as well as responding orally to stories (i; M=2.75). Items outside of the verbal language subscale that were rated highly included understanding print concepts (e; M=2.88), identifying elements of a story (p; M=2.25), writing their own name g;

(M=2.375), and letter recognition (m; M=2.375). Although oral story telling was viewed as important, as noted above, the ability to write a story was seen as the least important (h; M=1), with sight word recognition (f; M=1.13), separating words into sounds (o; M=1.25), and writing letters or words (d; M=1.56) also seen as not very important. These lower valued items represent higher order skills within early literacy.

Table 12

Subscales, Affiliated Statements, and Corresponding Means on Section 1 of the PLPC

Subscale	How important is it to teach children to:	Present Study Mean	Pilot Study Mean
Alphabet knowledge	a. name letters	2.25	2.05
	b. say sounds of letters/letter combinations	2.34	1.60
	d. write letters or words	1.56	1.45
	g. write own name	2.375	2.18
	m. Recognize letters in text	2.375	1.80
Word and story knowledge	f. recognize basic sight words	1.13	1.25
	h. write a story	1	0.93
	n. recognize words in text	2	1.32
	o. separate words into sounds	1.25	0.90
	p. identify elements of a story	2.25	1.65
Verbal language	c. understand word meanings	2.25	2.27
	i. respond to stories orally	2.75	2.78
	j. relate experiences to those in a storybook	2.63	2.47
	k. tell their own stories	2.86	2.73
	l. tell a story from pictures	2.75	2.66
No category	e. understand concepts about print	2.88	Not included

Teachers view all of the aspects of literacy development as important, but to varying degrees. Table 13 presents the mean and range for each of the three subscales from the current study as well as from the pilot. As seen when looking at mean scores for individual statements, verbal language activities are seen as the most important (M=2.65) and also have the smallest range, while alphabet knowledge is seen as somewhat important (M=2.19) and word and story knowledge is seen as the least important (M=1.53). Composite means and ranges indicate that teachers see all of the literacy skills and types of knowledge included in this measure as

important, and the pattern demonstrated in this study is similar to that of the pilot, albeit with slightly higher means.

Table 13

Subscale Means and Ranges on Section 1 of PLPC

	Alphabet Knowledge		Word and Story Knowledge		Verbal Language	
	Mean	Range	Mean	Range	Mean	Range
Present Study	2.19	1.56-2.38	1.53	1-2.25	2.65	2.25-2.88
Burgess, et. al (2001)	1.82	1.45-2.18	1.21	0.90-1.65	2.582	2.27-2.78

The second section of the PLPC asks teachers about the amount of time they spend on certain literacy-related activities or areas of knowledge. Again using a four-point scale, with 0 representing “never”, one representing “a little”, two representing “some”, and three representing “a lot”, teachers indicated how much time they feel they spend on 19 different activities (see Table 14). Similar patterns emerged in the second section of the PLPC as were seen in the first section. Tameka again answered almost all items with the same number, reporting she spends “some” time on all activities except for dictating a story and then reading it aloud, on which she only spends “a little” time. This placed Tameka as an outlier on a few different items on which the other teachers had consensus: all of the other teachers reported spending a lot of time having children read or look at books independently (r) and listening to an adult read aloud (e).

Table 14*Individual Responses to the Preschool Literacy Practices Checklist, Section 2*

How much time do you spend having children:	Tameka	Margie	Angie	Rodrigo	Alison	Deborah	Cristina	Dana
a. Develop sight vocabulary	2	1	2	1	1	1	2	1
b. Name letters	2	3	3	3	1	3	3	3
c. Find letters in words	2	2	2	2	2	2	3	3
d. Sound out words	2	1	2	1	1	2	3	2
e. Listen to an adult read aloud	2	3	3	3	3	3	3	3
f. Draw pictures to illustrate a story	2	3	3	3	2	3	3	3
g. Draw pictures and then tell a story to go with the picture	2	3	3	3	2	3	3	3
h. Dictate a story and then read it aloud	1	2	2	0	2	2	2	3
i. Recite rhymes, songs, or poems	2	3	3	2	3	3	3	2
j. Act out events in a story they have heard	2	3	1	2	3	1	3	2
k. Retell a story	2	3	3	2	3	2	3	3
l. Discuss words' meanings	2	2	3	2	2	3	2	3
m. Compare words and word parts in printed words	2	1	2	1	1	3	2	1
n. Compare words and word parts in heard words	2	1	2	1	2	3	3	1
o. Categorize heard words based on sound patterns	2	0	2	2	2	2	3	2
p. Categorize printed words based on spelling patterns	2	0	2	1	1	1	2	1
q. Write letters or words	2	1	3	2	1	3	3	3
r. Read or look at books independently	2	3	3	3	3	3	3	3
s. Read aloud to an adult	2	1	2	1	1	1	2	3

3=A lot, 2=Some, 1=A little, 0=Never

In the pilot study (Burgess, et al, 2001), items from this section of the PLPC loaded onto four different factors or subscales: word study, alphabet knowledge, story, and interest/motivation. Five of the items did not factor onto any subscale. Word study includes a range of behaviors involving word meaning as well as comparing and categorizing written and heard words and word parts. Alphabet knowledge includes identifying, naming, and writing letters or words. Story includes activities that involve both drawing and dictating stories. The final subscale, motivation and interest, includes activities that Burgess, et al (2001) viewed as

“designed to promote children’s interest in and motivation for reading” (p. 9). Table 15 shows how statements loaded onto each subscale as well as the mean for those statements in the current study and in the pilot study (Burgess, et al., 2001).

Table 15

Subscales, Affiliated Statements, and Corresponding Means on Section 2 of the PLPC

Factor	Activities	Mean	Pilot Mean
Word Study	l. Discuss word meanings	2.375	1.93
	m. Compare words and word parts in printed words	1.625	.51
	n. Compare words and word parts in heard words	1.875	.89
	o. Categorize heard words based on sound patterns	1.875	.74
	p. Categorize printed words based on spelling patterns	1.25	.37
Alphabet Knowledge	b. Name letters	2.625	1.89
	c. Find letters in words	2.25	1.54
	q. Write letters or words	2.25	1.57
Story	f. Draw pictures to illustrate a story	2.75	2.22
	g. Draw pictures then tell a story	2.75	2.32
	h. Dictate a story then read it aloud	1.75	1.64
Interest and Motivation	e. Listen to an adult read aloud	2.875	2.90
	i. Recite rhymes, songs, and poems	2.625	2.92
	r. Read or look at books independently	2.875	2.81
Not Factored	a. Develop sight vocabulary	1.375	
	d. Sound out words	1.75	
	j. Act out events in a story they have heard	2.125	
	k. Retell a story	2.625	
	s. Read aloud to an adult	1.625	

Stories and books represent some of the activities on which teachers in both studies report spending the most time. In the present study, while the two highest rated items—listen to an adult read aloud (e) and read or look at books independently (r)—factored onto the interest and motivation subscale, they obviously involve interactions with books. Couple these with other highly rated items such as retell a story (k) and draw pictures to illustrate (f) or tell a story (g), and it is clear that teachers spend a lot of time on storytelling in one form or another in their classrooms. Burgess et al. (2001) also noted that they found less emphasis on writing in their

participants' classrooms. However, if you recognize drawing as a part of emergent writing (Byington & Kim, 2017; Puranik & Lonigan, 2011; Schickedanz & Collins, 2013), teachers in both studies reported spending time on activities that support writing development. Teachers also reported spending a lot of time naming letters (b), reciting songs, poems, and rhymes (i), and discussing word meanings (l). In both studies, the least amount of time is reportedly spent on skills involving sound and spelling patterns as well as word parts, which Burgess et al. (2001) note indicates "that phonological processing is not emphasized in these teachers' classroom, despite its important in early literacy development" (p. 13).

After considering means for participants and individual statements, Table 16 represents the means and ranges for the different subscales in both the present study as well as Burgess, et al. (2001). As is seen when considering the means of individual statements from both studies, the pattern for how teachers report spending their time is the same: the most time is spent on activities from the interest and motivation subscale, followed by story, alphabet knowledge, and finally, word study. In both studies, teachers varied the most in their reported time spent on word study activities and varied the least in the amount of time they reported spending on interest and motivation activities.

Table 16

Cross-Study Comparison of Subscale Means and Ranges on Section 2 of PLPC

	Word Study		Alphabet Knowledge		Story		Interest and Motivation	
	Mean	Range	Mean	Range	Mean	Range	Mean	Range
Present Study	1.8	1.25-2.375	2.375	2.25-2.625	2.417	1.75-2.75	2.792	2.625-2.875
Burgess, et. al (2001)	.888	0.37-1.93	1.667	1.54-1.89	2.06	1.64-2.32	2.877	2.81-2.92

Discussion

There was a high degree of consistency across the surveys, with the lowest scores reserved for code-related skills and higher order phonological skills involving deciphering sound and spelling patterns. On Part 2 of the PLPC, teachers were less likely to spend time on developing sight vocabulary and categorizing printed words based on spelling patterns. This echoed their responses to the first part of the PLPC, which concerned how important they thought certain activities were to teach children. Word recognition, whether as sight words or within text, and separating words into sounds, both of which can be categorized as code-related skills, were the only skills not viewed as essential by any of the teachers.

Outside of these specific skills, teachers reported spending time on a range of literacy activities and working with children to develop a variety of skills to support their emerging language and literacy understandings. The items teachers spent the most time on centered around interactions with and around books and story-telling, including the children having opportunities to draw pictures and tell their own stories, as well as developing vocabulary, letter knowledge, and engaging in playful activities with songs and rhymes in order to develop phonological awareness skills. These are consistent with teachers' beliefs as expressed on both the PLPC and the TBQ regarding what activities, behaviors, and skills are important for and supportive of children's early literacy development. Teachers believed children should have opportunities to look at books, share their ideas and feelings, draw and write, understand print concepts, broaden their vocabulary, play with words and rhyming, and tell stories. In addition, they also recognized that it is important to teach children to write their names and develop their alphabet knowledge, including understanding basic phonemic principles associated with letters and letter combinations.

The Quantitative/Qualitative Connection: Linking Survey Data to the Narratives

Employing multiple methods and triangulating the data help develop a deeper understanding of the early literacy beliefs and practices of the participating teachers (Turner, Cardinal, & Burton, 2017). While it is useful to understand, for instance, that teachers are overall more supportive of activities that develop oral language skills and vocabulary and less supportive of higher-order code-related skills and that this aligns with previous studies, having the qualitative data from the interviews and compiled in the narratives helps guide interpretation and provide deeper insight into what the numbers really mean.

As described earlier, the TBQ has been used in various studies, and the results have been explained in slightly different ways. Hindman and Wasik (2008) describe the results as indicative of teachers' alignment with ideas about best practice while Lynch and Owston (2015) interpret the results as degrees of certainty, meaning how confident teachers were that children learned in a particular way. On the TBQ, Tameka, Cristina, and Margie had the lowest overall means, which could mean they did not align with ideas about best practice and/or that they were less certain. In order to have a richer understanding of their beliefs and practice, it is helpful look at both surveys together and also turn to the qualitative data to decipher the meaning or intent behind their responses.

In her interviews, Cristina was confident and determined and had strong beliefs about the capabilities of all children, even when she said her colleagues sometimes criticized her for doing activities that were "too advanced." She also relied heavily on large group instruction, call and response, repetition, and, in her survey responses, was supportive of "plenty of drill and practice" as well as using worksheets. Her lower overall mean on the TBQ is therefore best understood as reflecting less alignment with traditional norms of best practice. Of course, a richer, more

nuanced understanding of what Cristina does and why is revealed in her interviews, and she describes herself exposing children to higher order literacy skills and repetitions because she has high expectations and views children as “sponges” who are often underestimated. She also understands not all children are in the same place or learn the same way, but they all benefit from rich and varied literacy experiences, ideas, and instruction. These beliefs are reflected in her PLPC responses. On part 1, she ranked print concepts, name writing, and various experiences with books and story-telling as essential, but all other skills were viewed as less important. Notably, she was the only teacher to respond that understanding word meaning and identifying elements of a story were only a little important. She also noted that writing letters and words, recognizing basic sight words, writing a story, and separating words into sounds were a little important. While Cristina had the lowest mean on part 1 of the PLPC and the second lowest on the TBQ, she had the highest mean on part 2 of the PLPC, which concerned time spent on various literacy activities. Literacy was an important part of Cristina’s curriculum, and this is reflected across both data sources.

In her interviews, Margie was reflective about her own teaching and clearly still exploring different activities and teaching styles. She questioned some of her decisions, such as using worksheets in the past or having an underused word wall in her classroom, and was open about her questioning. Margie only strongly agreed or disagreed with two statements—one concerning drawing and scribbling and their relationship with writing development and one concerning the importance of talking about ideas and feelings to learn language. Because of her lack of strong responses or beliefs, using Lynch and Owston’s (2015) interpretation regarding degree of certainty makes more sense for understanding Margie’s responses as her interviews reveal someone who is continually exploring, questioning, and growing in her own practice. She

has strong convictions across the two different surveys regarding children talking, drawing, listening to and telling stories, but she is less certain about code-related skills, in particular.

Rodrigo offers an interesting contrast to Margie that is apparent both in his narrative as well as in the quantitative data. While Margie was still working on exploring and determining what she wanted her practice to look like, Rodrigo was both less reflective and very clear and confident in his descriptions of his teaching. Rodrigo had the highest overall means on both the TBQ as well as part 1 of the PLPC, which asked participants to rank how important different skills are, which is reflective of his certainty and his alignment with best practices. In his descriptions of his literacy practices, Rodrigo discussed focusing on alphabet knowledge, oral language, vocabulary, and phonological awareness skills through a variety of activities, attempting to differentiate his instruction and provide children different entry points and opportunities to explore and play. Interestingly, Rodrigo had the lowest overall mean on the second part of the PLPC concerning how much time teachers spend on different literacy activities. In his interviews, Rodrigo described paying a lot of attention to literacy: introducing and reviewing the letter of the week and the sounds it makes during group time, moving to small group literacy activities, writing daily in journals, and doing phonological awareness activities three times a week. In his survey response, Rodrigo reported only spending a little bit of time on more complex literacy skills such as developing sight words and categorizing words based on patterns. He spent a lot of time on drawing, naming letters, and reading books, which is reflected in his interviews as well, thus demonstrating a high degree of alignment between the two different sources of data.

Angie, Alison, and Deborah were the most experienced teachers who participated in the study, and it is interesting to see the similarities and differences in their responses. The three of

them had high means on the TBQ, which can be interpreted as reflecting both their certainty as well as their alignment with (and knowledge of) best practices. This is understandable based upon their formal education background as well as their extensive experience as early childhood practitioners. Their responses diverge, however, on the PLPC, and their interviews illuminate some of the reasons for this. Most notably, Angie's score was higher on both sections of the PLPC, indicating that she placed more importance on teaching the skills and also spent more time on the range of literacy activities. When looked at in conjunction with her interviews, Angie felt like she was in an environment with high expectations and she had a lot of skills to help children master in 2 ½ days of school. Given that context, she described spending a lot of her day on literacy activities and her survey responses reflect this. On the other hand, Alison was a strong believer in developmentally appropriate practices and disagreed with many of the expectations that were placed upon prekindergarteners. She was the only person who said teaching children to write their own name was only a little important, and this was similarly expressed in her interviews, in which she described reluctantly focusing on name writing because she wanted her children to be prepared for kindergarten. Across the surveys and in her interviews, Alison emphasized story-telling, reading books, acting stories out, and playing with language and did not feel like she needed to place an inordinate emphasis on literacy skills, particularly higher order code-related skills. Deborah's means sit in the middle of the other two, and her interview responses were similarly a little more nuanced. Both reflect her love for play and exploration but also her desire to make sure children were confident and prepared for kindergarten expectations.

Tameka's responses offer an interesting comparison to Deborah, Alison, and Angie, in large part because she had the least formal education and the least experience as either a lead teacher or in early childhood. Tameka had the lowest mean on the TBQ and her responses

averaged to a neutral stance overall. On several items she was an outlier, most notably disagreeing that nursery rhymes help children learn ending sounds or that children should play with words to learn to hear ending sounds. Similar to Margie, Tameka never strongly agreed or disagreed with any of the statements, which can be interpreted as indicative of uncertainty. In her interviews, she expressed this uncertainty and even asked for ideas for activities. Tameka wanted to learn more about supporting early literacy development but lacked the opportunity. Possibly because of her lack of experience, Tameka responded on the TBQ that children need plenty of drill and practice to learn letters sounds, and she described didactic and drill-like activities in her teaching. On the other hand, Tameka circled 2 for almost every item on the PLPC, which presents a contrast with her interviews. In particular, Tameka did not describe doing the range of activities that she reported spending time on nor were some of those activities evident in her lesson plans. It is possible Tameka believed she should respond in a particular way because that was what she was expected to be doing, even if it is not an accurate reflection of her practice. Contrasting Tameka with Angie, Deborah, and Alison presents some insight into how formal education and experience might mitigate teachers' curriculum and instruction, which is in turn reflected in the surveys.

Like Tameka, Dana is one of the less experienced teachers. However, she has a degree in Early Childhood Education and was much more familiar with different terms and described a range of activities. Dana's responses on the surveys mirrored her descriptions of her practice in her interviews, in which she described encouraging children to play with language, have experiences with books, and developing phonological awareness. At the same time, other than Tameka and Cristina, Dana was the only teacher who did not disagree with whether or not children learn sounds through drill and practices. On all of the surveys, Dana's answers placed

her means consistently in the middle in terms of her beliefs as well as her self-reported time spent on different literacy activities. Interestingly, in her narrative, it is also clear that Dana's beliefs and practices also situated her in the middle of pedagogical approaches that are often viewed as existing in opposition to one another (Campbell, 2015; Wien, 1995). Both her survey responses and her narrative reflect someone who values a range of early literacy knowledge and skills and believes in incorporating both child-directed and explicit instruction in order to meet the needs of all children.

Conclusion

Viewed in isolation, the quantitative data are helpful in situating the participants in this study within a larger context, understanding how their beliefs and practices compare to respondents in other research studies. Combining the data from the surveys with the qualitative data collected in the interviews provides a check for consistency between the two sources but, more interestingly, supports a deeper exploration and interpretation of survey responses.

Chapter XIII: Comparative Analysis

The purpose of this study was to explore prekindergarten teacher's descriptions of their literacy practices as well as their beliefs about early literacy development and curriculum. As the field of early childhood education continues to be a focal point of education policy reform (Akaba, et al., 2020; Brown & Gasko, 2012; Brown & Lee, 2012; Scott-Little, Kagan, & Frelow, 2006), concerns about the state of early literacy education and a continual narrowing of the curriculum and skills that are emphasized have persisted for decades (McKenney & Bradley, 2016). Given the frequent omission of teachers' voices from early childhood research (Ryan & Goffin, 2008; Ryan, Ochsner, & Genishi, 2001), it is valuable to hear directly from teachers—the ones who are charged with putting different ideas from research and policy into practice—about what literacy looks like in their classrooms and how they perceive early literacy and changes in the field (Akaba, et. al, 2020; Brown & Lee, 2012).

Data Analysis

Commensurate with a focus on teacher voice, the intention of this study was to provide a platform for teachers to describe their experiences, beliefs, and teaching practices. This orientation led to data collection through interviews with prekindergarten teachers in Texas, and provided an opportunity to expand our understanding of early literacy teaching and learning. To develop this platform for story-telling, this study included multiple stages of data analysis. The first phase of analysis was the narrative portrait chapters that were developed for each individual teacher based upon interviews, survey data, and the various documents and materials the teachers chose to share. While a deep exploration of an individual's practice and beliefs has merit on its own, it is also enlightening to make connections across the teachers' stories through the development of qualitative themes, which framed the next phase, this comparative analysis. The

research questions and theoretical framework that guided data collection provided a foundation for external codes (Brown, 2009; Brown & Lee, 2012), while internal codes (Brown, 2009; Brown & Lee, 2012) were derived, revised, and refined from an immersion in the data and multiple readings, re-readings, and note-taking based upon the interviews (see also Friesen & Butera, 2012). A “research text” (Brown & Lee, 2012, p. 330), or system of outlining data into themes using quotes from interviews and other supporting data, was created, and it included information about individual teachers as well as connections between teachers and potential supporting literature sources. These notes were then used to create this interpretive presentation of the data.

The following section provides a brief description of the teachers and their schools in order to provide some contextual information for the ways in which teachers discussed factors that influenced their teaching and curriculum.

Overview of Participants

Eight teachers from a major metropolitan area in Texas participated in this study, including two Head Start teachers (Cristina and Dana), three public pre-k teachers (Alison, Rodrigo, and Deborah), and three teachers working for private programs (Angie, Margie, and Tameka). Teachers were selected not only based upon the type of program setting in which they worked but also to represent different school community factors as well as different teacher characteristics such as gender, race, ethnicity, and number of years of experience.

Intentionally including these different personal and community factors meant that same program types were not homogenous and were dealing with different contextual systems. The teachers in the privately funded programs included: Angie, who was a teacher at a church preschool that served predominantly white, middle class children and families; Margie, who

worked for a school specifically for the children of the local school district employees, who were predominantly white; and Tameka, who taught at a non-profit school operated primarily by The United Way whose students were predominantly Black and from economically disadvantaged families. Both Margie and Angie's schools were NAEYC-accredited, something which they both viewed as reflective of the quality of their programs. The teachers in the public district pre-k's included: Alison, whose classroom was both an English as a Second Language (ESL) and inclusive classroom at the same school where Cristina taught, where 93% of the students were "economically disadvantaged" and were 16% white, 21% African American, and 57% Hispanic; Deborah, who taught in a predominately white, wealthy suburban community where fewer than two percent of students were classified as "economically disadvantaged;" and Rodrigo, who worked in a school where 86% of the children were classified as "economically disadvantaged" and 89% were Hispanic. Cristina worked in the same school as Alison but her students were part of the Head Start program rather than the district, and Dana worked for a center that included children in Head Start as well as children enrolled in childcare. Alison and Deborah both had inclusive classrooms that included children with special needs, and Margie's class was joined for part of the day by a group of children in the Preschool Program for Children with Disabilities (PPCD). Tameka is Black; Rodrigo and Cristina are both Hispanic native Spanish speakers and bilingual education teachers; and Dana, Margie, Angie, Alison, and Deborah are white. Deborah had the most teaching experience with 26 years in the classroom; Angie had 18; Alison was in her 12th year; Cristina was in her 7th year; Rodrigo was in his 6th year; Margie was in her 3rd year of teaching but had 17 years in early childhood education; Tameka had 20 years in education, primarily as an aide, and was in her third year of teaching pre-k; and Dana was in her third year teaching pre-k. These overlapping similarities and differences created a web of shared

experiences, goals, concerns, and influences as well as a variety of policies and stakeholder expectations.

Factors That Influence Teachers' Practices

One of the intentions of this study was to investigate the factors teachers describe as influencing their literacy practices. Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological theory was used as a framework for understanding the impact of different spheres of influence within which teachers function and the ways in which context influences their thinking about early literacy and early literacy instruction (Matsumoto & Tsuneda, 2019). The following influencing factors will be discussed: microsystem—parents, teaching colleagues, administrators, and specialists; exosystem—policies, early learning standards, conceptions of readiness, curriculum, and assessments; and macrosystem—how teachers discussed broader cultural concerns, particularly around race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic class.

The Influence of Members of the Microsystem

The microsystem includes people and specific role-players, such as colleagues, administrators, parents, and children, who are all part of the teachers' immediate environment. Overall, teachers did not perceive members of the microsystem as having a direct or significant influence on their teaching practices or their beliefs about early literacy learning and instruction.

District and School Administration. Administrators, including principals, directors, and district personnel, were viewed as largely uninvolved in pedagogical or day-to-day decisions that directly impacted children, such as selection of specific literacy-related activities, or as having any influence on the teachers' beliefs or teaching. Instead, administrators were discussed as an outside factor, primarily making decisions about what curricula had to be used, selecting the weekly or monthly themes for the school year, and influential in how the amount of direct

support they did or did not provide impacted the school culture and confidence in managing and meeting requirements.

Viewing administrators as an outside factor meant in many ways teachers felt like they had a high degree of autonomy in making decisions about activities and pedagogy within a provided framework of expectations. Alison, for example, was grateful for the degree of latitude she felt her principal gave her in terms of choosing what and how to teach because she believed it allowed her to create a developmentally and individually appropriate, child-focused approach within the confines of the need to meet specific early learning standards. Cristina, who taught at the same school as Alison, had a less positive view of this hands-off approach and felt that a culture of too much autonomy was overwhelming, particularly for less experienced teachers. The lack of a specific and clear framework left newer teachers feeling stressed by requirements such as the number of assessments to administer, frustration and uncertainty over developing lesson plans and feeling unsupported, and this all created a lack of cohesive pedagogical approaches and learning quality across classrooms. Teachers with more experience and knowledge were able to figure out ways to manage requirements and meet goals and expectations while less experienced teachers struggled with putting together a well-planned and cohesive learning plan that would address literacy expectations. Margie and Rodrigo reflected on this concern based on their own personal experiences as new pre-k teachers, acknowledging that early in their teaching careers, a clear framework, including specific activities and expectations, was extremely beneficial. As they became more experienced, they felt more comfortable deviating from the curricular framework and incorporating other activities and ideas that they believed were more supportive of children's literacy development.

Tameka was the only teacher whose administrator was directly involved in all of the decision-making, including choosing activities as well as books to read rather than trusting Tameka with those decisions. Rather than finding comfort and stability because she had more support and fewer decisions to make on her own, the lack of personal authority was a source of frustration for Tameka as she believed teachers should be the decision-makers given that they are the ones who are in the classroom with the children. Without stating it directly, Tameka appeared to resent the tight control the assistant director had over her teaching, and she was eager to have more independence over activities and materials.

Other Teachers and Specialists. Despite the fact that research often indicates the value of a collaborative culture and social learning community to the development of teachers' professional knowledge as well as creating a positive school culture (Gomez, Kagan, & Fox, 2015; Hopkins & Spillane, 2014), colleagues and co-teachers were also primarily viewed as having little influence over teachers' literacy practices and beliefs. Tameka was the only pre-k teacher at her school and never collaborated with any of her colleagues, leaving her isolated and without some of the critical supports that can be found in a more social teaching environment (Ingersoll & Strong, 2011). Teachers who had been in the field longer, including Deborah, Angie, and Alison, were viewed by themselves and colleagues as more experienced, often finding themselves sharing ideas in a mentor role rather than gaining ideas from their colleagues. Teachers noted that their schools provided few opportunities for collaboration amongst teachers, and formally scheduled meetings were often reduced to focusing on administrative issues and requirements rather than collaboration or discussions about students or instructional activities. Any collaboration or discussion about teaching often occurred in informal moments, such as

stopping by a classroom at the end of the day (see Wells, 2017), and Cristina, for one, was actively seeking to change this aspect of the school culture.

Angie and Rodrigo, in contrast, had ample opportunities for shared planning with colleagues, but had different experiences with how this impacted their literacy beliefs and practices. Angie's school had recently undergone an administrative change and there was a renewed focus on community and collaboration. The pre-k team planned lessons together and developed literacy goals as a team, but perhaps because she was the team leader, Angie still maintained this had little influence on her own teaching. For Rodrigo, colleagues and mentors were actually a tremendous source of ideas and support, particularly when he first began teaching. Rodrigo had a mentor his first year and was given the opportunity not only to be observed and receive feedback from his mentor, but also to observe her in her classroom. Rodrigo and the pre-k and kindergarten teachers tried to take time for quick, informal observations in each other's classrooms, and he really felt like this had a significant influence on his literacy practice as he tried to implement different activities and approaches to instruction, blending them in with his own approach.

The most beneficial collegiate relationships seemed to come from co-teachers in inclusive classrooms or from reaching out to specialists, such as speech and occupational therapists, for ideas about how to support language and literacy development. Margie, in particular, believed that her co-teacher had had a tremendous impact on her thinking about literacy and helping her incorporate more child-centered and process-oriented activities. Dana would frequently seek out specialists at her school for advice about how to help with, for example, the oral language development of children with speech delays as well as ways to support emergent writing with children with motor delays and difficulties.

Parent Involvement and Influence. Strong partnerships with parents and families and a high degree of parent involvement are often associated with improved kindergarten readiness and school-related outcomes (Cooper, et al., 2010; Wesley & Buysse, 2003). Teachers in this study had varied relationships and experiences with parent expectations but only two teachers, Angie and Margie, made any adjustments to their literacy teaching to accommodate parent input and goals. Angie and Margie both worked with the children of middle and upper-middle class, college-educated families who had very clear expectations about their children's academic achievement (Makin & McNaught, 2001; Stull, 2013; Tyre, 2006). Both teachers observed that the more familiarity parents had with what children would be expected to know and do in elementary school—either because they had older children and/or were employed by the school district—the higher the parents' expectations were. Angie believed that if parents had a particular goal or expectation for their children, then it was the teacher's responsibility to teach it. Margie firmly believed in meeting children where they are, but the pressure from parents made her feel like she needed to continuously demonstrate to parents what their children were learning to do by incorporating more structured and skills-focused activities (see Campbell, 2015). This led Margie to continue to use worksheets with children even though she was conflicted and was trying to move away from product-oriented activities.

Several of the teachers felt like they had a unidirectional relationship with parents in which it was their responsibility as the teacher to help educate parents about ways to be involved and supportive of their children's literacy development (Campbell, 2015). This was particularly true for teachers who worked with children and families from a lower socioeconomic group. Alison, Cristina, and Rodrigo sent home activities and talked to parents about appropriate expectations for their children and different ways they could support language and literacy

learning. Cristina took it a step further and met monthly with parents to discuss curriculum and the home-school connection. While parents in all of these classrooms had literacy goals for their children, Alison, Cristina, and Rodrigo felt they needed to help parents understand what they could do at home and how they could be involved in their children's education.

Influential Factors Within the Exosystem

Components of the exosystem were conceptualized by Bronfenbrenner as forces that an individual does not experience directly but are still influential. In this study, exosystem factors had the biggest impact on teachers, directly shaping not only literacy goals but also the content of lesson plans and activities as well as pedagogical approaches. They include: early learning standards, time, curriculum, professional concepts such as developmentally appropriate practice (NAEYC, 2022), assessment and assessment tools (Matsumoto & Tsuneda, 2019), and the coordination (or lack thereof) amongst different systems.

Early Learning Standards. Neither Margie nor Tameka, both of whom worked in private settings, were required to address any standards or expectations and, in fact, neither of them were familiar with the standards, leaving them to determine their own literacy goals and content. While Angie also worked in a private setting, her program had opted to use the state standards as a framework, listing them on report cards to help keep them heading in a consistent direction and monitoring children's progression toward meeting expectations. Angie consistently described her school as highly academic and needing to address the high expectations of the upper middle-class families who were part of their school community, and incorporating the standards was one way in which they helped maintain some focus and rigor in order to ensure they were following state expectations for preparing children for the academic aspects of kindergarten.

For teachers in Head Start and public school prekindergarten programs, the standards were not optional, and they discussed standards as a strongly influential factor in determining literacy goals and expectations and sometimes how they taught early literacy concepts. The Texas Pre-K Guidelines place heavy emphasis on early literacy skills, and this resulted in teachers dedicating each day to explicitly focus on a range of literacy skills such as alphabet knowledge and phonological awareness. Overall, the teachers viewed the guidelines as a useful framework and a realistic set of goals for the children. However, they all acknowledged that they did not expect every child to reach every benchmark and that they adjusted their goals and expectations for individual children. Standards are a uniform set of expectations for all students, and this becomes complicated when they are being imposed upon an increasingly diverse student population (Brown & Lee, 2012; Genishi & Dyson, 2009). Alison, in particular, felt a tension between the standards and what she thought was appropriate for the children in her class, and she found herself working to determine when she needed to acquiesce to requirements and when she could find creative ways to integrate them into her curriculum in individually and developmentally appropriate ways (Akaba, et al., 2020; Goldstein, 2007). All of the teachers described themselves as working to help children progress toward the expectations laid out in the standards while recognizing that they were not achievable for every student because children are individuals with different knowledge, interests, and experiences.

Time Restrictions. One of the challenges that grew out of the many expectations and goals that standards imposed upon teachers concerned the amount of time teachers had to cover everything they were trying to. Teachers expressed frustration that restrictions on time, particularly due to assessments and the volume of material that needed to be covered, impaired their abilities to individualize instruction. Time was an extra factor that impacted Angie and

Alison's teaching because neither one of them had students all day, five days a week. Alison had two half-day classes of over 20 children and Angie's students only had two regular school days each week. In an educational context that places extensive demands on teachers' time in an era of increased accountability, this is exacerbated for teachers in half-day and part-time programs as they have less instructional time to try to reach the same standards and expectations (Gallant, 2009).

Assessments. Assessment of children's language and literacy skills can drive curricular content and help teachers differentiate instruction (Piasta, 2014), but it can also become something that consumes a significant amount of time and becomes a source of frustration for teachers (Akaba, et al., 2020). Time continued to be an impactful factor for teachers when it came to testing as scheduling time to sit down and assess children sometimes became a source of stress and frustration. Because of the high volume of tests required, teachers admitted that sometimes they and other teachers would either resort to testing children in small groups or even fill them out independently based on what they had observed children doing. This accommodation was viewed as necessary by the teachers, particularly those who had testing requirements for each 6-week grading period, and participants noted that they felt the issue of time made frequent assessment requirements even more overwhelming for less experienced teachers.

Whether due to high parental expectations or accountability structures put into place by an inchoate policy structure in early childhood education, teachers were faced with a proliferation of assessment measures intended to hold teachers and programs accountable for ensuring children enter kindergarten with a particular set of skills (Brown & Gasko, 2012; Brown & Lee, 2012; Cochran-Smith, 2003; Genishi & Dyson, 2009; Kagan & Scott-Little,

2004). All of the teachers in the Head Start and public school settings were required to administer multiple literacy assessments throughout the year both as a fulfillment of a requirement as well as a means of checking children's knowledge of concepts such as letter identification and phonemic awareness, and Cristina, who worked in a Head Start classroom in a public school, was required to administer the tests for both programs. Early literacy knowledge, particularly alphabet knowledge, was the one common area of assessment across all of the participants, reflecting the emphasis that schools, communities, and states place on the importance of early literacy skills.

Several of the teachers acknowledged that testing can provide valuable information, with Rodrigo even noting that children need to be "held accountable," but they also were concerned that the testing directs teachers toward focusing more exclusively on the achievement of discrete skills that are needed to "pass the tests," which can lead teachers to neglect other areas that are not tested such as art, music, social emotional development, and physical development. An additional concern about assessment was the validity of the measures used and how well they actually represented what children knew and were able to do. Teachers who felt that standardized assessments offered an incomplete picture of children's abilities would often supplement with anecdotal records and observational data to offer a more complete picture. Teachers felt pressured to improve their students' test performance, and the need to strive for achievement of certain constrained skills sometimes led them away from what they viewed as more developmentally appropriate practices as well as stealing time away from opportunities to play and explore. When children's learning goals are framed by a series of assessments, it has the potential to limit both the content and style of teaching while also reducing the decision-making power of teachers in their own classrooms (Brown & Lee, 2012; Goldstein, 2007; Hatch, 2002;

Matsumoto & Tsuneda, 2019). The sheer volume and repetitive nature of assessments some of the teachers had to do turned them from a tool that teachers believed could potentially enhance teaching and learning to something that lost meaning and became a cumbersome requirement.

Lack of Coordination Amongst Policies and Systems. One of the primary concerns for teachers in Head Start and public programs concerned the enormous amount of required assessments due to a failure to streamline and coordinate requirements, a consequence of the assertion that “the early childhood field in the United States is underdeveloped and disorganized” (Kagan, 2020, p. 9). When programs collaborate, such as Cristina’s situation as a Head Start teacher in a public school, the lack of coordination amongst programs multiplies the amount of assessments and resulted in what Cristina described as a significant amount of redundancy. In one six-week period alone, Cristina had six different assessments that were required for each child. The failure to streamline and coordinate requirements created a significant amount of paperwork and detracted from teachers’ ability to spend time with children engaged in more meaningful activities. In addition to the volume of assessments, a failure to coordinate between programs also at times led to a direct contradiction, particularly between Head Start activities and requirements and those of the Dual Language program, and Cristina would have to find a way to navigate the different expectations.

Curriculum. Curriculum is frequently cited as a key factor in providing a high quality early childhood education experience (Reid & Kagan, 2022), and it naturally had a significant influence over the literacy content in each of the teacher’s classrooms as the activities within them provided the foundation for literacy activities and materials. Curriculum decisions were made for all of the teachers by administrators at their schools, and Head Start and public prekindergarten teachers were required to use the Texas State Board of Education approved list

of curricula that have been selected based on their alignment with the early learning standards. The Head Start and public prekindergarten teachers all had at least one state-approved packaged curriculum that was purchased and supplied by their school, with many of them integrating prior required curricula or otherwise available resources into the latest one.

Previous research has addressed the possibility that teachers may view required curricula as limiting their decision making opportunities (Sverdlov, Aram, & Levin, 2014). For most of the teachers, however, curricula were supplied but strict adherence was not required, providing them with a degree of flexibility and autonomy to make a lot of their own decisions about what to teach and how while using the curriculum as a resource. The fact that the supplied curricula were clearly aligned with early learning standards helped remove some of the guesswork for teachers when they made decisions about what activities and materials they could use to help meet the expectations. One of the challenges that arose for teachers occurred when their schools selected a new curriculum for teachers to use. Teachers viewed this as creating more work for them, and they found it difficult at times to adjust and incorporate a new curriculum while other times they frankly disliked the materials they were now being provided. While they tried to incorporate new activities, they often preferred to use the old curriculum and literacy activities that they believed they and the children enjoyed and learned from. This would seemingly indicate that it is not necessarily that different curricula are entirely “bad,” but rather that teachers find the introduction of new materials disruptive and not necessarily a helpful resource. Teachers particularly dislike materials that they viewed as too structured, overly-simplistic, and “one-dimensional,” underestimating what young children are capable of and using “boring” books and materials. They acknowledged, however, that a more structured and prescriptive curriculum is beneficial for less experienced teachers (Campbell, Torr, & Cologon, 2012). The accumulation

of experience enables teachers to experiment with different activities and approaches, ultimately employing multiple literacy activities to help teach the same concept, such as phonological awareness, to a diverse group of children with different needs, values, background knowledge, and experiences. Many of the teachers discussed the ways in which they adapted curriculum activities to meet the needs of individual children or deviated entirely when the children seemed uninterested or unengaged.

The Macrosystem: How Cultural Issues Impacted Teachers

The macrosystem is the largest context within Bronfenbrenner's theory and includes people in a society who share broader cultural values, beliefs, and practices. More nuanced and unique values and beliefs of different racial, ethnic, socioeconomic, or even regional groups can also be considered separate macrosystems within a society given that they may have their own sense of a shared identity (Tudge, Merçon-Vargas, Liang, & Tudge, 2017). The concept of shared values and identities is, of course, based on broad generalizations, and it is important to note that there are no monolithic groups and that all people "bring multiple social identities" (Bryan & Jett, 2018, p. 100) with them to any situation or context.

As Sandvik, van Daal, and Adér (2014) note, "Preschool teachers' beliefs about emergent literacy are largely influenced by culture" (p. 31). Teachers' conceptions of children's current and future needs reflected a deep desire to provide a safe learning environment and a strong educational foundation to support children's future academic success, although they also seemed at times to reflect deficit conceptions of children from historically marginalized groups, many of whom are often deemed "at risk." Dana, for example, mentioned that she felt she needed to have a strong emphasis on vocabulary in her classroom because the children at her school were not

exposed to a large and varied amount of words in their homes, an assumption seemingly based upon cultural deprivation paradigms.

Tameka also had significant concerns about how to help her children succeed in a culture defined not only by different values, but she also had a particular understanding of a need for her children to adapt their language to fit in with more “mainstream” language expectations.

Tameka’s personal beliefs as reflected in both her interviews and her questionnaire responses, were that, while hands-on learning had value, her school needed more explicit language and literacy instruction to overcome what she viewed as the negative impacts of poverty, including the predominance of what she called “street talk” versus “correct English” (Whittingham, Hoffman, & Rumenapp, 2018). She contrasted the type of language that was appropriate for home and the type of language that was expected in classrooms, and as a consequence, she tried to find ways to weave in explicit skills, language corrections, conversational expectations, and didactic instruction to guide them toward using Dominant American English in order to, in her view, improve their chances of future academic and economic success (Whittingham, Hoffman, & Rumenapp, 2018).

In fact, the ways in which the teachers discussed and conceptualized their children’s future prospects were at times correlated with broader assumptions that exist in the United States. Teachers of students from higher economic classes felt the need to have more academic rigor and ensure that students had a strong foundation, knowing that the children of these families were expected to perform at a high level in school as they moved forward. Cristina, on the other hand, felt that it was her responsibility to educate parents and children in her Head Start classroom and help them understand that they could defy the low expectations they might have based on their ethnicity and social class, emphasizing that her students could “be so much more”

than housekeepers, for example. Cristina herself had high expectations for her students and sought to counter dominant narratives that exist for children with linguistic differences from non-white, economically disadvantaged backgrounds. Whether they internalized or sought to refute dominant cultural values and narratives, teachers' goals and expectations for the children in their classrooms were impacted by this broader system.

Teachers' Descriptions of Literacy Practices

Given the influence of the different systems, their components, and the values that they reflect, the pedagogical approaches used and the different activities teachers described are indicative of the influence of different factors.

Instruction

Considering contextual influences as well as individual teacher decision-making can often mean that "early reading instruction can vary significantly across early childhood settings, even in cases where the same curriculum or resources are present" (Friesen & Butera, 2012, p. 361). All teachers, however, used similar instructional approaches but in different ways and to varying degrees, adjusting their pedagogy as they accommodated to various requirements. While they all professed to support hands-on learning and believe that engaged exploration was the best way for young children to learn, in reality all of the teachers also used more teacher-directed activities and approaches to address literacy concepts, particularly for code-related skills. All of the teachers described instructional moments in their own teaching that reduced children's participation in their own literacy learning to "mimicking, reciting, and repeating" (Neuman, 2006, p. 31), but they also to varying degrees discussed the importance of play, self-expression, and exploration. Teacher-directed, repetitive, and drill-and-skill type lessons typically involved activities that emphasized constrained skills such as letter names, phonemes, and spelling rules,

as opposed to unconstrained skills such as vocabulary, grammar, background knowledge, and conversation skills (Snow & Matthews, 2016).

Small groups were a common technique used by teachers for literacy instruction, and working in small groups allowed teachers to further individualize instruction while focusing on specific curricular content. Teachers typically created their small groups intentionally using ability grouping, based upon early literacy assessments of skills such as alphabet knowledge. Alison, however, actively resisted tracking her students in this way and instead created groups that included children with disabilities, English language learners, and children who were not deemed to have any special needs or differences. Angie, under extreme time constraints and high academic expectations, ability grouped her students not only to individualize instruction but it also was seemingly an efficient approach to instruction. Unique to Angie was the fact that she and the other pre-k classrooms would combine their children based upon their literacy knowledge—having a high, medium, and low group—and also do some larger group instruction, demonstrating how they adapted their instruction based upon the influence of time and expectations.

Research often suggests that immigrant children from a Latinx background are “experiencing a disproportionate amount of strict teaching and learning environments in which children have little or no influence over how and/or what they learn” (Colegrove & Adair, 2014, p. 122; see also Reid & Kagan, 2022). However, in this study, it seems that teachers across settings and systems used similar pedagogical approaches and that the classrooms that served Latinx children, namely Rodrigo and Cristina’s, did not have instructional approaches that were more or less strict or teacher-driven than other classrooms. Rodrigo, in fact, stood out from the other teachers in how he viewed his role during small groups. Rather than using them as an

opportunity for direct instruction, Rodrigo viewed his role during this time as a facilitator, asking questions and guiding children as he scaffolded his support based upon their needs. Both Rodrigo and Cristina valued the importance of a vibrant and engaging social learning environment, and Cristina's use of bilingual partners was a decidedly social approach to instruction that relied heavily upon a dynamic of using peers as partners in learning. Education in the United States is traditionally conceived of as reflecting an emphasis on the individual, and this communal approach to learning instead reflects a style that "elevate[s] the communal obligations and activities that shape learning in Black, Latinx, and Asian communities" (Reid & Kagan, 2022, p.53). Cristina's choice positioned all of the children simultaneously as experts and learners while also empowering the children and giving them a degree of agency in their own learning (Colegrove & Adair, 2014). In these classrooms, speaking a language other than English was not viewed as a deficit but rather an important part of their identities as learners, and children were developing literacy knowledge and skills in their home language.

Alison actively resisted the image of children from traditionally marginalized communities being subjected to less engaging and meaningful learning in favor of more strict and didactic pedagogical approaches. Alison taught children from "economically disadvantaged" backgrounds but refused to incorporate more drill-like activities, particularly in reference to phonological awareness, which some argue needs to be taught through explicit instruction (Skibbe, et al., 2016). Alison rejected the flash cards she was supposed to use with the supplied curriculum, opting for a more child-centered and playful approach to learning concepts of phonological awareness through songs, games, and rhymes. Alison's professional socialization emphasized developmentally appropriate practice, and, while it is understood that traditional descriptions of development have limited application due to the fact that they were normalized

on both Western and White middle-class populations (Love & Hancock, 2022; Reid, Kagan, & Scott-Little, 2019), for Alison this perspective generally translated less into beliefs about “typical” developmental trajectories and was more about placing children and their individual needs first.

This presents an interesting contrast with Tameka, who was very much in favor of flash cards and more strict and didactic teaching. Oftentimes curriculum and teaching in under-resourced communities are depicted as more didactic, less child-driven, with a heavy emphasis on code-based skills and less reliance on developmentally appropriate practices (Colegrove & Adair, 2014; Kirp, 2007; Reid, & Kagan, 2022; Riley-Ayers & Figueras-Daniel, 2018; Snow & Matthews, 2016; Walter & Lippard, 2017). Taking this approach with the intention of leveling the playing field can be seen as ironic given that “[s]kill-and-drill isn’t how middle-class children got their edge, as [Deborah] Stipek points out: ‘Why use a strategy to help poor kids catch up that didn’t help middle-class kids in the first place?’” (Kirp, 2007, p. 9). A counterpoint to this, however, is the possibility that teachers like Tameka who work with children of color in under-resourced communities do not believe that the “good liberal intentions” (Delpit, 1995, p. 45) behind progressive ideologies provide sufficient preparation and access to knowledge bases needed to ensure the future success of their students (Wien, 2004).

Ultimately, the picture that emerges from the teachers’ own descriptions of their literacy instruction is that they all worked to accommodate different contextual variables and incorporated instructional techniques and varied opportunities for emergent literacy to develop using both child-centered and teacher-directed approaches.

Literacy Activities

Individual literacy activities are described in greater depth in teachers' narrative portraits, which serve as phase one of data analysis, so the intention here is to highlight commonalities. While every early childhood classroom is unique—even in cases where teachers are required to use a prescriptive curriculum—, there was a considerable degree of overlap of literacy activities used by the teachers in this study.

For all of the teachers, a “letter of the week” or “focus letter” was at the center of each week's activities, and teachers used this as a launching point for letter identification, phonemic awareness, vocabulary, phonological awareness, and writing activities. Throughout the week, teachers would introduce and review letter sounds (phonemes) in conjunction with letter of the week activities. All of the teachers considered alphabet knowledge to be a key aspect of early literacy development in pre-k, and this was the most common area of literacy for which they all described a multitude of activities. Their opinions were more mixed, however, when it came to phonological awareness. Several teachers acknowledged that if phonological awareness was not included in the state early learning standards, they would not necessarily dedicate time to working explicitly on syllabication, rhyming, and onset and rime to the extent that they did. Some of the teachers considered phonological awareness a more advanced skill and, while they would introduce aspects of phonological awareness such as syllabication and onset/rime, they did not heavily emphasize it nor expect children to exhibit mastery. However, while they stated they did not do much to support this area of literacy, in actuality, descriptions in interviews as well as responses to the survey indicated that teachers regularly incorporated songs and rhyming into their activities, perhaps indicating that they had not made the connection between these activities and the concept of phonological awareness.

Books and stories were a part of every teacher's daily routine, with teachers viewing reading books together as opportunities to expand children's vocabulary, teach print concepts, develop sight words, and make connections (Lipsky, 2013). Teachers expanded upon book reading in different ways, sending books home to encourage parents to read with their children and making books in class, typically connected to the theme or letter of the week. Children were also encouraged to act out stories, and one teacher, Dana, described how at the end of the year she would stop reading before a book was finished and encourage the children to create their own ending.

While reading is often the focus of discussions surrounding early literacy and writing is viewed as underrepresented in early childhood classrooms (Gerde, Bingham, & Wasik, 2012), writing was actually well represented across all eight classrooms in ways that focused both on the mechanical and procedural conventions of written language as well as the ways in which writing can be used to meaningfully convey ideas (Gerde, et al., 2019; Puranik & Lonigan, 2011). All of the teachers recognized an emergent writing process and their descriptions of writing talked about various elements including drawing, dictation, tracing over letters, copying what the teacher wrote, "sounding out," and invented spelling. Journals were regularly used by all but one teacher, and activities ranged from completely open-ended to teacher-directed prompts focusing on letter of the week practice.

Oral language activities were in some ways one of the more difficult areas for teachers to discuss because they viewed it as something basic and obvious that children were always engaging in and developing throughout the day. All teachers mentioned oral language opportunities by emphasizing how much conversation occurred throughout the day, including between teachers and children as well as peer-to-peer. Other than including vocabulary in their

lesson plans, most opportunities and activities that support language development were seen as unplanned and child-driven because children are listening, playing, and talking all day. Teachers who taught English language learners and/or children with disabilities seemed to be particularly aware of the importance of supporting oral language development in more intentional ways.

Shifts Over Time

Several of the teachers discussed how the activities that they do with their children and the standards they are expected to meet reflect a push-down of expectations from the higher grades (Akaba, et al., 2020; Gallant, 2009; Goldstein, 2007; Graue, 1992; Hatch, 2002; Wesley & Boyse, 2003). They all believed that children in prekindergarten were now expected to know more academic content than they did either in the teachers' own personal childhoods or over the duration of their own teaching careers. Some of the teachers were aware of broader concerns about pushing children too hard, but did not necessarily view a pushdown of expectations as a negative. In fact, three of the teachers who worked in lower socioeconomic communities—Rodrigo, Cristina, and Tameka—continued to counter a narrative of low expectations for these children, believing instead that young children are highly capable of doing more than what is typically expected of them.

As expected, teachers who had been in the field longer were more likely to believe that prekindergarten had changed during their careers, and they discussed how the pushdown was impacting their teaching. Concerns with the changes they were seeing centered around both content as well as the ways in which an increased emphasis on academic content limited teachers' flexibility and infringed upon the amount of time teachers were able to dedicate to other disciplines including art, science, or music. They were concerned that the increased attention, particularly to early literacy was impinging upon their ability to provide a more holistic

and well-rounded classroom environment. Teachers worried that children had less time for play and teachers were having to focus more of their efforts on meeting state-mandated expectations due to the pressure of academic expectations being pushed down into pre-k. They believed that part of the explanation for expectations being pushed down is the testing culture that exists in elementary school, causing a trickle-down to pre-k as each grade wants to ensure that students successfully pass state tests.

Teacher Beliefs About Literacy Development and Curriculum

While not always completely unified, teachers shared similar beliefs about early literacy development and the pedagogical approaches that support children's learning. Each of the teachers advocated for the importance of hands-on learning, seeing children as active participants who needed opportunities to have fun, play, explore, talk, and ask questions. Teachers did not believe their role was to lecture children, and they believed play and exploration provided legitimate support for early literacy skills. Every one of the teachers discussed how children are unique and that instruction should be individualized and differentiated as much as possible to help children develop their language and literacy knowledge and skills. Teachers also shared a belief that code-related skills need to be included as part of a robust early literacy program, but they did not believe that the only way to teach those skills was through explicit, formal instruction (Campbell, 2018).

In fact, teachers often described their role in all areas of children's literacy learning as a facilitator or guide. Teachers served in this role by observing children and adjusting their expectations and goals based on what they heard and saw children doing. They also would play with children, scaffolding their oral language skills and vocabulary through conversations. Several teachers described themselves as striving to balance direct instruction with opportunities

for children to play and explore in a carefully thought-out classroom with supportive materials and activities. Teachers would employ multiple strategies to support children's language and literacy development, including scaffolding, repetition, and modeling while also recognizing the development and learning that occurs during child-initiated activities.

Teachers had broad conceptualizations of literacy, viewing it as integral to all learning and having roots in language. They also had specific literacy goals for students, which were frequently aligned with standards. While Tameka's stated goal was for children to be able to read, most of the teachers' goals included more foundational skills that are typically believed to support the development of readers and writers. Teachers had goals for alphabet knowledge, print concepts, phonological awareness, oral language, and vocabulary, and, with the exception of Alison, they believed that the goals they had were aligned with the expectations set within early learning standards. Sometimes their goals exceeded the state standards, such as when they expected children to know all letter names and sounds by the end of the year, which was not a goal within any of the standards. Teachers also expected children to be able to write at least their first name, motivated largely by their conceptions of what was required for kindergarten readiness and motivated to make sure their children felt confident and prepared. Teachers had high goals and expectations for children's potential, regardless of whether they served more marginalized communities or communities with high expectations for academic success, such as those that served predominantly white children from high income families.

Writing was an area of literacy where all of the teachers had a shared belief regarding an emergent process that occurs along a developmental trajectory, and they supported writing in its different forms. Writing was viewed as a process requiring fine motor skill development and evolving from drawings to "scribble" to invented spelling to sounding words out, and teachers

supported children's writing through both planned activities such as journals and practicing writing letters as well as more child-driven activities seen in play such as taking orders in a pretend restaurant. Some of the teachers also believed that writing, in all of its forms, served as an important vehicle for self-expression.

Compatibility Between Beliefs and Practice

Campbell (2015) noted "Understanding educators' beliefs can assist in understanding educators' literacy teaching practices" (p. 14). While teachers emphasized their belief in the importance of child-directed learning and hands-on experiences, they all also described literacy pedagogy that involved more direct instruction, rather than embedding literacy in everyday experiences. Concerns with kindergarten readiness, as well as a need to comply with early learning standards, were common driving forces behind attempts to balance instructional approaches. For some of the teachers, using didactic techniques even though they believed in a child-centered practice was a necessary accommodation in order to meet requirements and prepare children for kindergarten. Pressures on teachers' time, particularly those with more heavily restricted schedules, also limited teachers' flexibility and they felt they needed to make accommodations to their beliefs in order to move their children toward standard expectations. Teachers worked to find ways to meet expectations and integrate new requirements that often emphasize measurable skills while maintaining a developmentally appropriate approach. The key for all of the teachers was having the pedagogical autonomy to be creative and flexible as they adopted requirements that might contradict their beliefs about what and how to teach (Sverdlov, Aram, & Levin, 2014).

Several teachers "made a clear distinction between what they thought was appropriate from a child development perspective and what they knew children would be expected to

demonstrate during the kindergarten year” (Wesley & Buysse, 2003, p. 358; see also Akaba, et al., 2020). This meant teachers would work on skills such as name writing or would use worksheets for activities because, while they did not think these were developmentally appropriate, they knew that children would be expected to be familiar with them when they got to kindergarten and they did not want their students to feel blindsided or unprepared. As Alison described it, she felt like she had to “bend my beliefs enough to keep my job.” Other teachers similarly lamented that they were not able to devote as much time to play-based activities because of expectations to meet requirements.

Conclusion

The pre-k teachers in this study navigated a host of different influences on their early literacy practice from local stakeholders and colleagues to policies, cultural values and expectations, as well as shifting expectations for the early literacy skills pre-k children should have. Teachers described a variety of activities and approaches to supporting emerging literacy skills, and they balanced requirements and expectations with a desire to tailor their instruction and learning opportunities in individually appropriate ways. What emerges is a picture of eight different teachers who believe in the potential of all children and are committed to providing a strong education foundation for the children in their classes.

Chapter XIV: Discussion and Conclusion

This study set out to explore pre-k teachers' descriptions of their early literacy teaching and curriculum with the intent of understanding how an ever-increasing emphasis on early childhood education, and early literacy in particular, was impacting teachers. Eight pre-k teachers of varying backgrounds and years of experience who were working in different systems (private, public, Head Start, and combination) and in different contexts (high income, low income, bilingual, inclusive, heterogeneous or homogenous Black, White, or Latinx communities) were asked to describe early literacy activities and teaching, what factors they believed impacted their teaching, shifts in literacy curricula and approaches they had seen over their careers, and their beliefs about early literacy learning and instruction. Teachers described broad understandings of early literacy and what they do, and see children doing, to expand upon children's literacy repertoires, and they repeatedly emphasized their intentions to individualize teaching and learning opportunities as much as they could, even as they were expected to help children achieve standardized early literacy skills and knowledge. Early learning standards and benchmark assessments had a particularly strong influence on teachers and their literacy goals, and teachers described a push-down of expectations from higher grades that not only led to higher constrained literacy goals for children, but also left less room for play and more child-initiated exploration and learning.

This study took shape in a time in which educators, researchers, and policymakers were reacting to increased accountability expectations across pre-k through twelfth grade, in no small part as a response to policies that resulted from the passage of the No Child Left Behind Act. At that time, early childhood practitioners and researchers were asking for attention to be paid to the impact of efforts for increased standardization on a population of children that was becoming

increasingly diverse (Genishi & Dyson, 2009; Genishi & Goodwin, 2008). Perhaps, for me, one of the most disappointing discoveries of this study is how little some things have changed by the time of this writing. While now there are many more people writing about and responding to the need to move away from rigid standardization and transform early education and early years policy to reflect what we know about the diversities of experiences, knowledge, and potential that young children bring with them into the classroom (Reid & Kagan, 2022; Reid, Kagan, & Scott-Little, 2022; Reid, Scott-Little, & Kagan, 2019; Souto-Manning, Ghim, & Madu, 2021; Souto-Manning, et al., 2019; Yoon, 2015), we are also seeing vocal resistance to ideas about equitable teaching and a broadening of perspectives within some local communities and state-level policymakers. This is particularly true in Texas, which leads the nation in book bans (Lopez, 2022), and where legislators have worked to impede or directly ban equity and inclusion efforts, including a Senate bill that seeks to ban the teaching of critical race theory at public universities (Jankowski, 2023) and another bill that would ban diversity, equity and inclusion programs and offices at public universities (McGee, 2023).

In this chapter, I seek to explore how the results of this study both represent and can contribute to bridging this ideological divide by providing insight into the landscape of early literacy teaching and discussing ways to build and sustain a workforce that feels empowered as professionals to provide a foundation of learning that prioritizes the experiences and capabilities of all children. First, I will present two sources of challenges for teachers: the ways in which conceptions of readiness impacted teachers and became a source of pressure and conflict, and the specific contextual barriers that teachers dealt with and tried to balance. Next, I will discuss the implications for policy, teacher education, and professional development opportunities. Third, I

will emphasize the critical importance of including teachers in conversations about bettering the field of early education. Finally, I will discuss limitations and future directions.

Challenges for Teachers

The Impact of Concerns with Readiness

Conceptions of and concerns about readiness can be seen as undergirding teachers' responses to all of the research questions for this study as readiness often defined teachers' literacy practices, was reflected in the influencing factors, was the driving force behind shifts and a push-down of expectations, informed teachers' beliefs, and at times led to potential conflicts between their beliefs and practices. Teachers, parents, policies, and standards reflected a concern with and varying beliefs about what children should be doing and should be prepared to do in order to be successful in the future. While it is imperative to understand early childhood as an important and significant phase of children's lives that is a foundation for future experiences, we should not allow concerns with readiness to force us into a position that is so forward looking that we fail to consider the importance of understanding what children need right now while they are young and in preschool (Fassler & Levin, 2008). Instead of valuing children's play and actions as having merit in the moment as they explore and make meaning, we run the risk of feeling the need to justify the curricular and pedagogical decisions we make based on how they prepare children for kindergarten and beyond.

Definitions of readiness are frequently limited to literacy skills, and specifically code-based literacy skills more so than broader concepts of language and development that are less easily measurable (Yoon, 2015), so the fact that this study limited teachers' discussions of readiness to literacy is a reflection of broader discussions around early education, early literacy, and readiness. While some teachers acknowledged concerns about being too academic or lacking

sufficient time to allow children to play and explore, they nonetheless felt pressured to focus their teaching on discrete skill acquisition, which sometimes meant teachers incorporated practices that ran counter to their personal and professional beliefs about learning and instruction (Campbell, 2015). However, because teachers were invested in their children and cared deeply about supporting learning and easing the transition to kindergarten, they were willing to compromise not just because they needed to keep their jobs but also because they wanted to protect children from the psychological impact of being behind their peers in kindergarten. This is not to imply that teachers do not recognize early literacy development as a critical foundation for reading and writing, but rather that imposing a large volume of standardized requirements and assessments onto a group of children becomes a daunting task, particularly when teachers are still trying to find ways to individualize their instruction to support every child in their class.

The source of the conflict teachers experienced at times was the contradiction between what they learned about child development and learning in their pre-service programs and the requirements and expectations they were met with in reality. All of the teachers who had degrees described the philosophy of their pre-service programs as emphasizing developmentally appropriate practice, learning through play and exploration, and the importance of meeting individual children where they are. Now, however, as professionals, they are told they need to make sure every child can master a uniform set of expectations such as letter identification, phonemic awareness, print concepts, and develop a strong vocabulary or they will not be ready for kindergarten. The need to meet these requirements placed limitations upon how much time teachers felt they could give children to play and also confined their focus to a more limited range of skills and behaviors to look for and value from children. This impacts both children and

teachers, restricting children's ability to develop rich and meaningful approaches to language and literacy and undermining the professional capabilities and autonomy of teachers.

Not all of the teachers felt necessarily constrained or bothered by the possibility that the range of behaviors that were valued was restricted, however, and I admit I have to resist the temptation to oversimplify and treat teachers as a monolith to fit my own narrative. Just like we recognize the need to value the range of cultural capital and ways of knowing that children bring with them into the classroom, we also need to understand the varying positions and beliefs held by early childhood teachers. There were similarities and differences across these eight teachers and having the in-depth portraits enables us to take a peek into how they think about and frame their practice and their own responses and ideas about readiness. Expectations of readiness meant that Tameka felt she was not doing enough to help her "at risk" children become readers so they could succeed in school and in life. She, Cristina, and Rodrigo were all working with children from more marginalized communities and worried about their well-being and futures. But readiness and expectations also made Angie worry about being too academic, Alison feel frustrated that too much was being asked of her children, while Deborah just wished she had more time for children to play and catch their breath. Their positions around readiness are nuanced, reflecting their own beliefs about early literacy, the ideas they learned about in teacher education programs, and their understandings of the communities, children, and families with whom they worked; and we need more nuanced discussions about the complications of standardized beliefs about and expectations for readiness and the impact on teachers and children.

Barriers to Literacy Teaching and Learning

Regardless of their settings or beliefs about teaching, teachers experienced barriers that at times impeded their ability to teach the ways they wanted to. The field of early childhood is notoriously fragmented due to an incoherent system of governance, funding streams, and settings, resulting in a host of complications including expectations that might contradict one another and a redundancy within requirements that means teachers' time is frequently consumed with paperwork, competing curricula, and duplicate assessments (Bullough, et al., 2014; Gomez, Kagan, & Fox, 2015; Heimer, 2023; Jones, 2023; Kagan & Roth, 2017). This was particularly felt by the teachers working in public schools and/or Head Start, and those teachers lamented that sometimes it just did not feel like there was enough time in the day or weeks in the year to accomplish everything they were expected to do while others described it as making teaching chaotic and overwhelming. Yet it was also true for Angie, who only had two days a week to reach some very highly academic parent expectations.

While I anticipated issues with time and assessments, I had not expected the curricular issues that teachers were forced to deal with. Instead of always serving as a resource, curriculum at times was a source of confusion and almost a nuisance as districts and schools adopted new curricula and layered them on top of one another. Sometimes teachers found the provided curriculum to be boring or, quite simply, just bad, while other times a new curriculum would conflict with an existing one. Fortunately, many of the teachers felt like they had some flexibility to pick and choose, and they would pull elements, suggestions, and resources from different curricula. Deborah, however, had been teaching for more than two decades, and felt compelled to demonstrate fidelity to the curriculum because it was provided by the district because they

wanted teachers to use it, making it her responsibility to figure out how to include it all and add in new expectations when she was already comfortable with other activities and approaches.

Teachers also acknowledged that while curriculum in some cases served as a complication for themselves, detailed and more explicit curriculum was actually beneficial for new teachers. Both Dana and Rodrigo, in particular, discussed the benefits of having a thoughtful framework that helped keep them on track as they supported children toward different learning goals and expectations. Experience mitigated many of the teachers' beliefs and reactions to the varying systemic complications and barriers with which they were confronted, which is not unexpected. It is, however, a reminder that just like we (should) recognize children's uniqueness and diversity, a similar approach needs to be taken for teachers. We need to provide supports that teachers can use flexibly, availing themselves of resources as needed but having the autonomy to make their own curricular decisions, particularly as they respond to children's different strengths and needs. The field of early care and education is already marked by high attrition and turnover (Gomez, Kagan, & Fox, 2015), and this has only worsened in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic (Austin, 2023). One possible approach for improving this is to prepare, support, and trust teachers. When they have a large amount of constraints around them and are inundated with requirements, paperwork, and assessments to complete, it undermines their professionalism and is overwhelming to even the most experienced teachers.

Implications for Policy, Teacher Education, and Professional Development

There is clearly no quick-fix for improving the field of early education and creating a more cohesive system. Multiple researchers have put forth recommendations for altering our strategy (Kagan & Roth, 2017) as well as specific remedies for fragmented funding and workforce improvements (Jones, 2023). In addition, there continue to be suggestions for how we

can improve upon pre-service teacher education (Love & Hancock, 2022; Souto-Manning, 2022) as well as professional development (Gomez, Kagan, & Fox, 2015; Piasta, et al., 2020; Reid, Kagan, & Scott-Little, 2019) in order to create more robust supports for teachers as well as more equitable experiences for all children. Findings from this study can contribute to these conversations about policy and teacher education.

Based on teachers' descriptions of their practice and the factors that influenced their literacy teaching, there are a few clear implications for policy. First, there is a need to streamline requirements so that teachers are not left to negotiate layered, redundant, and competing curricula, standards, and assessments. As for assessments specifically, many teachers felt that they offered incomplete snapshots of children's literacy knowledge and abilities, focusing on discrete skills such as letter identification within a restricted amount of time. Teachers and children benefit from more authentic assessments that can then be used as a resource to inform teaching. Second, teachers need more flexibility within requirements and as well as increased autonomy. They need to be trusted to make decisions for their students. Third, based on teachers' own experiences as well as descriptions of their colleagues, we need increased supports for people who are new to the profession. Teaching is complicated and there is a lot to navigate as you develop your professional identity. A reduction in requirements is a first step, but teachers also spoke positively about structural supports such as having a coach, meaningful collaboration with other teachers, and the ability to observe other teachers in action.

An important piece of support for novice educators is obviously early childhood teacher education programs and how well they are able to prepare teachers. I would argue that the ability to critically reflect upon one's own teaching is a critical skill for teachers and one that should be developed in pre-service programs. Reflection seemed to support teacher's professional growth

as they considered what activities and approaches did and did not work for children but was not an ability that all of the teachers possessed. Because context is such an important and impactful component of teaching, knowledge of policies and expectations that they will be negotiating and possibly have to conform to should also be a part of pre-service programs. While we have an imperfect system, the ability to question and critique existing standards and rules is predicated upon a familiarity with the broader contextual issues that shape teaching.

Education, teaching and learning are not static fields as people and societies are constantly evolving, and our understandings of how to support teachers and children also continue to evolve with them. Professional development opportunities will not only need to expand on their pre-service and professional experiences but also continually support teachers to build upon children's diverse backgrounds, needs, strengths, and differences. One piece to accomplishing this that should be a part of professional learning is the development of bidirectional relationships with parents and families. Most of the teachers in this study described their relationships with families as unidirectional; that is, teachers saw it as their responsibility to educate parents. One of the schools, however, placed a heavy emphasis on including families, and the teachers there encouraged families to share their languages and cultures with the class while also developing relationships with families so that teachers could best support their needs and goals.

Missing Voices: Including Teachers in the Conversation

While the path forward is not necessarily easy, what is clear, and what this study sought to contribute, is that teachers need to be an integral part of the process as we continuously seek to improve both the early childhood teaching profession as well as the early learning experiences of all children. Discussions about ways to support and improve the early childhood education

workforce have rarely included practitioners or acknowledged them as experts in their own field, further communicating to early care and education workers that they are not considered a valuable part of the conversation (Austin, 2023).

Central to the process of including teachers is to ensure that teachers from varying backgrounds and with varying beliefs and experiences are included. A lot has been written here and in other studies about how standardization and expectations impose restrictions upon teachers' time and decision-making and particularly impacts implementation of more developmentally appropriate practices. While many of the teachers in this study lamented wanting more time for play and child-directed activities, one teacher did not. She happened to be the one teacher who did not have a college degree or formal training in early childhood education and this likely offers a partial explanation as she was unfamiliar with different aspects of literacy and unsure of different ways to support language and literacy learning. Her story can be used to highlight how valuable formal education experiences are in order to create a more qualified and knowledgeable workforce, and she was eager to learn. However, she was also the only Black teacher in the study, the only teacher working with an almost entirely Black community, she worked in the highest poverty setting, and she believed that in order to learn and succeed children needed to assimilate and have access to the funds of knowledge of the groups in power that are represented in school expectations. It would be easy to respond to Tameka's position by saying she just needs to be educated and learn more, but I believe that would be not only dismissive but also condescending. What does the conversation look like if we stop privileging white, middle-class voices and make space for educators and child care workers who come from different backgrounds? I suggest that bettering the field means we need to ensure open dialogue,

difficult conversations and include critical missing perspectives to improve our understanding as well as the learning experiences of all children.

Limitations

There are methodological limitations to this study that were a byproduct of its design. I intentionally relied upon teachers' voices and their own descriptions of what they do and why as they seek to support children's language and literacy development. It is likely, however, that by not including an observation component, I missed out on things both the teachers and the children were doing that supported their learning. Future studies could still center teachers' voices while using observation as a basis for further interview questions.

This was also not a study that by design sought to address topics related to diversity and equity, including both within the teaching profession as well as children's experiences in the classroom. Some of the reason for this derives from the timing of when this study took place. While many researchers, such as Celia Genishi, were at the forefront of calling for more inclusion of diverse voices and perspectives, it was not a topic that was receiving as much attention then as it is now. This meant that there was no attempt, for example, to ask Rodrigo more about his experiences as a cis-gendered male in early childhood education nor to explore additional aspects of the teachers' identities and how they impacted their experiences and beliefs. I very much had concerns about standardizing education when children are all so wonderfully unique, particularly because I had always used an emergent curriculum in my own teaching, but did not question teachers more pointedly on issues of diversity and standardization, in part because I did not want to introduce my own biases into the study.

This study also occurred in Texas, which impacts its generalizability to other settings. Exploring and recognizing the importance of context requires a simultaneous acknowledgement

that Texas has a very unique educational landscape, even when comparing to other states in the United States. This limits its applicability to other settings, although there are many connections that have been made within this document demonstrating how teachers in other contexts are navigating similar issues.

Future Directions

One of the primary considerations of this study was the ways in which contextual variables impacted the literacy practices of pre-k teachers. What role do parents, administrators, and policymakers play in shaping the literacy curriculum and instruction? Texas presents a unique political and social landscape, and future studies could examine the early literacy practices of teachers working in a variety of contexts, particularly those that differ markedly from the politics at play in Texas. At the same time, the educational landscape in Texas has become even more politicized since the data was collected for the present study, and it would be beneficial to understand how this is impacting early education teachers. In particular, given the focus on literacy, it would be worthwhile to explore if early childhood teachers have altered the books they use, the topics they explore, or the types of conversations they engage in with children and families. As academia and professional groups place high value on making education more equitable and more consciously creating spaces of belonging for a diverse student population, how does this impact teachers in more politically conservative contexts such as Texas, who are at the intersection between these two belief systems? Future studies could examine the ways in which early childhood practitioners think about diversity and equity and how they do or do not describe addressing it in their teaching.

While the present study included teachers in bilingual classrooms as well as teachers in ESL classrooms, it would be beneficial to examine more comprehensively the curriculum,

pedagogy, and experiences of teachers who work with multilingual populations. The population of children and families across the United States who speak languages other than English at home continues to increase. Future studies could focus more specifically on the language and literacy curriculum and teaching of practitioners in bilingual classrooms as well as those who work with a significant percentage of children who are learning English.

Along this same line, an important addition to the conversation would be to look more intently at pedagogy, talking to teachers about their different instructional approaches. What is the interplay of literacy and pedagogical variance? The teachers in this study used a variety of pedagogical strategies to help children develop literacy skills and knowledge, and future studies could explore multiple facets of this such as whether or not variability has any relationship with area of literacy, teacher experience, and how this impacts children.

The present study touched on the ways in which experience mitigates pedagogical and curricular decision-making. This data was collected pre-COVID-19, and the pandemic impacted the education workforce, resulting in attrition and a less experienced teacher population (Dos Santos, 2021). This study included teachers with extensive experience, and post-pandemic this would likely be difficult to achieve. Future studies could explore how the pandemic impacted early childhood teachers, those who stayed and those who chose to leave the profession, and how this has impacted the early literacy experiences of pre-k children.

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Appendix A: Informed Consent Forms

Teachers College, Columbia University
Informed Consent, Part I

Description of the Research: You are invited to participate in a doctoral dissertation study that explores prekindergarten teachers' descriptions of their literacy practices and their beliefs about early literacy development and curriculum. I am interested in conducting this research so that I can better understand how teachers working in different settings are helping children develop early literacy skills. I am also interested in understanding how teachers' practices relate to their beliefs about early literacy development and how they believe young children best develop knowledge, skills, and abilities that support reading and writing.

You will be asked to complete a brief survey, share curriculum materials, and participate in two audio-taped interviews. The survey, interviews, and curriculum materials will be used to help me create a narrative portrait, which in essence is a retelling of your stories and experiences. We will conduct each interview at a time and place that are convenient to you.

All audiotape recordings, surveys, and materials will be carefully stored in a locked drawer at my home. In addition, your name will be changed on all documents, interviews, and in the study write-up to protect your identity.

Risks and Benefits: Possible risks of this study include some emotional unease in sharing your teaching experiences and beliefs about literacy development and curriculum. It is also possible that you will experience some discomfort when reading the narrative portrait. The benefits of participating in this research cannot be guaranteed, however, you may find it beneficial to describe your experiences and to discuss your beliefs about how young children learn to read and write with an engaged and responsive listener.

Your participation in this study is strictly voluntary and you may decide to withdraw yourself from the study at any time. You may also choose not to answer particular questions at any time throughout the study. If you have any questions during this research process, you may call me on my cell phone at (817)905-3363.

Payments: You will receive a \$20 gift card to a book store as a show of gratitude for your participation.

Data Storage to Protect Confidentiality: Your confidentiality will be maintained throughout the research process. All data sources, such as audiotapes, notes, curriculum materials, and surveys, will remain in my possession in a locked drawer in my desk at my home. Pseudonyms will be used for teachers, children, schools, and districts. Once I have defended my dissertation, I will destroy all interview recordings.

Time Involvement: Your participation will take approximately 5 total hours. The study involves two interviews of approximately 1 ½ hours each, spaced 1-2 weeks apart depending upon your schedule; completion of a survey, which should take approximately 20 minutes; collection of

curriculum documents from your program that provide information the early literacy curriculum; and the opportunity to review and respond to the narrative portrait I create based on the information you share. Interviews will be scheduled at your convenience to fit your schedule, and surveys and documents will be collected and reviewed before your first interview.

How Will Results be Used: The results of this study will be used for my dissertation research. In addition, research maybe be presented at professional conferences, published in articles or journals, or used for educational purposes. Since all study participants and locations will be given pseudonyms, there will be no way to identify you in any write-ups of the study results.

Teachers College, Columbia University
Informed Consent Part II

PARTICIPANT'S RIGHTS

Principle Investigator: **Andrea Honig**

Research Title: **Stories of Experience: Texas Preschool Teachers' Early Literacy Beliefs and Practices**

- I have read and discussed the Research Description with the researcher. I have had the opportunity to ask questions about the purposes and procedures regarding this study.
- My participation in this research is voluntary. I may refuse to participate or withdraw from participation at any time.
- The researcher may withdraw me from the research at her professional discretion.
- If, during the course of the study, significant new information that has been developed becomes available which may relate to my willingness to continue to participate, the investigator will provide this information to me.
- Any information derived from the research project that personally identifies me will not be voluntarily released or disclosed without my separate consent, except as specifically required by law.
- If at any time I have any questions regarding the research or my participation, I can contact the investigator, who will answer my questions. The investigator's phone number is (817)905-3363.
- If at any time I have comments, or concerns regarding the conduct of the research or questions about my rights as a research subject, I should contact the Teachers College, Columbia University Institutional Review Board /IRB. The phone number for the IRB is (212) 678-4105. Or, I can write to the IRB at Teachers College, Columbia University, 525 W. 120th Street, New York, NY, 10027, Box 151.
- I should receive a copy of the Research Description and this Participant's Rights document.
- If video and/or audio taping is part of this research, I () consent to be audio taped. I () do NOT consent to being audio taped. The written and/or audio taped materials will be viewed only by the principal investigator and members of the research team.
- Written and/or audio taped materials () may be viewed in an educational setting outside the research

() may NOT be viewed in an educational setting outside the research.
- My signature means that I agree to participate in this study.

Participant's signature: _____ Date: ____/____/____

Name: _____

Appendix B: Interview 1 Guide

Interview #1: Background and Descriptions of Practice

Expected duration: 1 ½-2 hours

Today is my opportunity to learn about you, your teaching background, the school where you are teaching now, your thoughts about different people who might influence your teaching and curriculum, and any changes that may have occurred in your early literacy teaching practices. I will also be asking you to help me get a sense of your classroom including what happens on a typical day as well as what you and the children are doing to support their literacy learning. Just to remind you: if at any point you start to feel uncomfortable, do not wish to answer a specific question, or would like to end the interview, please let me know and we will stop immediately.

<i>Interview questions</i>	<i>Corresponding research question(s)</i>
<u>Background Information:</u>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How long have you been teaching? • How long have you been teaching preschool? • Can you remember why you decided you wanted to teach preschool? How did you get to where you are in your career? • Did you go to school for teaching or do you have a degree in education? Was it specifically for early childhood? How would you describe the program’s philosophy regarding how children learn and the role of teachers in the classroom? • What types of settings have you worked in (Head Start, private, state-funded)? • How long have you been teaching at the school where you are now? • How would you describe the setting: Head Start, private, state-funded? • Why did you choose to work there, as opposed to a different program? 	2, 6
<u>School Information:</u>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What type of approach to curriculum does the school take? • How would you say your school thinks children learn best? • How would you describe the school’s philosophy regarding the role of the teacher in the classroom? • How would your school define what counts as literacy? • What literacy practices and behaviors does the school expect children to be engaged in? 	1, 2, 5, 6
<u>Influences:</u>	
Who determines what you do in the classroom in terms of curriculum and instruction?	2, 5, 6

Parents

- What is the role of parents in your work? What should it be?
- Based on your conversations with parents, what do you think their literacy goals are for the children in your class? Can you give specific examples? 2, 5, 6
- Are there things you do in response to parents that you might not do otherwise?

Administration

- What role does the administration play in terms of influencing your literacy curriculum and teaching practices?
- How do you feel about the influence of the administration on your classroom and your teaching? Are they supportive? Do any of their ideas, attitudes or values differ from yours?

Colleagues

- Are there times at your school—either informal or formal—where teachers talk to each other about what is going on in their classrooms? 2, 5, 6
- What role do/have other teachers played in influencing your ideas about early literacy development?
- Do other teachers influence your teaching, particularly regarding literacy?

Policies

These questions will differ somewhat depending on the school setting.

- Can you think of specific policies—school, federal, state—that impact your teaching and/or curriculum?
- Are you required to incorporate or address the TX Prekindergarten Early Learning Standards? If not, do you know why not? If so, how have you done that? 2, 4b, 5, 6
- What are the Head Start literacy requirements? What activities or materials are you required to incorporate? Do you?
- How do you feel the policies are compatible or incompatible with your own ideas about what you should be doing in regard to early literacy instruction?

Classroom Information:

- How would you describe a typical day in your classroom?
- What do you do on a typical day? What is your role? 1, 5, 6
- What are children doing on a typical day? Who decides what they are doing?

I'd like to switch gears now and focus more specifically on literacy in your classroom.

- What do you think of when I say the word “literacy”? What does that mean to you? 4, 5, 6

Children's role:

- What do you think children are doing in your classroom that is related to literacy and literacy development?
-

-
- Can you describe specific activities or moments during the day? [Since the teacher has described a typical day in the classroom, I can ask follow-up questions about specific points during the day such as group times, outdoors time, etc. and whether or not they think children are doing things during these times that support literacy development?] 1, 4a, 4b, 5, 6
 - What types of materials do children use in your classroom that supports their literacy development? When are these available to them?
 - Are there any English language learners in your class? What approaches to you see them taking to learning about language? What about their approaches to reading and writing (in English or in their native language)?
-

Teacher's role:

- What do you do to support children's literacy development?
 - Are there things that you do that are not necessarily planned for or included on a lesson plan that connect to children's literacy development? What kinds of spontaneous moments happen during the day [conversations, impromptu reading, entering pretend play, etc.]? 1, 4b, 5, 6
 - How do you support English language learners (if there are any in your class) in their language and literacy development?
-

What changes or shifts have you seen in your early literacy teaching over the years? 2, 3, 5, 6

If you have seen any changes, what do you think has influenced them?

Appendix C: Interview 2 Guide

Interview #2: Beliefs About Literacy Development, Curriculum, and Instruction

Expected Duration: 1 ½ hours

In our last interview, we talked about your background and experiences as well as the school where you work now. We also talked about what you do in the classroom, specifically about your early literacy practices. Today we are going to shift gears and focus on your beliefs rather than descriptions of your actual teaching. Specifically, some of the things I am going to ask you to talk about are your beliefs about how young children best learn to read and write as well as your ideas about best teaching practices.

If at any point you start to feel uncomfortable or decide you want to stop the interview, please let me know and we will end it immediately.

<i>Interview questions</i>	<i>Corresponding research question(s)</i>
<p>Perspectives on early learning and curriculum and pedagogy:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How would you describe an ideal teaching situation for young children? • How do you think children learn best? • What is the role of the teacher in the classroom? • What literacy goals do you have for your students? 	4, 5, 6
<p>Conceptualizations of early literacy:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Since we last spoke, have you had any additional thoughts about how you define literacy? • Have you thought of anything else that you or the children do in the classroom (or outside) that is related to literacy? • How would you describe an ideal approach to literacy? • What is the relationship between literacy and other areas of development? • What role does literacy play in early childhood education? How much should we emphasize it? Do you think we emphasize it just enough, too little, or too much? Why? 	1, 4, 5, 6
<p>Addressing specific components of early literacy:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Oral language • Phonological awareness • Print concepts • Alphabet knowledge • Emergent writing <p>For each:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Discuss what it is. 2. Do you see this as important to children’s literacy 	1, 4, 5, 6

<p>development?</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 3. Should this be emphasized in an early childhood classroom? Why or why not? How much? 4. Do you incorporate this into your curriculum? How? Why? What types of activities or materials do you have that support this area of learning? 5. Do you do things or see children doing things that are not included on this list? 	
What do you not do that you wish you could?	1, 4, 5, 6
What do you do that you do not think you should or is somehow inappropriate?	1, 4, 5, 6

Appendix D: Preschool Teacher Literacy Beliefs and Practices Questionnaire

The purpose of this questionnaire is to help me understand more about different literacy practices in preschool classrooms as well as understanding preschool teachers' beliefs about how children learn to read and write. There are no right or wrong answers. Your answers to these questions are confidential. I will keep them in a locked cabinet and they will not be made available to anyone else. In any reports I prepare, you will not be identified by name or in any way that will allow someone to know your identity.

Thank you for taking the time to complete this!

As a teacher I believe preschool children	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree or Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
1. Should not write until teachers show them how to form each letter.	SA	A	N	D	SD
2. Need plenty of drill and practice to learn new letter sounds.	SA	A	N	D	SD
3. Do not need to learn the meaning of a lot of words to become good readers.	SA	A	N	D	SD
4. Do not need to be taught the names of each letter because children learn to read without knowing each letter and its name.	SA	A	N	D	SD
5. Should write without worrying about spelling.	SA	A	N	D	SD
6. Learn ending sounds by circling pictures of things that rhyme on worksheets.	SA	A	N	D	SD
7. Learn language by talking about their ideas and expressing feelings.	SA	A	N	D	SD
8. Should look at books to help them learn to read.	SA	A	N	D	SD

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree or Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
9. Learn ending sounds in words by listening to nursery rhymes.	SA	A	N	D	SD
10. Do not need to hear many stories in order to become good readers.	SA	A	N	D	SD
11. Learn new words as teachers define them when reading books to children.	SA	A	N	D	SD
12. Learn to write in part by watching teachers write.	SA	A	N	D	SD
13. Learn new words by connecting them to real things, objects, or activities they are doing.	SA	A	N	D	SD
14. Should not talk with each other during the day.	SA	A	N	D	SD
15. Learn to read before learning to write.	SA	A	N	D	SD
16. Should play with words, such as making up rhymes or jump rope chants, to learn to hear ending sounds in words.	SA	A	N	D	SD
17. Need to learn a lot of words so they can learn to read.	SA	A	N	D	SD
18. Should learn to identify beginning and ending sounds in words.	SA	A	N	D	SD
19. Need many experiences, such as going to the zoo and talking about it in order to learn new vocabulary.	SA	A	N	D	SD

Circle the number indicating the importance of each of the following goals for language and literacy development in your classroom.

How important is it to teach the children to:	<u>Essential</u>	<u>Pretty Important</u>	<u>A Little Important</u>	<u>Not Important</u>
a. Name letters?	3	2	1	0
b. Say the sounds that letters and letters combinations make?	3	2	1	0
c. Understand the meaning of words?	3	2	1	0
d. Write letters and words?	3	2	1	0
e. Understand concepts about print (e.g., read left to right)?	3	2	1	0
f. Recognize basic sight words?	3	2	1	0
g. Write their own names?	3	2	1	0
h. Write a story?	3	2	1	0
i. Respond to stories by talking?	3	2	1	0
j. Relate their experiences to those in a storybook?	3	2	1	0
k. Tell their own stories?	3	2	1	0
l. Tell a story from pictures?	3	2	1	0
m. Recognize letters in a book, story, or other text?	3	2	1	0
n. Recognize words in a book, story, or other text?	3	2	1	0
o. Separate words into sounds?	3	2	1	0
p. Identify elements of a story (e.g., characters, setting, etc.)?	3	2	1	0

Circle the number indicating how much time you spend on the following:

How much time do you spend having children:	A lot	Some	A little	None
a. Develop sight vocabulary?	3	2	1	0
b. Name letters?	3	2	1	0
c. Find letters in words?	3	2	1	0
d. Sound out words?	3	2	1	0
e. Listen to an adult read aloud?	3	2	1	0
f. Draw pictures to illustrate a story?	3	2	1	0
g. Draw pictures and then tell a story to go with the pictures?	3	2	1	0
h. Dictate a story and then read it aloud?	3	2	1	0
i. Recite rhymes, songs, or poems?	3	2	1	0
j. Act out the events in a story they have heard?	3	2	1	0
k. Retell a story	3	2	1	0
l. Discuss words' meanings?	3	2	1	0
m. Compare words and word parts in <u>printed</u> words?	3	2	1	0
n. Compare words and word parts in <u>heard</u> words?	3	2	1	0
o. Categorize <u>heard</u> words based on spelling patterns?	3	2	1	0
p. Categorize <u>printed</u> words based on spelling patterns?	3	2	1	0
q. Write letters or words?	3	2	1	0
r. Read or look at books independently?	3	2	1	0
s. Read aloud to an adult?	3	2	1	0