PRESCHOOL TEACHERS’ CONSTRUCTIONS OF EARLY READING

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Much of the current discourse surrounding the practice of early reading has emerged from policies that dictate the definition and means by which reading is taught and by which reading success is measured. Although this discourse directly influences the work of preschool teachers, little is known about what preschool teachers think about early reading and how they develop these understandings or constructions. Research concerning preschool teachers’ constructions is useful because of the potential influence on teachers’ decisions and classroom behaviors. The purpose of this study is to better understand preschool teachers’ constructions concerning early reading and the process of learning to read. Six preschool teachers, with a variety of personal, educational, and professional experiences, from four diverse early childhood programs in the North Texas area were interviewed over a nine-month period during which each participant was interviewed for approximately three hours. Through systematic, inductive analysis, three themes were identified under an overarching theme of the interdependent and relational nature of early reading influences: out-of-school interactions, in-school interactions, and interactions with text. Without exception, these teachers referred to their life experiences as influencing their approach to teaching in general and to teaching reading in particular. The goals these preschool teachers had for their students and their instructional decisions were indications of their unique and evolving constructions of early reading and are absolutely grounded in their practice — in their life experiences and in their daily interactions with children. This study suggests
that stakeholders should remember that these practical experiences are a primary influence on how preschool teachers think about early reading and the process of learning to read.
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The field of early reading has been dominated by an emphasis on research-validated practices since the publication of *Becoming a Nation of Readers* (Anderson, Hiebert, Scott, and Wilkinson, 1985). Since then, the federal government has made determined efforts to define early reading and discover why so many children fail to learn to read. In 2008, the National Early Literacy Panel (NELP) made specific suggestions concerning the building blocks of beginning reading. On the whole, the NELP provided broad, comprehensive views of the skills necessary for success in reading. Unfortunately, the federally commissioned report created unintended outcomes by minimizing crucial contributions of various skills needed to become successful in reading by presenting in its executive summary and recommendations for practitioners only those findings relating to skills considered the easiest to measure and change (Dickinson, Hirsh-Pasek, Neuman, Burchinal, & Golinkoff, 2009).

Considering the powerful influence of individual teachers on student learning, it is important to establish whether and how this narrowly focused policy context has influenced teachers’ thinking about early reading. This inquiry was conducted to examine preschool teachers’ constructions of early reading and the process of learning to read. Teachers’ constructions are considered important because of the possibility that they are related to classroom practice (Pajares, 1992) and could influence teachers’ perceptions, decisions, and classroom behaviors. Some scholars assume that preschool teachers’ personal constructions concerning the process of learning to read and the ways children acquire literacy skills affect their choice of teaching methods. For
the purpose of this inquiry constructions are thoughts that an individual holds to be true. The use of this term conveys the idea that the forming and shaping of a professional perception evolves from a process of generating and refining convictions concerning early reading.

Constructions involve the social cognition at the core of how information is processed and combined to form attitudes, or perceived evaluations, and beliefs, or perceived facts. The trajectory of these mental constructs depends upon the initial formation of conceptual models, how static and kinetic combinations of information intertwine to affect them, and what happens to them as they are reconstructed. Constructions are the intersection of what a person knows and believes.

The sections of this chapter include a rationale for the study, statement of the problem, and a brief description of theoretical perspectives forming the basis of the philosophical assumptions of the study. The purpose, significance, limitations, and organization of the study are also provided.

Rationale

The present study was designed to explore preschool teachers’ constructions of early reading by interviewing teachers working in a variety of preschool settings. Little is known about the preschool teachers’ conceptual models concerning early reading, although an increasing number of researchers have examined preschool teachers’ beliefs about children’s print (Lynch, 2009) and literacy instruction (Burgess, Lundgren, Lloyd, & Pianta, 2001; Hindman & Wasik, 2008).

Preschool teachers’ constructions are thought to influence conceptions, actions, and processes in the classroom and, as teacher educators we assume are likely to
shape not only the nature of teacher-student interactions but also the students’
concepts of early reading. Often the complexities of societal beliefs constrain teachers’
capacity to advance their own conceptual models and offer instruction consistent with
their constructions. While evidence has been used to show that preschool programs
enhance beginning reading skills (Dickinson et al 2009), researchers have reported
little, if anything, about the preschool teachers' beliefs concerning early reading. This
study attempted to uncover preschool teachers' constructions using methods honoring
the assumptions of qualitative research methodology to emphasize rich descriptions
and to reveal the emergent topics in all their complexity and in their natural settings
(Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Statement of the Problem

As mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, the federal government’s efforts
have yielded a definition of literacy accepted by the U.S. Department of Education. The
definition that emerges from policy focuses on five skills required for success in reading
- phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and text comprehension
(NICHHD, 2000).

As those who share daily life with children, preschool teachers would be
expected to have conceptual models about their students' learning; however, these
teachers’ voices are not often heard outside of the classroom. Preschool teachers are
seldom included in the policy-making process, even though policies directly affect their
everyday teaching practice. While policy surrounding education includes an analysis of
many factors, teachers are hardly ever included in such discourse even though their
constructions concerning early reading affect teaching behaviors, and ultimately, student learning (Fang, 1996).

Purpose of the Study

Much of the current discourse surrounding the practice of early reading instruction stems from policies which dictate the definition and means by which reading is taught and by which reading success is measured. The purpose of this study was to better understand preschool teachers’ constructions concerning early reading and the process of learning to read. Key guiding questions were:

1. What do preschool teachers say about their early reading experiences and the process of learning to read?
2. What do preschool teachers say about how their other life experiences relate to their constructions of early reading and the process of learning to read?
3. What do preschool teachers say about policy and political influences on their constructions of early reading and the process of learning to read?

Significance of the Study

This study recognizes that teachers’ views have not been included in the policies and instructional practices surrounding the definition of early reading. The study attempted to contribute to a better understanding of the preschool teachers’ constructions concerning early reading to indicate whether or not the definition of early reading that emerges from policy has been consistently integrated in preschool teacher education programs. Overall, these findings added to a growing body of knowledge about what teachers say about their practice.
Delimitations of the Study

Although the findings of a qualitative analysis are not intended to be generalized, it is important to mention how the research decisions made during this study influenced its parameters. One of the major delimitations is the small sample size. Also, the data I collected and themes I uncovered were limited by my relationships with the six participants. While I was acquainted with some of the six interviewees, I first met the majority of them when we sat down for our first interview. My findings were completely dependent on the questions I asked, or did not ask, during the limited time of each interview. Attempting to compress into a few hours a lifetime of constructions about early reading was not possible. I am confident that their responses were honest, but I know that this study’s findings are evidence of these participants’ constructions that are largely implicit and difficult to uncover. To investigate the relative contributions of teachers’ students and their families, the program where teachers’ work, the influence of teachers’ educational and background experiences, and other possible factors shaping preschool teachers’ constructions of early reading, further research is required.

Organization of the Study

With awareness of the purpose and significance of the study, this section provides a brief outline of the remaining chapters in the dissertation. Chapter 2 includes a discussion of theoretical perspectives and the related literature concerning early reading in the United States beginning with research conducted in the 1920s. Chapter 3 outlines the research methods used to gather the phenomenological data and engage in inductive analysis. The findings of this study are reported in chapter 4. Chapter 5
concludes the study and includes reflections on the study, discussion of the findings, and suggestions for further research.
CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to better understand preschool teachers’ constructions concerning early reading and the process of learning to read. Key guiding questions were:

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2. What do preschool teachers say about how their other life experiences relate to their constructions of early reading and the process of learning to read?
3. What do preschool teachers say about policy and political influences on their constructions of early reading and the process of learning to read?

The sections of this chapter include a discussion of (a) theoretical perspectives that may influence teachers’ constructions, (b) historical and contemporary views of early reading, and (c) a review of research on teachers’ beliefs. I introduce the conceptual framework for this study to examine the preschool teachers’ constructions of early reading.

Constructions involve the social cognition at the core of how information is processed and combined to form attitudes, or perceived evaluations, and beliefs, or perceived facts. I have included an extensive historical review of how early reading has transpired from there to here because of the possibility that this could influence preschool teachers’ constructions. The review of the research on teachers’ beliefs
relating to this study is organized under three headings: broad-based teacher belief studies, potential influence of societal beliefs concerning early reading, and teachers’ beliefs concerning early reading. Teacher pedagogical beliefs regarding early reading are important because these beliefs can influence the interpretation and value placed on literacy activities. The decisions teachers make are not accidental or random but are rooted in the teachers’ constructions about how children learn to read and how they may more effectively teach. While possibly not directly impacting, the values of society value have potential to influence individual teachers’ constructions of early reading.

The Influence of Discourse on Teachers' Constructions

French post-structural theorist Michel Foucault’s work on discourse (1977) is useful for describing how paradigms of knowledge are generated in historical, social, and intellectual contexts and take on power and authority in society. This theoretical perspective is relevant to this study because it addresses potential connections between public discourse and individual constructions—or between the policies related to early reading and the constructions of preschool teachers related to reading and reading instruction.

In simple terms, the notion of discourse can be considered the framework of thought which appears when potentially unrelated statements or remarks begin to coalesce into more concrete conceptual frames. Foucault's work on discourse is another way to explain the context of teachers' constructions of early reading, which is the focus of this study. The discourses of schooling in general and early reading in particular provide the context in which teachers generate their constructions of early reading. Analyzing discourses requires paying attention not only to the production of
knowledge but also to how the use of such knowledge reflects and creates the standard and norms within a community.

Through the chains of associations and the complex interactions between the situations of childhood, people organize their conceptions and constructions of the world during everyday life. This worldview directs the ways in which people think about and behave toward objects and individuals with whom they come into contact. This concept echoes Thomas Kuhn’s (1996) ideas about paradigm shifts in science. While science describes the world as formed from molecules and energy, most individuals would describe the world as a place of color and life, including the exchange of ideas and emotions. This unspoken world created in the mind is not a single person’s creation alone. It is a synthesis of all our past experiences, conversations, learning, and upbringing. Discourse plays a crucial role in the social construction of reality (Kuhn, 1996).

Discourse represents and influences a person’s worldview, including what a person believes to be knowledge and truth. Knowledge for Foucault (1977) did not exist independently of language. In other words, knowledge is not only communicated through language but is also constructed through the organization, associations, and relationships that make up language. Discourse creates truth and truth-effects (Foucault, 1980) that have the power to persuade individuals to accept statements as true. This power often has no connection to any impartial accuracy of the statement. To illustrate, as ludicrous as it seems, Bruno Bettelheim's (1967) refrigerator mother theory of the cause of autism argued that the emotional frigidity of children’s mothers trigger autistic behaviors. This theory held considerable influence in the 1970s in the
United States because of its widespread popularity in the media and medical discourses that many accepted as true. Bettelheim’s theory was believed to be true because so many in authority presented it as true.

Discourse communicates knowledge not only about the message of the language but also about the person speaking the discourse. Discourse identifies a speaker’s education, background, gender, economic, and social class position, and even more overtly, the speaker’s indirect relationship to the audience. For example, during a parent-teacher conference, teachers often use a discourse consisting of esoteric vocabulary and school-related themes to maintain the authority to speak and a position of power over parents.

Foucault (1972) was especially interested in looking at modes of discourse that not everyone had a right to use or that demand a specific topic or location to gain authority. At that same parent-teacher conference questions concerning children’s health records might default to the mother who typically takes care of such matters. As such, discourse can have dangerous and negative effects when the production and dissemination of knowledge prevents the formation of other knowledge by establishing boundaries and exclusions with respect to who can participate, what are appropriate actions and behaviors, as well as what is allowed to be thought and on what topic. Discourse generates truths that become increasingly accepted by the dominant group. Therefore, I focus on these concepts to devise a theoretical framework for this study.

While many view education as an attainable mastery of a teachable set of knowledge and skills, others challenge the notion that universal truths may exist to delineate what could/should be learned, whether in early reading or in other areas. The
enlightenment tradition, according to Michael Foucault (1977), tends to explain phenomena using particular discourses that construct a master narrative. From various histories, Foucault examined the birth of modernism and its concern with a steady evolution of reason and progress. In order to understand Foucault’s work, the old models of power that argue for power being held by dominant groups in society and tending to be top-down must be examined. These models rely on specific and straightforward notions of identity.

Foucault (1977) realized that identities are not stable but are fluid. He argued that power is not possessed by particular people simply because they belong to a certain group. Instead, power is infused and resistive and both producing and produced. Foucault (1961) argued that power relations and the use of punishment as a form of power explains how society creates standards by which all others are judged. Sane, law-abiding citizens are considered *normal*, which also implies the existence of *abnormal*. What does not conform, or alternative forms, are labeled deviant or abnormal. Identity and power are not fixed constructs based on a few descriptive facts concerning race, gender, or class. Teachers’ constructions are influenced by their discourse communities and are connected with identity and power issues; both of which are fluid, not fixed.

This perspective is demonstrated in the writings of Paulo Freire and Michael Apple. Freire (1970) received international recognition for literacy education with the poor in Northeastern Brazil. He believed that the oppressed could be liberated if given the proper tools to help them understand how they had been submerged into a *culture of silence*. Given the opportunity to recognize their own voices, the oppressed could
then take control of their own liberation. Emphasizing respect and the dialogical nature of education, Freire believed that education should not involve the teacher acting on the students but rather the teacher and students working with each other. Freire contributed a range of ideas related to education but is perhaps best known for his criticism of what he termed the banking concept of education. In banking education, the student is viewed as an empty container to be filled with knowledge by the teacher. Education becomes an act of depositing information and allowing students to extend their own knowledge only as the receiver of deposits.

According to Freire (1970), banking education transforms students into receivers of learning but not into active learners and "attempts to control thinking and action, leads men and women to adjust to the world, and inhibits their creative power" (p. 77). Banking assumes that the teacher teaches and the students are taught. Consequently, the teacher holds all the knowledge, and the students know nothing. Freire proposed a problem-posing method of education in which the teacher and student engage in conversation, questioning, and sharing of interpretations of learning in a balanced power structure.

According to Apple (2006), schools will always be positioned in political struggles regarding the meaning of democracy, which culture is legitimate, whose knowledge and instructional methods are privileged, and who benefits from governmental actions. Education in the US has traditionally benefited the children of the privileged socioeconomic classes and has discredited and disqualified the children of marginalized groups. While tension exists between a neo-liberal focus on market-values and a neo-conservative agenda of conventional-values, both foci strive to establish tighter
mechanisms of control with regard to curriculum, broad education beliefs, and even
teacher education. Continued pressures from these large-scale social movements have
resulted in high-stakes standardized assessments and a *teach to the test* mentality in
the classroom. What is considered *correct* knowledge, morals, and values have
become embedded in educational and curricular restructuring.

For example, economics and politics are at the heart of textbook adoption in the
United States. Depending on the state, textbooks are chosen at the state or local level.
Texas, California, and Florida purchase at least 35% of the textbook market’s products.
Therefore, publishers only print the textbooks adopted by these three powerful states,
two of which are conservative (Stille, 2002). Battles over the science and history
textbook content to be read by virtually all public school students are often determined
by board members typically with little or no background in education but determined to
fulfill a neo-conservative agenda.

To illustrate, the neo-liberal and neo-conservative educational and political
climate in which the current public education system in the US functions has resulted in
changes to instructional approaches in reading (Apple, 2006). Teachers must use
instructional strategies and curriculum designed solely to raise standardized test scores.
Often, producers of commercial programs advertise their reading programs with claims
of their ability to increase test scores. Consequently, the commercial materials have
become the primary method for reading instruction and the measure by which students’
reading abilities are assessed (Shannon, 2005).

In this current atmosphere, beginning reading has been washed by a wave of
reductionism. The emphasis has been simply to teach children how to decode more
effectively and how to identify basic story elements in order to earn passing scores on standardized tests. These political structures have regulated the research and practice in fields such as early childhood education and others involving the care and education of children and may be used to privilege particular views of early reading. These regulations may influence preschool teachers’ constructions of early reading.

Relevant to the discussion concerning the relationship between culture, society, and power is the need to highlight those groups who traditionally have been excluded from the dominant educational discourse. Those in power maintain the ability or authority to decide what is best for others and to exercise control over others, including who has access to resources. Education is one such resource. Non-dominant groups are oppressed by the dominant group’s ideology, which often includes an invisible privilege. Individuals in dominant groups maintain that others could have access to their privileges, if only individuals of non-dominant groups would work hard to be worthy of them and to accept them as the best. In fact, privilege, most often reserved for White, able-bodied males, is inherited at birth. Even acquired privilege by education or class status most naturally stems from the benefits of privilege by birth. Members of dominant groups knowingly or unknowingly take advantage of members of non-dominant groups and define what is considered normal in a society (Foucault, 1961).

When designing education policy, teachers’ voices are rarely heard. They are considered the non-dominant group.

Learning to read and write allows for forms of citizenship in which members of dominant and non-dominant groups can position themselves in ways in which the discourse makes most sense. In this way, subjecting themselves to its power, they may
live in a society in which they have the opportunity to shape history (Foucault, 1980). Literacy is more than simply learning how to read, write, or listen. It also serves to direct attention to the importance of recognizing that meaning is derived from experience and that to be literate is to engage in dialogue with others from different backgrounds, cultures, and experiences (Freire, 1970; Hooks, 2000).

Both Freire (1970) and Hooks (2000) believed that literacy is essential to the concept of consciousness raising, and that the lack of reading, writing, and critical skills excluded many not only from self-actualization but also from the political process and labor markets. Literacy, in this instance, becomes an ideological form of critique that gives rise to how oppressive and dominating practices mediate between the margins and centers of power (Said, 1978). Literacy makes clear the socially and historically constructed strengths and limitations that frame social relations and discourses.

For virtually all humans, the ability to acquire oral language comes effortlessly, but reading a symbolic system such as the alphabet requires the ability to make meaning from a socially constructed system embedded in cultural patterns of behavior, practices, beliefs, and knowledge. Various diverse perspectives on the definition, purpose, and value of reading lie at the heart of the matter. For example, Shirley Brice Heath’s (1983) ethnographic study of two communities in the Piedmont Carolinas illustrated these diverse perspectives. Heath found a wide range of literacy functions in the White working-class rural homes in Roadville and the Black working-class rural homes of Trackton, as compared with the mainstream Black and White townspeople. The townspeople prepared their children for the literacy demands of school by reading to them, asking and answering questions, labeling objects, describing events, and
buying educational toys. The majority of the townpeople’s children succeeded at school. The Trackton parents taught children to use literacy for practical purposes, such as finding items at the store, and in church-related activities. The children became very adept at storytelling, and were encouraged to embellish and exaggerate everyday events to capture the attention of their audience (Heath, 1983). Roadville parents believed book reading had value. At home and in church, children were taught to memorize and repeat information and accounts, emphasizing the importance of retelling a story using correct details and chronology. Once in school, however, the children of Trackton and Roadville found that the language expectations were different than in their homes (Heath, 1983).

Attitudes toward literacy and specifically written text varied in each community. In Roadville, text was seen as an authority. In Trackton, the written word was something that could be negotiated and manipulated. The townspeople read for leisure and to find information. Heath concluded that the measure of success of the children from each community depended on the continuity or discontinuity of the literacy uses and expectations between home and school. The children of the dominant group families with more educational experiences and higher paying jobs experienced greater success in the institution of school than did the children of the poorer, working-class families (Heath, 1983). Basically, differing constructions concerning reading were exhibited across the three communities.

Other researchers (Wells, 1986; Taylor & Dorsey-Gaines, 1988) have also shown the disparity between the literacy experienced before children enter school and the expectations of early reading. Children exposed to school literacy before entry to formal
education gain power over children from families who do not experience the types of literacy privileged in school. Associated with teachers’ constructions about teaching, Pajares (1992) described how attitudes about a particular issue possibly lead to future behaviors, called *action plans*:

A teacher’s attitude about a particular educational issue may include beliefs connected to attitudes about the nature of society, the community, race, and even family. These connections create the values that guide one’s life, develop and maintain other attitudes, interpret information, and determine behavior. (p. 319).

Understanding, significance, and meaning are developed in coordination with other human beings and life experiences. Processed information is constructed to form the attitudes and beliefs which are often reconsidered when individuals interact with new people and have new experiences.

Literacy delineates boundaries that distinguish *us* from *them*, and *safe* from *unsafe*. These boundaries suggest, both metaphorically and literally, how power is inscribed in a different way whether personally, or in the context of culture and history. When literacy is defined in grand terms, using linear logic that removes all uncertainty, it only acknowledges the boundaries drawn by those with privilege from the dominated group (Giroux, 1992).

**Literacy as a Form of Dominance**

The ideological basis of the current education climate was formed during President Reagan’s presidential term, primarily established by conservatives such as E. D. Hirsch, Jr., and Allan Bloom. In the 1988 manifesto *Cultural Literacy: What Every*
American Needs to Know, Hirsch forcefully argued that children in the U.S. were being deprived of the core knowledge needed to function in contemporary society. And while his realization that text comprehension depended on the reader's background knowledge was significant, his extremely controversial notions concerning what content should be taught to all American children was narrow and reactionary. His Core Knowledge Series proposed a neo-conservative body of knowledge of the facts and traditional lore based on the culture, values, and history of the dominant national culture. In this instance, cultural literacy comprises only the culture of one group, White, middle-class males.

Likewise, Bloom (1987) in The Closing of the American Mind expressed concern about the influence of music and popular media that was taking the place of knowledge taken from what he considered the Great Books. Bloom believed that classic literature written by Aristophanes, Plato, Shakespeare, and Rousseau provided the intellectual knowledge needed for success in school and in life. These curricular guides presented an agenda and purpose for shaping public schooling and higher education under the terms of a cultural discourse in which the concept of diversity is seen as a threat to dominant American culture. This intellectually colonizing perspective and practice allows the dominant group to control and subjugate non-dominant groups. Within this discourse the subject of culture and schooling is viewed first and foremost as a way of assimilating diversity, rather than embracing it. This neo-conservative attitude cites the radical social movements of the 1960s and more recent movements, such as feminism and others. The effect of neoconservative education reform has been tremendously imbalanced. Suburban school districts have managed to sustain high performing
schools, while urban districts, which serve primarily children from non-dominant groups, have declined. Many inner-city schools have been reduced to overcrowded, unsanitary, and often under staffed environments missing even the most essential textbooks and materials needed for teaching and learning (Kozol, 1992).

Schools produce knowledge, and provide students an opportunity to recognize their position, worth, and individuality in their community. The curriculum, including the instructional methods, textbooks, and activities to support learning are preselected representations of the skills, values, specific histories, and ways of existing in the world. The political and ethical question here is, "Whose history, story, and experience prevail in the school setting? In other words, “who speaks for whom, under what conditions, and for what purpose?” (Giroux, 1992, p. 4). In this respect, schools are not neutral institutions, but are deeply occupied in modes of inclusion and exclusion that produce particular moral truths and values. Questions regarding literacy must also be considered. For example, whose literature traditions should mold what is deemed literacy with which discourse and texts and in whose interests? Can literacy practices be redefined to include digital technologies and other blended forms of social and economic identities? Freire’s (1970) primary point was that literacy is political, its application and operation are acts of power in a complicated political system where language, literacy, and systems of representation are rationalized for social and economic power (Luke, 2003).

Success in most U.S. public schools requires particular dominant culturally based knowledge and behaviors (Apple, 2006). For non-dominant groups, this knowledge is not always made explicit. Without such knowledge, these children and families remain
excluded from the activities that support success in schools. In this way, children from the dominant group are privileged; society accommodates them. Privilege is about how society accommodates one group and the advantages they have that they deem normal. People of privilege believe the advantages are available to anyone who is willing to work hard to earn them. Minority groups, who traditionally have been considered to lack the literacy skills necessary to be successful in school and in life, frequently provide an environment rich in language for their children. But this particular environment may not contain the specific literacy experiences that adhere to the school's expectations. In terms of contribution, resources, and culturally significant interactions, school-based literacy interactions can create a cultural connection or disconnection between the home and school. Literacy is also a social construct which exists in relation to arrangement of power in society. This is not a particular problem for those families who have access to power. For those families without strong influence in the school, particularly of minority group status, the overt power relationship may deny them academic success. An important characteristic of this relation of power is the confirmation or rejection of the individual’s cultural identity in the process of literacy learning.

Problematizing the present begins with interpreting the past. In the following sections, I describe three theoretical perspectives associated with early reading – reading readiness, emergent literacy, and the definition of early reading that has emerged from current policy and provides examples of instructional practices that correspond with each. While there are certain distinctions that could be made within each perspective, I offer these categories as heuristic to explain the range of viewpoints
that affect reading instructional practices in contemporary elementary classrooms. These widely espoused constructions of early literacy may be similar to those of the teachers involved in this study. They are certainly embedded in the materials, the curricula, the policies, and the professional development experiences that are a part of the context in which these teachers work.

Research-based and Policy-based Constructions Reading

In the 1830s, methods of teaching reading were purely alphabetic, with letters taught independently of their relationship to sounds. Religion, the motivation for many people to learn to read, greatly influenced reading materials and instructional methodology, and it would be difficult, if not impossible, to separate these religious influences from American reading instruction. This changed with the introduction of Noah Webster's *American Spelling Book* as the first textbook focusing on pronunciation and enunciation. This commonly used treatise on grammar, history, and geography of the United States taught five generations of Americans how to read and how to spell. The book was revised several times and came to be known as the "blue-back speller." And while the book was less religious and more secular, it indoctrinated readers to the social values espoused by Webster, including issues of morality in the form of essays titled *The Description of a Good Boy* and *The Description of a Bad Boy*.

*McGuffey Readers* books, first published in 1836, largely replaced the blue-backed speller as the most used and highly influential school textbook. The series became a six volume set of leveled reading books based on the phonics method of teaching reading and included moral and ethical lessons. The initial publication contained stark Calvinistic leanings. Later editions were softened to a non-
denominational religious approach even though broad civic values such as frugality, honesty, hard work, and kindness were emphasized. The readers were as materialistic as they were moralistic and used for teaching a simple system of rewards—gold and silver—for virtuous behavior and of punishment—swift and terrible—for improper behavior. The ideal American was modeled on the White, Anglo-Saxon Protestant. During the last half of the 19th century, virtually every publicly schooled American learned to read through the moral and ethical lessons found within the McGuffey Readers.

At the turn of the 20th century, reading was synonymous with literacy appreciation. Some scholars believed the readers lacked literary merit and argued that children should read quality literature, not the insipid offerings in contemporary readers. As part of a set of reforms intended to bring about a return to classicism, Charles Eliot, then president of Harvard University, called for their elimination from the classroom. Smith (2002) quoted Eliot in the following:

It would be well for the advancement of the whole public school system if every reader were hereafter to be absolutely excluded from the school. I object to them because they are not real literature; they are but scraps of literature (p. 113).

The turn of the 20th century ushered in a time of scientific investigation. Several research studies were published in the United States primarily psychologist and medical researchers studying eye movement, visual perception, and reading speed (Smith, 2002). Data accumulated during World War I indicated that 25% of men who entered the draft could not read a newspaper or write a letter home. This lack of literacy among the military meant that many soldiers could not read well enough to understand the
printed instructions necessary for operating machinery and handling firearms. Public schools were blamed, and assessments were created to try and determine why children experienced difficulty learning to read. For more than a century, America’s classrooms have been under surveillance by psychologists, sociologists, educators, and politicians as a giant laboratory for discovering the key to reading success.

*Reading Research and Instruction in the 20th Century*

Early scientific constructions defined reading as an active visual process (Huey, 1908). Huey (1908) viewed the process of reading from a psychological perspective, as a complex interplay of the "most intricate workings of the mind" (p. 6). By using an apparatus similar to a contact lens with an aluminum pointer attached, Huey tracked the movement of the readers’ eyes as they read passages of text. He found that the eyes do not follow a smooth path along each word and sentence, but that the readers’ eyes make a series of short pauses and regressions. In other words, reading is not a passive process of word-by-word recognition. Readers make choices about where and when to focus while reading. His findings led to questions about the cognitive nature of the reading process and questions about where eyes stop, why they stop, how long eyes linger on words. Huey laid the foundation for the scientific movement to influence education research for a decade, from 1910 to 1920.

*Reading as Reason* was Thorndike’s (1917a) study on comprehension and may be the most extensively quoted reading research study. Thorndike (1917a, 1917b) supported the importance and value of the written word and contributed to the study of comprehension processes by gathering data on a reading comprehension test consisting of paragraphs followed by open-ended questions. By noting reading errors,
he demonstrated the difference between simply mouthing the words and understanding meanings. By identifying patterns in the incorrect responses, Thorndike concluded that incorrect responses stemmed from three types of errors: (a) not knowing the correct meaning of a word, (b) over-potency or under-potency by allocating too much or too little value to a word, and (c) the failure to test responses against subtler implications.

Thorndike (1917a) offered the following analogy:

> Understanding a paragraph is like solving a problem in mathematics. It consists in selecting the right elements of the situation and putting them together in the right relations, and also with the right amount of weight or influence or force for each. The mind is assailed as it were by every word in the paragraph. It must select, repress, soften, emphasize, correlate and organize, all under the influence of the right mental set or purpose or demand. (p. 329)

Thorndike’s (1917a, 1917b) view of reading as a reasoning process was shaped by a psychological perspective and as a social-cognitive activity. In Thorndike’s view, understanding is a function of both the text and the questions asked about it. Comprehension is dependent on the readers’ background knowledge and their abilities to transfer learning from one area to another.

*The Reading Wars*

Various approaches to reading presume that students learn differently. While one group thought that reading readiness was the result of maturation, or the *natural* process, the other group believed that experiences with literacy could promote, or *nurture* readiness. These differing points of view are the basis of the major
philosophical differences that have exemplified the research on early childhood studies throughout the years.

Reading Readiness and the Nature Perspective

In the 1920s, educators proposed that the early years could be a period of preparation for reading and writing. In 1925, the National Society for the Study of Education (NSSE) devoted their entire yearbook to the topic of reading instruction. Contributor William S. Gray in a chapter titled “Essential Objectives of Instruction in Reading” encouraged reading for comprehension and enjoyment. Gray (1925) believed lessons should take into consideration children’s background knowledge and interests to introduce reading as a thought-getting process. Strategies to teach reading shifted from the mechanics of letter-sound relationships and oral reading to sight word vocabulary and silent reading. Researchers noted that the richness of readers’ vocabularies was important to comprehension. If readers come across an unknown word, they must decode it. If the decoded word is part of their vocabulary, readers understand the word. If not, they must rely on pictures or context clues to make meaning.

Also in 1925, the National Committee on Reading published the first specific reference to the concept of reading readiness. The committee defined reading readiness as the mastery of a set of visual and auditory discrimination skills needed to learn to read (Whipple, 1925). From this perspective, learning to read was highly correlated with the process of biological maturation.

The readiness period preceded formal instruction in reading which generally began during the second half of first grade. Reading activities, such as stories at
bedtime, were not believed to interfere with later formal instruction. However, these activities were not believed to support the acquisition of reading skills.

Morphett and Washburne (1931) published a correlational study of intelligence (via mental age) and reading. They claimed that formal reading instruction offered before a child reached a mental age of 6½ years was wasteful and simply damaging. During the 1928-1929 school year, 141 Winnetka, Illinois first graders were given the Detroit First-Grade Intelligence Test to determine their mental age. Teachers were not told their students’ scores but taught them to read according to the district’s technique, a 21-step reading program.

In February 1929, students reading progression was measured by the number of steps they had completed in the reading program and a sight-word test of the 139 words most frequently used in primers and first-grade readers (Morphett & Washburne, 1931). The first-grade teachers determined that completion of 13 steps of the reading program and mastery of 37 sight words when tested in February to be the measure of the minimum degree of satisfactory progress. Students were again given the Detroit First-Grade Intelligence Test and the Stanford Binet test to compare mental age as determined by the two tests. The results for this group of first-graders indicated that only a small percentage of children given reading instruction with a mental age less than six years of age were able to achieve satisfactory progress. By waiting until children attain a mental age of six and one-half years, 78% of the children could be expected to make satisfactory reading progress and 87% of the children could be expected to make satisfactory progress mastering sight words.
Morphett and Washburn (1931) laid the foundation for maturation theory to dominate reading instruction until the 1950s. The reading readiness perspective inspired the creation of standardized assessments to determine when a child was ready for reading. Tests, such as the Metropolitan Readiness Test (1933), set the stage for formalized instructional methods to emphasize mastery of visual and auditory pre-reading skills as a prerequisite to beginning reading. Reading readiness assessments determined children’s intellectual maturity and indicated whether children were ready to learn to read. Readiness testing continues in one form or another in schools today (Leong & Bodrova, 2006; Lonigan, Burgess & Anthony, 2000; Nielsen & Monson, 1996).

During this period, Arnold Gesell (1933), a giant in the field of developmental psychology, was formalizing the idea that behaviors have form and that "patterns of behavior in all species tend to follow an orderly genetic sequence in their emergence" (p. 217). Gesell’s (1933) major contribution to the field was a comprehensive schedule of developmental norms. Gesell provided detailed descriptions of typical children to inform and reassure parents and educators that their children were developing normally. His original descriptions were based on photographic catalogs of more than 500 children, 50 children whose ages range from infant to nine years old. These children were conscientiously sampled from the community surrounding Yale University, where Gesell conducted his research, from White, middle-class, European-American homes with two-parent families.

In one account of his work, Gesell (1952) confessed to excluding children who did not fit his homogenous sample, such as children from different cultural and home environments. Yet from this standardized sample, he purported to generalize his
findings to any infant or child. He led the scientific movement of observation of young children using innovative and technically complex methods for collecting considerable amounts of data. By carefully photographing infants and young children in all facets of their lives, Gesell came to believe that "postural patterns are behavioral patterns" (p. 65). Throughout his career, Gesell remained a committed maturationist, even when he could not reconcile his beliefs that development could be understood by biologic destiny with his beliefs in children’s individuality and the contributions of the environment (Thelen & Adolph, 1992).

While clear maturational claims are not characteristic of Piaget’s (1926) original work, his theory of cognitive development has been used by many as the theoretical foundation for the notion that children must progress through specific developmental stages to benefit from formal instruction. This knowledge base which early childhood educators relied on for making decisions about programming and curriculum emphasized that each child matures at his or her individual pace and that a child’s development cannot be hastened or altered to any great degree by experience or instruction. According to this understanding of development, children must be ready for school, and school readiness is a function of developmental age. Researchers claimed that preparation provides an environment that does not interfere with the predetermined process of development of the child. As a result, teachers and parents were warned to postpone early reading until children reached a certain age.

In Piaget’s time period, class and cultural assumptions grounded the representation of middle-class American children from primarily European backgrounds. A strong shift from a religious and philosophical knowledge base to a secular and
psychological one was consistent with the new demand for scientific justification in all fields. Darwin’s use of the scientific method (1859) had shaped the intellectual state of mind, and the popularity of his evolutionary theory brought about a new curiosity in the area of child study. This notion of change over time, a progression of stages from birth to adulthood led many to accept the Piagetian theory of a precise conception of what is vital to child development and success in life. His concept was consistent with the current support for rational and scientifically based knowledge.

Jean Piaget (1926) was a biologist whose early studies were on mollusks. He became interested in the workings of children’s mind following a crisis of faith and a fruitless search for a biological explanation of knowledge. By observing, talking, and listening to children while they worked on exercises, Piaget believed he gained insight on the role of maturation, and children’s increasing capacities to make sense of the world around them. He theorized that children cannot manage certain tasks until they reach a certain level of psychological maturity. He proposed that children’s thinking follows a trajectory of discontinuous development, and that specific moments lead to acceleration of cognition and movement into a new stage with discrete capabilities. Piaget saw these transitions occurring at about 18 months when children move from a sensorimotor to preoperational stage, at seven years when they move from preoperational to concrete operational stage, and finally at 11 years when children move to formal operational stage. The primary difference between these stages is children’s thinking and problem solving abilities. According to Piaget, as children mature they move from making sense of their world through their senses to being guided by perception and appearances to using logic when analyzing concrete objects.
and events. Finally they possess the ability to apply logic to hypothetical and abstract problems (Piaget, 1972, 1990).

Piaget’s premise has been interpreted to mean that before these ages even very clever children are not capable of understanding concepts beyond the major features of their stage of cognitive development. Piaget’s widely accepted assumptions about development are now a pervasive influence and used as the basis for school programming and curriculum in early childhood education. Walkerdine (1984) and Burman (2007) theorized that Piaget’s stage theory is too rigid and that many children are able to think and problem solve using concrete operations earlier than Piaget thought.

Reading Readiness and the Nurture Perspective

Established in the ideology of pragmatism rather than idealism, progressive educators such as John Dewey and Jerome Bruner incorporated elements of Piaget’s theory into the pedagogical method known as constructivism. Utilizing developmental psychology, the progressives designed curriculum that would encourage cooperative learning as well as allow children to develop at their own individual pace. For early childhood, this model manifested in the 1960s with the construction of Head Start programs. For behaviorists promoting a narrow academic agenda, this model offered a somewhat broader conception of intellectual growth. For constructionists, focusing on socioemotional issues, the basis for educational decision-making was psychological criteria.

In 1955, Rudolf Flesch published *Why Johnny Can’t Read* which directed criticism at the reading programs created by the progressives which stressed reading in
context. Jeanne Chall (1967) made a recommendation to return to an early emphasis on phonics in her book titled *Learning to Read: The Great Debate*. Almost simultaneously, Bond and Dykstra’s (1967) *First Grade Studies*, which were a large-scale collaborative effort, indicated that no single method of reading instruction could serve all children. Rather, Bond and Dykstra interpreted their data as a set of *best practices* needed for teachers to have a strong understanding of a variety of methods to best meet the needs of their students. With this line of reasoning, Bond and Dykstra implied that the reasons children have difficulty learning to read are related to the quality and method of the instructional program and not in the presence or absence of any predetermined level of readiness or mental age. This view reiterated Gates’ (1937) observations about readiness in the 1930s and Gray’s (1969) explanation that the correlation coefficient of 0.65 between mental age and progress in learning to read signifies that environmental factors other than mental age influence learning to read.

This body of research emphasized the significance of children’s early experiences and the importance of exposing children to literacy activities in order to help them get ready to read rather than simply waiting for them to reach an appropriate level of readiness as a result of the passage of time. Proponents of this point of view claimed that with appropriate literacy experiences, children’s reading readiness could be accelerated.

These results, along with the cultural and social revolution of the 1960s, led to the beginnings of the Head Start programs. This intervention program was designed to provide opportunities for those labeled as economically disadvantaged, so they would begin public school on the same level as their non-disadvantaged peers to help support
school success (Teale & Sulzby, 1986). The notion that it was necessary to teach prerequisite skills for beginning reading became a vital part of the isolated skill approach in basal reading programs. Curriculum changes were also seen, as the knowledge and skills typically taught in first grade were now part of kindergarten classrooms. The introduction of reading readiness programs, usually from basal reading series, became a fundamental component of kindergarten curricula (Teale & Sulzby, 1986).

The infant studies of the 1960s and 1970s (Brazelton, 1969; Bruner, 1960; Kagan, 1971) ushered in a shift in the readiness perspective by showing that even before beginning school, young children are learning. Bruner (1960) conducted a longitudinal study of 180 first-born Caucasian infants and found a relationship between infants’ fixation time, measured by attentiveness to visual events, and parental education. By observing infants during four sessions between the ages of four and 27 months, Bruner identified class differences in development. Bruner’s data came from infant fixation times to presented stimuli such as the images of regular or scrambled human faces; common objects such as dolls, bows, and flowers; and geometric forms. Operating from a belief that well-educated mothers provided more face-to-face contact, vocalized more often, and rewarded their attempts than did poor mothers, Bruner concluded that longer fixation times resulted in the ability of schools to attract and maintain children’s focused attention to result in academic success. This realization created a shift from reading readiness as maturation to readiness as a result of nurture.

Despite the introduction of programs for early literacy, the readiness tests of the 1960s continued following the practice of the previous 30 years. Throughout education, the 1970s ushered in a movement to mastery learning and skills management
approaches to curriculum. Readiness tests consisted of the subtests, such as visual discrimination, auditory discrimination, and vocabulary knowledge, seen in the original readiness tests. The newer tests included letter-sound correspondence. Diagnostic information, indicating strengths and weaknesses, began to appear on standardized readiness tests.

While the readiness tests and classroom instruction of this era were most closely aligned with the philosophy of an isolated skills approach to reading, the research was not. A new approach to looking at beginning reading began in the late 60s and continued into the 80s. Both the readiness and sub-skills approaches to early reading were rejected. In 1966, Marie Clay coined the term *emergent literacy* for her dissertation, which would come to define this new approach to early reading (Clay, 1966).

*Emergent Literacy*

Emergent literacy considers all of the child's interactions with literacy, including books, environmental print, reading, and writing, as important steps to becoming an independent reader and writer (Teale & Sulzby, 1986). This also suggests that learning to read and write in a print-rich environment is as natural as learning speech is in a language-rich environment (Goodman, 1967; Goodman, 1984; Goodman & Goodman, 1979). The term emergent literacy appropriately defines this perspective because learners are in the process of becoming literate as they actively engage with literacy throughout their world (Teale & Sulzby, 1986). The term readiness implies that the ability to learn to read relies on cognitive maturity and suggests the presence of a period
in which children do not have the skills needed to become readers. Obviously, such a suggestion is contrary to the emergent literacy perspective.

The term *emergent literacy* first appeared in educational literature in the mid-1960s, but the perspective did not reach prominence until the mid-1980s. This was due to the research of W.H. Teale and Elizabeth Sulzby. In their review of the literature on literacy development, Teale and Sulzby (1986) made note that until the 1920s, research primarily focused on early reading in the elementary school years. In the 1920s, however, educators began to recognize that the early childhood and kindergarten years were a *period of preparation* for reading and writing. The notion of emergent literacy gave rise to two different research interests in early reading. While one group thought that reading readiness was the result of maturation, or the *natural* process, the other group believed that experiences with literacy could promote, or *nurture*, readiness. These differing points of view are the basis of the major philosophical differences that have exemplified the research on early childhood studies throughout the years.

The emergent literacy perspective continued focusing on more organic methods and on meaning and strategy instruction (Smith, 1979; Resnick & Resnick, 1977). Educators began to believe that it was important to emphasize meaning in the teaching, and 1970s and 1980s included greater emphasis placed on deriving meaning on text. Before this period, the research on reading and writing focused only on the elementary school years, with the assumption that the earlier years (kindergarten and below) were not really that important in the acquisition of literacy and that the secondary years were a time to use reading skills to learn content.
Beginning with Kenneth Goodman’s study of oral reading miscues, published in 1965, a major shift in the perspective for teaching and learning to read and write arrived. His study of reading miscues of words in isolation and words in story context is considered by some to be the most influential study on beginning reading to ever be published. While he never intended his exploratory study with a budget of $250 to earn classic status, nonetheless, the implications of his study gained a broad and captive audience among researchers and educators. The subjects for his study were 100 children in grades one through three from an inner city school in Detroit. He planned to use linguistics to examine reading in the real word of a racially mixed, working-class community with struggling readers. He created a word list that sampled the words of the books of a basal series in order to test the widespread belief among teachers that students could not read words in isolation, but could recognize them in story context. First graders were able to read two-thirds of the words in story context they missed in isolation and third graders read four-fifths of them (Goodman, 1965).

The movement which became known as “whole language” began as a grassroots approach to literacy which focuses on the process and content, rather than product and skills. The philosophy known as the whole language approach is described as a set of beliefs about literacy acquisition through the implementation of literature-based, process instruction (Reyes, 1992). Relatedly, emergent literacy constructs reading and writing as being acquired concurrently and connectedly in literate environments. The process of learning to read is believed to develop as children accumulate knowledge of the spoken and written language (Leong & Bodrova, 2006; Saracho & Spodek, 2003).
Exposure to a variety of literacy experiences during the early years is considered important to future successful acquisition of reading skills (Lonigan et al., 2000).

Another important study emerged in 1971 concerning the process of early literacy learning in the area of the phonological-orthographic characteristics of language. Charles Read analyzed the writing of preschool children and discovered that with no formal instruction, they attempted to spell based on their knowledge of the sounds of letters. He observed that as part of the natural process of early writing, children attempted to choose phonetic spellings to write words from their daily vocabularies. Based on these observations, invented spelling was to some extent accepted and encouraged in classrooms (Read, 1971) and paralleled invented spelling for writing acquisition with the process used to learn to speak.

Marie Clay (1979) used the term emergent literacy to describe the behaviors used by young children with books and when reading and writing, even though the children could not yet actually read and write. She also emphasized the importance of the relationship between writing and reading in early literacy development (Clay, 1979). Until then, educators believed that children must learn to read before they could learn to write. Clay also advocated for one-on-one instruction, more so for children who struggled to learn to read:

Why is a switch to individual instruction so powerful in its effect? It allows for a revolutionary change in teaching, devising lessons which work out from what the child can already do, and not from the teacher’s preselected programme sequence. When two or three children are taught in a group the teacher cannot make this change; she has to choose a compromise path, a new move for “the
group.’ To get results with the lowest achievers the teacher must work with the particular (and very limited) response repertoire of a particular child using what he knows as the context within which to introduce him to novel things. (1994, p. 8)

Her work led to the creation of Reading Recovery, a supplementary education program designed to support first graders struggling to learn to read. The program provides support through social interaction and combines the methods of intensive phonics and the whole language approach. Teachers receive specialized instruction in observation skills and the ability to scaffold children as they construct the cognitive systems needed to become readers and writers (Clay, 1994).

Children engaged in conversation with their parents are more confident and fluent readers at school (Hart & Risley, 1995). Betty Hart and Todd Risley collaborated for decades searching for ways to increase the vocabularies of young children from low-income homes. Working in the Kansas City area, they spent more than two years intensely observing the oral language habits of 42 ordinary families. They categorized the households as professional, working class, and welfare families and gathered a vast amount of data during the study and longitudinal continuation study. Each month, for one hour, and over the course of two and one-half years, they recorded every word spoken in the homes. Ultimately, they coded and analyzed 1,318 transcripts. They found that often, children from the welfare families heard far fewer words by three years of age than did the children from professional families. In fact, by age three, the recorded vocabularies of the children from professional families were larger than the parents living on welfare, indicating that not only was the quantity of talk greater but also
the variety of words spoken was greater within the homes of the professional families. The longitudinal data demonstrated a strong relationship between vocabulary size at three years of age and test scores at nine and ten years of age in areas of listening, syntax, vocabulary, listening, and reading comprehension.

Children with access to literature and stories in their homes learn to read earlier, read more fluently, and have better attitudes toward reading (Wells, 1986). Gordon Wells (1986) used the Bristol Study of Language Development to document the language acquisition of 32 British children from one year of age until they completed elementary school. Data were collected at homes and schools. Some of the children were first introduced to written language at home in the context of social interaction and primarily a bedtime story. Children being read to most frequently during the preschool years strongly predicted literacy ability when they began formal schooling and their academic success at ages five and ten years.

Not all children enter school with the same literacy experiences. Stanovich (1986) described the phenomenon whereby children who begin school with weak literacy skills remain struggling readers throughout schooling and beyond as the Matthew Effects in which the rich get richer and the poor get poorer. Using a longitudinal research design, Stanovich pared down the number of relationships between individual differences and success in reading. Children who successfully acquire a great deal of interlocking knowledge about reading are often more successful in the acquisition of reading skills which improves their chances for continuing to be successful with more challenging reading in later grades. For example, as children move into grades in which they are no longer learning to read, but are reading to learn,
children who are still struggling with reading fall farther and farther behind. Struggling readers incur cognitive, behavioral, and motivational consequences that affect other areas of academic success.

Because children vary widely in literacy experiences, no one teaching method or approach works effectively with all children (Clay, 1979; Snow, Griffin & Burns, 2005). Despite the fact that most early childhood educators embrace the concept of emergent literacy in the preschool setting, many express concern that this approach neglects the development of foundational skills children need for learning to read and write (Neuman & Roskos, 2005). While studying the effects of a theme related play center, something typically found in a preschool classroom, Susan Neuman and Kathy Roskos found that while children were exposed to everyday literacy objects, such as maps, grocery lists, menus, and mail, they were not always involved with them in meaningful ways. The researchers found that often the four-year-old participants had actively played with these objects but could not identify them or describe their purpose. The children did not just need objects to play with, but they also needed the vocabulary and knowledge about what people would do with them and why.

Rather than present isolated skills, emergent literacy allows children to develop strategies as they construct meaning with language (Strickland & Shanahan, 2004). Young children come to school with a variety of literacy knowledge. One might know a great deal about books and other text materials. Another might have writing experience. Others might recognize their name, or most of the letters of the alphabet. Some have clusters of skills, and some may have little experience in the literacy
activities valued at school. Still, it is rare to find children entering school without some literacy knowledge.

"Literacy is deeply embedded in the culture of the family and community, functioning primarily as an aspect of human activity rather that a set of isolated skills" (Sulzby & Teale, 1991, p. 744). Sulzby and Teale expanded the purview of research on emergent literacy by taking the orientation toward the children's literacy perspectives taking place within the influences of cultural environments which immerse them, to diverse degrees, in a variety of literacy activities. Much of their research took place in natural environments, using observation techniques, asking simple questions of children, such as verbally saying, "Read your own way." Teale and his or her colleagues conducted research at the San Diego Laboratory of Comparative Human Cognition investigating the literacy activities of 24 White, Black, and Hispanic children from low-income families. Literacy was a part of the social lives of all the children but in different forms and functions. The majority of the times, literacy activities were used to mediate other activities (e.g., sharing information, paying bills, and entertainment). These findings were consistent with Heath (1983) and Taylor and Dorsey-Gaines (1988).

It is difficult to summarize emergent literacy, as it encompasses the very beginning stages of literacy and is seen as the scope of behaviors related to learning to read and write including those seen in very young children just beginning to use language to communicate and to older children participating in more conventional literacy activities. This perspective underscores the interconnected nature of acquiring literacy skills and acknowledges that it involves a process of change.
Methods of reading instruction have been a source of controversy since formal schooling became compulsory. The struggle involves not only debates about the strategies deemed acceptable for reading instruction but also about who has power over the curriculum and the pedagogy of teaching and learning. Policies can stem from a single viewpoint, or from a collection of connected views. Regardless, these guiding principles have social, political, and historical context. Any discussion of policy should speak both about the values and ideologies of the dominant group and articulate a visioning process to link communities and end domination and oppression (Edmondson, 2004).

In 1990, Marilyn Jager Adams proposed a balanced approach to literacy that incorporated the best elements from phonics instruction and the whole language approach. This approach was widely accepted by districts as a means to create consensus among teachers and parents holding different perspectives about early reading. That same year, National Education Goals established by the U.S. Congress required standards-based education reform based on the principles of outcomes-based education (Public Law 103-227, Goals 2000, 1990). As a result, only scientifically-based curriculum programs leading to measurable improvement in student achievement could be used in public schools.

In the US, the way public school teachers introduce the topic of reading instruction to young children has become more complex than ever. No longer can teachers tailor their instruction to meet the needs of their students. In contemporary society, teachers must adhere to the dominant ideologies that continue to shape
education. Current literacy policy began to take root with Bill Clinton’s America Reads and the Reading Excellence Act and continued with George W. Bush’s Reading First policy (Edmondson & Shannon, 2002). Unlike the Clinton-backed program, the Bush education policies were very specific in stating exactly what should happen in public school classrooms.

Clinton’s Reading Excellence Act was first proposed in 1997 shortly after he initiated plans for the America Reads program during his State of the Union Address in 1996. Again, education was expressly associated with the economy and described as an equation of reading success. Neoliberalism is a global political ideology that emphasizes free-market, capitalistic principles in all areas of society, including education, politics, and commerce. This neoliberal policy promoted reading as necessary for global economic success. America Reads specified three main goals all related to core neoliberal values. These goals were as follows: (a) foster economic growth through academic success as it relates to labor market success, (b) create a shared sense of community to promote assimilation, and (c) create efficient educational methods imitating a business model (Edmondson, 2004).

Representative Bill Goodling (R-Pennsylvania), Chairman of the House Education and Workforce Committee, proposed the Reading Excellence Act to Congress in 1998. This act was seen as a neoconservative challenge to the Democrats’ America Reads agenda by representing an ideology that combines liberal beliefs that all should have equal opportunities with conservative values of order, continuity, and the belief that ultimately individuals are responsible for their own education and rank in society. The proposed version of the Reading Excellence Act
specified four major goals related to neoconservative values. First, all children can learn. Second, curriculum must be based on valid, scientific research. Third, the role of the family should be emphasized by creating high-quality family literacy programs. Fourth, federal funding of special education should be limited to reduce the number of children inappropriately referred.

A great deal of compromise between all parties resulted in a policy enacted on October 21, 1998. The new policy specified how reading should be taught and included a commitment to using only systematic, scientifically-based curriculum and training for teachers (Edmondson & Shannon, 2002). The led Congress to direct the U.S. Department of Education and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services to convene a panel of respected literacy experts to examine the prevention of reading difficulties. The National Research Council (NRC) published Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998) in which it examined the effectiveness of interventions for young children at risk of having problems learning to read. The report included recommendations on ways to promote high quality reading instruction. Snow et al. (1998) stated that adequate initial reading instruction requires children to:

- use reading to obtain meaning from print, have frequent and intensive opportunities to read, [be] exposed to frequent, regular spelling-sound relationships, learn about the nature of the alphabetic writing system, and understand the structure of spoken words. (p. 3)

Snow et al. (1998) recommended that first through third grade beginning reading programs include explicit instruction and practice that directs children’s attention to "the
alphabetic principle, reading sight words, reading words by mapping speech sounds to parts of words, achieving fluency, and comprehension” (“Recommendations,” para. 1). An introduction to alphabetic reading is contingent upon understanding the letter-sound relationship. The NRC panel believed that comprehension difficulties could be prevented by continually building on existing background and conceptual knowledge beginning in the earliest grades through instruction focused on vocabulary growth and direct instruction strategies such as summarizing and predicting. Comprehension also takes practice, which is gained by reading independently, by having students read in pairs or groups, and by being read to aloud by a teacher or each other (Snow et al., 1998).

Congress was dissatisfied with the report, stating that the "consensus document based on the best judgments of a diverse group of experts in reading research and reading instruction" (NICHHD, 2000, p. 1) did not critically review and assess the existing literature leading to a prescription stating how reading skills should be taught. As a result, Congress commissioned a National Reading Panel (NRP) and gave them instructions to conduct a thorough review of the body of research relating to early reading and disseminate the information to public schools across the nation. While the instructions were somewhat open-ended, the NRP chose to eliminate all studies that did not adhere to their rigorous research methodological standards. These standards reflected the political scientific-based research trends and the personal ideologies of the report’s authors. NRP stated that instruction in systematic phonics, phonemic awareness, fluency, and comprehension strategies were important components in an effective reading program. Undoubtedly, the NRP report made a substantial political
and curricular impact on the reading instruction policies of American public schools (Cunningham, 2001).

The majority of the NRP’s critics applauded its hard work and dedication to the project and believed that in its final form, the entire report held a wealth of information. Some cited important inconsistencies between the actual NRP findings, the summary document, and the interpretations made by commercial reading companies who cited the report as the basis for their reading programs (Cunningham, 2001). "Systematic phonics instruction makes a bigger contribution to children's growth in reading than alternative programs providing unsystematic or no phonics instruction" (Carnine, Silbert, Kami’enui, & Tarver, 2003, p. 140). A closer look at the evidence to support this claim indicated that phonics instruction led to increased scores on standardized phonics tests, just as teaching fluency led to increased scores on standardized fluency tests and teaching comprehension led to increased scores on standardized reading comprehension tests. However, the adoption of scientifically based curriculum as mandated in the NRP report did not translate into improvements in making meaning from text (Meier, 2009).

Looking at the report as a whole, immediate concerns related to the number of studies ($N = 100,000$) available about reading instruction and the actual number of studies ($n = 300$) reviewed for the final report (Meier, 2009). Thus, the NRP reviewed less than 0.003 of the available reading instruction studies by citing that the bulk of studies did not reach its inclusion standards. Appropriate studies might have been excluded in the name of science. The majority of the areas of reading instruction at which the NRP targeted its efforts yielded only three or fewer studies for drawing any
conclusion about the effectiveness of individual strategies. Also, important areas relating to literacy were not even addressed by the NRP, such as family literacy, availability of reading materials, and attitude toward reading (Cunningham, 2001).

Perhaps the most critical problem with the NRP report was the very definition of reading proposed by the NRP. Instead of defining reading as the process of making meaning from text, the NRP defined reading as an isolated set of skills that can be taught and learned. For example, reading was defined as decoding words in isolation, pronouncing nonsense words, segmenting words into phonemes, and pronouncing individual letters. While the NRP seemed to indicate that children need knowledge of letter-sound correspondence in order to become efficient readers, the most effective methods to these skills could not be concluded from the studies reviewed by the NRP.

As federal policy increasingly influences early literacy instructional practice in American schools and currently requires using only those methods deemed to be proven effective by scientifically based research, early childhood educators must be aware of the types of studies used to influence early literacy instruction. Many NRP report readers are likely to agree with at least one or more of its findings, even though some critics (e.g., Cunningham, 2001; Meier, 2009) found the panel’s methodology problematic.

For example, Cunningham (2001) noted that for many of the categories explored, the panel included very few studies that met their research methodological standards. Therefore, the sub-committee that reviewed studies relating to reading comprehension did not have enough available studies to conduct a meta-analysis. This problem did not prevent the NRP from making instructional recommendations concerning
comprehension. The NRP found that teaching compression strategies is a complex process but could not discern nor recommend best methods or combinations of methods to ensure a sound reading program (NICHHD, 2000).

Concerns about U.S. economic global competitiveness and the community and political perceptions of the public school system intensified high-stakes assessments and requirements for curriculum based on research or practices branded as scientifically validated. The National Early Literacy Panel (NELP, 2008), funded by the National Institute for Literacy, synthesized early literacy education research to provide clues as to what skills and abilities of young children need to predict reading success (Strickland & Shanahan, 2004). The NELP findings were consistent with the key components of emergent literacy presented in the position statement on developmentally appropriate practices for young children learning to read and write prepared by the National Association for the Education of Young Children and the International Reading Association (NAEYC, 1998). According to these groups, effective programs that promote language and early literacy include the following broad categories: (a) phonemic awareness referring to alphabetic knowledge and the ability to recognize speech units (e.g., words, syllables, and sounds); (b) oral language referring to listening comprehension, vocabulary development, and verbal expression; (c) print knowledge referring to an understanding and awareness of the concepts of print, including environmental print and invented spelling (NAEYC, 1998; Snow et al., 2005; Strickland & Shanahan, 2004).

An almost immediate and scathing response to the NELP (2008) report was issued (Barnett & Frede, 2009; Dickinson et al., 2009). Numerous accounts since have
either supported or criticized the published findings and determinations. While the report underscored the significance of early literacy abilities and future reading success, its critics believed that the conclusions might be construed as a call to teach the code skills that are the easiest to measure and change. A good reading foundation, according to Dickinson et al. (2009), requires sufficient preparation in comprehensive language development, background, and conceptual knowledge. Children can master the mechanics of reading and learn to decode text but may not be ready to make meaning from the text.

This contemporary narrow definition of reading favors traditional forms of literacies and texts and ignores the variety of new technologies and new forms of text. Hassett (2006) investigated ways in which alphabetic print governs the sense of literacy in school. Children who begin formal school with a great deal of knowledge about alphabetic print have a better chance of success at school. Preschool children, however, are exposed to a variety of beliefs and practices concerning the value and use of print.

Print media is just one aspect of literacy. Snow et al. (1998) reported that "children live in homes that support literacy development to differing degrees" (p. 57). New and innovative methods of producing books with creative type and illustrations, multiple perspectives of characters, and concepts of interaction are part of the sign systems used by children to experience text. The seemingly permanent notion of text and beginning reading skills devalues these non-linear, multi-modal texts (Hassett, 2006). As researchers recognize the impact of culture on literacy activities, questions must include those asking what children do within a communicative space, what kinds
of agency children have, and what cultural materials children consider important to the social action at hand. Drawing on data collected from a yearlong ethnographic project in an urban elementary school in East San Francisco, Anne Haas Dyson (2001) focused on children’s use of diverse cultural materials to complete school writing projects. Dyson’s participants were aged five to nine years old. Half of the school’s population was African-American; about one-third of the population was European-American; and the remaining population was Latino and Asian. Specifically, Dyson recorded the media references used by a small group of children in their talk and writing over a nine-month period. Dyson spent four to six hours per week observing and audio taping in the classroom.

The children’s landscape was filled with interconnected communicative symbol systems including written language, music, drawing, and the voices they heard on television and radio (Dyson, 2001). Dyson (2001) revealed the non-linearity of literacy development and the use of children’s localized symbols and practices in their speaking and writing. Dyson argued for broadening the school curriculum to include the unexpected symbols and practices children bring to the formal school communicative space.

Extending Dyson’s (2001) research, Compton-Lilly (2006) conducted a case study to examine how one male student’s cultural resources intersected with his literacy learning. Childhood culture, media, sports, video games, and music contribute to the textual tools children use to position themselves within the social network of the classroom and the between spaces of home, school, friends, popular and academic culture. Over the course of an academic year, Compton-Lilly worked with and collected
data during one-to-one sessions with a six-year-old African-American boy struggling with the state-mandated reading program in a Midwestern urban first grade classroom. She interviewed his mother concerning home literacy activities. Compton-Lilly found that several factors, including cultural resources, race, and gender, influenced his development as a reader as he constructed his identity as a reader and his social relationships with teachers and other school personnel. Given the opportunity to access his cultural resources, he began to view himself as a reader (Compton-Lilly, 2006).

Another case study documented the struggle of a male first grader’s experience navigating a scientifically-based, state-mandated reading curriculum for struggling readers on the Eastern side of the country. In New York City, Spencer (2009) collected data as a participant observer in a diverse urban public school over a period of three months. Spencer collected observation data focusing on verbal, written, and gestured communication during three-hour blocks three days a week for the next five months. Spencer found that when aligned with the narrow set of isolated skills deemed necessary for proficiency with the scientifically-based, state-mandated reading curriculum, the first grader could be characterized as a struggling reader. However, as Spencer saw how this child negotiated literacy in his everyday experiences, she recognized how the isolated skills taught in school bore no relationship to the context of his cultural and social purposes (Spencer, 2009).

The socially constructed phenomenon of a struggling reader has infiltrated the literature surrounding early reading since the inception of No Child Left Behind (NCLB, 2002). This term shapes how teachers and children position this group of others in the academic setting. Considering this term is used to describe 40% of first through third
graders in U.S. public schools, it possibly says more about beginning reading policy and curricular context and less about the reader. The importance of the early years and an associated understanding of the problematic literacy achievement gap during the school years between children of poverty or minority cultures and those of more economically advantaged and dominant cultures creates a sense of urgency among policy makers, educators, and researchers to examine the limitations of the NELP report which severely narrows the definition of early literacy and ignores the important role of background knowledge and comprehension (Neuman, 2010). The code-based skills outlined do not sufficiently account for early literacy development. Environments and activities in which broad ranges of skills are learned help children acquire the knowledge, skills, and ways of thinking that build a foundation for literacy learning (Teale, Hoffman, & Paciga, 2010).

While teachers have been positioned as colonizers (Apple, 1995) as a result of the narrowing definition of reading and the subsequent enforcement of mandated curriculums for reading instruction, they now operate transversely as colonizers and the colonized. MacGillivray, Ardell, Curwen, and Palma (2004) applied neocolonial theory for data collected from interviews with teachers in the Los Angeles School District concerning its recent adoption of a state-mandated curriculum program to teach third grade reading. The highly scripted reading program greatly reduced instructional decision making and placed teachers under district surveillance as they closely monitored and controlled instruction and classroom environments. Redefined as unskilled, once highly-regarded expert educators were forced to eliminate reading instruction methods they knew motivated and engaged their students. Struggling
between exerting professional knowledge and the need to contribute as a team player, teachers felt their competence had become stagnant as they searched for ways to meet their students’ needs most effectively by teaching within and between the scripted curriculums (MacGillivray et al., 2004). Because these studies clearly suggest that constructions of early reading embedded in contemporary educational policies strongly influence teachers’ decisions, they are a significant aspect of the context of this investigation of teacher participants’ constructions about early reading.

Teachers’ Constructions of Early Reading

From a pedagogical perspective, learning to read has been viewed as a question of methods. Literacy does not exist as a precise sphere of knowledge agreed upon by researchers, policy-makers, and educators. Without a clear consensus on the definition of literacy, and specifically early reading, the best methods for teaching young children continue to be questioned (Snow et al., 1998).

Early childhood educators tend to believe that learning to read begins long before children enter kindergarten (Moats, 2009). Therefore, the process of early reading has been of interest to most educators of young children. Understanding early literary and instructional methods that foster learning has been a major concern in recent decades. A large body of information has been compiled, researched, and debated. However, educational researchers agree that virtually all children can learn to read. Researchers have demonstrated that literacy experiences vary widely between children, but even children with very different cultural experiences and backgrounds develop literacy as it is used in their homes and communities (Heath, 1983; Snow et al., 2005). Even though
children can gain literacy at home, information about their experiences in preschool is less available.

Less is known about preschool teachers' beliefs regarding how young children learn to read and about how teachers construct these beliefs. Beliefs are those ideas accepted by individuals as truth and are intertwined with individuals' knowledge (Kagan, 1992). Understanding teachers' beliefs is critical, as the teachers, not the researchers or policy makers, engage in daily contact with preschool children. Therefore, teachers' beliefs regarding early reading can be defined to include what preschool teachers think about how young children acquire early literacy skills, what they perceive their role to be in that process, and how they believe early reading programs should be implemented in their classrooms. Teachers' beliefs impact the classroom environment, because teachers practice their beliefs with the children in their classrooms (Raths, 2001). The following sections describe teacher belief studies related to a broad range of teaching practices, societies' beliefs concerning early reading, and teachers' beliefs concerning early reading.

Broad-Based Teachers' Belief Studies

Teacher pedagogical beliefs regarding early reading are important because these beliefs can influence the interpretation and value placed on literacy activities. The decisions teachers make are not accidental or random but are rooted in the teachers’ constructions about how children learn to read and how they may more effectively teach. Researchers of teachers' beliefs about early reading have often paired beliefs with another component of teaching or learning. For example, Smith and Shepard (1988) completed a study of teachers' beliefs and the practice of readiness and
retention of kindergarten students. The kindergarten teachers developed their own guidelines concerning kindergarten readiness and retention. Some regularly retained kindergartners, while others rarely had students repeat the grade. Such informal guidelines reflect the structure, parental influence, and social climate for school community.

Within the broad study, 40 kindergarten teachers were interviewed for one hour to gather qualitative data based on their responses to a series of indirect questions related to their beliefs about retention and readiness (Smith & Shepard, 1988). The interviews were taped, transcribed, and coded. Smith and Shepard (1988) found that the majority of the teachers believed that school readiness was rooted in maturation more than in environmental conditions. Remarkably, the few teachers who reported beliefs that parents could influence readiness had the least number of students who repeated kindergarten. In this regard, the teachers’ beliefs were "grounded in the social and educational contexts within which teachers work" (Smith & Shepard, 1988, p. 308). Even though Smith and Shepard could not determine the cause of the similarities, the teachers’ beliefs seem to be in conflict between school with societal beliefs.

Teachers’ beliefs are often studied in relation to teaching practices, as some consider beliefs a central determinant of how teachers make decisions in classrooms. Vartuli (1999) surveyed and observed 137 educators teaching across various grade levels in a Missouri school district over a five-year period. Each teacher was studied for at least three successive years. Observers spent one hour in the spring and one hour in the fall collecting data with the Classroom Practices Inventory. Vartuli measured the internal consistency of the participants’ self-reports on the Early Childhood Survey of
Beliefs and Practices and the Teachers’ Beliefs Scale. Together, these instruments provided an ample representation of the teachers’ beliefs about issues relating to instruction and learning in the early childhood classroom. Vartuli compared the variations in observed classroom practices and reported beliefs of Head Start, kindergarten, first-grade, second-grade, and third-grade teachers and found that the beliefs and practices of the teachers participating in this study were consistent. The most congruence was found in the beliefs and practices of the preschool teachers. "When teachers believe in and can articulate their philosophy, the results can be positive [with] more children learning" (Vartuli, 1999, p. 551).

Research on teachers’ beliefs is problematic because beliefs are multi-dimensional and complex. However, an underexplored aspect of teachers’ beliefs is the connection to their beliefs about the nature of knowledge. For example, Buehl and Fives (2009) found that teachers’ beliefs varied when considering teaching versus learning or pedagogical versus content knowledge. Fifty-three pre-service and 57 in-service teachers with varying levels of experience from two large U.S. state universities responded to a series of written open-ended questions about their beliefs concerning the nature of teaching knowledge. Because the study was exploratory, Buehl and Fives did not attempt to quantify or compare the regularity of beliefs, but they did identify the types of beliefs and how participants articulated their beliefs. Buehl and Fives developed the Open-Ended Teaching Belief Questionnaire (OTBQ) to gather data concerning the "source and stability of teaching knowledge" (p. 374). Participants believed teaching knowledge comes from a variety of sources including college courses, books, research articles, and the Internet. Explicit experiences, such as
student observations of teaching, also contributed to participants’ beliefs. The majority of sources were less formal and pertained to personal experiences, collaboration, and self-reflection. Understanding the configuration of teachers’ beliefs assisted in making possible learning experiences to expand and support pre-service and in-service teachers’ training experiences. Beliefs about the nature of knowledge influence actions, thoughts, and purpose in the classroom (Buehl & Fives, 2009).

Largely, teachers’ beliefs shape classroom practice. Beliefs arise from a variety of experiences and observations that may be both professional and personal. Teachers’ beliefs guide decision-making, expectations, and classroom behaviors. Teachers’ beliefs may not always reflect the accepted notions in the education field and can be manipulated by the beliefs held by society.

*Potential Influence of Societal Beliefs about Early Reading*

Another aspect of the context of the work of early reading teachers is what people throughout society value. Although perhaps not directly influencing individual teachers' constructions of early reading, these societal attitudes are clearly a part of the context. Approximately 58% of fourth-grade students are not proficient in reading (National Assessment of Educational Progress [NAEP], 2013), and for these struggling students, this gap increases every year (Stanovich, 1986). While this statistic is staggering, little national urgency has emerged to address the challenges in the public school system. Relatively few Americans see education as an important problem facing the nation. According to a ‘Most Important Problem’ phone poll, Americans are most concerned about unemployment (23%) and the economy in general (20%) as has been trending since 2008 (Gallup, 2014). Of the random sample of 1,000 adults, a mere four
percent mentioned education (Gallup, 2014). The current economic problems along with healthcare and national fixation on terrorist activity and global nation building have led resources away from educational reform.

Unlike the economy and terrorism, those in political power are not as affected by problems in public schools as are the majority of Americans. A survey of the members of the 111th Congress revealed that "forty-four percent of Senators and thirty-six percent of Representatives had at one time sent their children to private school" (Heritage Foundation, 2009, p. 2). By comparison, approximately 11% of American children attend private school (Heritage Foundation, 2009). For these reasons, society has sought panaceas, miracle cures, and quick fixes to the problems of the American public education system. These solutions have generated greater focuses on standardized testing, restrictive teaching methods, and the demoralization of teachers who are blamed for the failures of school children. As a result, educational policies mandate the systematic and explicit instruction of a narrow set of skills and concepts considered by a small group of researchers to be the essential components of reading (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development [NICHHD], 2000) and a narrow focus on skill development in very young children (National Early Literacy Panel [NELP], 2008).

*Teachers’ Beliefs Concerning Early Reading*

During the past 30 years, studies examining the competing notion of consistency versus inconsistency between teachers’ beliefs and practices have permeated the field (Fang, 1996). The greatest contributions to the understanding of the relationship between teachers’ beliefs and classroom practice have come from the field of reading.
Attempts to differentiate teachers’ beliefs concerning reading instruction have typically focused on the theoretical notion about how children learn to read as reader-based, text-driven, or some combined interaction between the two approaches as well as on methodological ideas about reading instruction via phonics, skills, or a more holistic approach. Kamil and Pearson (1979) claimed that every teacher operates with at least an implicit model of reading and that the beliefs they hold shape their pedagogy. These beliefs not only shape the manner in which they teach reading but also critically impact how students perceive the process of learning and value of literacy.

Teachers’ beliefs about instructional practices vary widely. Baumann, Hoffman, Moon, and Duffy-Hester (1998) surveyed teachers about their beliefs and priorities and reported on the practices of 1,207 elementary school teachers related to the phonics/whole language debate. Baumann et al. reported that the majority of the teachers (89%) embraced a balanced approach by combining skills instruction with language and literacy activities. Baumann et al. found that 63% of the teachers believed directly teaching students phonics allowed them to become skillful and fluent readers. The majority of the teachers reported using a variety of instructional strategies that included spelling and writing activities, read alouds, word families, and journal writing (Baumann, et al., 1998).

In a study of preschool teachers’ beliefs about literacy instruction, Burgess, Lundgren, Loyd, and Pianta (2001) revealed the increasing academic emphasis in early childhood programs. Burgess et al. examined the self-reported beliefs of 240 preschool teachers from a publically funded Virginia Preschool Initiative program serving three- and four-year-old children. To analyze teachers’ beliefs, Burgess et al. asked teachers
to identify the statements they endorsed out of 11 statements describing various early literacy instructional practices. The majority of the teachers (86%) endorsed providing students with literature and literacy experiences to help them become fluent and skilled readers, yet only two percent endorsed teaching decoding skills as an important goal. These practices were consistent with their reported beliefs of early literacy skills being an essential component of a preschool program. For them, providing direct reading instruction was not essential.

In a more recent study of the beliefs regarding language and literacy instruction, Head Start teachers from a major Eastern seaboard urban area completed surveys revealing the literacy skills they believed to be important, the trajectory of children’s development, and the instructional practices with which they successfully taught these literacy skills (Hindman & Wasik, 2008). Hindman and Wasik (2008) used the Preschool Teacher Literacy Beliefs Questionnaire (TBQ) because the TBQ is comprised of survey items "commonly accepted best practices in the field of early literacy" (p. 483). The study participants were 28 African-American lead teachers. Only one of the 28 teachers was male. The findings were somewhat useful for determining that the beliefs of the Head Start teachers were in accord with currently accepted best practices in early reading. These preschool teachers believed that phonemic awareness, letter knowledge, book reading, and exposure to meaningful literacy activities support later reading ability. While Hindman and Wasik (2008) determined that the beliefs of this sample of Head Start teachers were consistent with the TBQ, they stated that "it would be helpful to understand teachers’ interpretations of the questionnaire items to make sure that these interpretations are comparable" (Hindman & Wasik, 2008, p. 487).
Globally, researchers have been studying preschool teachers’ beliefs concerning early reading. Ure and Raban (2001) studied preschool centers in poor urban and rural areas of Victoria, Australia. Over a period of 18 months, 40 teachers participated in the Pre-school Literacy Project (PLP) by completing a survey with open-ended questions and a two-hour informal interview. The two-part survey requested general background information, including age, gender, education, and experience. Also, participants provided responses to open-ended questions about their beliefs concerning early reading skills. For example, teachers were asked, "What concerns do you have about children’s early reading and writing?" (Ure & Raban, 2001, p. 167).

All of Ure and Raban’s (2001) participants took part in the interviews and offered important insight into their interpretations of the survey questions. These responses "indicated an overwhelming uncertainty about the role of literacy in their programmes" (Ure & Raban, 2001, p. 161). For example, when asked if any of their students could read, 92% of the preschool teachers answered affirmatively. When teachers were interviewed about their responses, Ure and Raban learned that teachers held a variety of concerns "that young children might be pushed into literacy too soon, that their own expectations might be too low, and that parents’ expectations might be too high" (pp. 161-162). Without the follow-up interview, researchers would not have been able to capture the important qualitative data (Ure & Raban, 2001).

In central Canada, Lynch (2009) explored the print literacy beliefs of preschool teachers in a large, urban, diverse area. Eight female preschool teachers participated in 45-minute in-depth semi-structured interviews. Sixteen questions were prepared in advance, and others emerged as the interview progressed. Using a constant
comparative method to analyze the transcripts of the interviews, Lynch identified common themes about how these preschool teachers believed children learned to read and write. For example, some teachers reported feeling uncertain about the methods, best practices, and the appropriate age at which children should learn to read and write. While the teachers explained a variety of ways to support the emerging literacy skills of their students, several of the teachers did not express confidence in their knowledge of the best way to support children’s reading and writing acquisition (Lynch, 2009).

The development of these teacher beliefs about early reading is also reported among students of teacher education programs. Stoube (2009) investigated the emerging beliefs of four preservice elementary teachers during their participation in two University of Iowa reading courses. Stoube compared how participants incorporated various conceptions concerning beginning reading instruction from course work and field experiences into what they already believed about early reading. Using narrative analysis and a survey to determine the participants’ beliefs about beginning reading instruction, Stoube underscored the development of their belief systems during their teacher education experience. Stoube found that the preservice teachers’ beliefs about reading and its instruction were evolving and impacted by their past and current experiences with important socializing agents, such as families and practicum mentors, but not with the beliefs of teacher education course instructors. For example, one participant credited her parents for using workbooks and flash cards with her while she learned to read (Stoube, 2009). This past influence shaped her belief about the critical role of parents in teaching their children to read. Another participant’s beliefs were inspired by a Reading Recovery© teacher she met during a field experience. Stoube
described the method used by the Reading Recovery© teacher as based on students’ needs revealed during ongoing assessments, even though participating students found the Reading Recovery© teacher to be using a creative method. Stoube indicated that new teachers are still open to influence from early experiences.

On the other hand, the relationship between teachers’ beliefs and their resistance to change was examined by Mayo (2010). Mayo used a mixed-methods design to determine whether teachers’ beliefs are consistent with classroom practice and decision making. From a sample of 2,000 West Virginia prekindergarten, first-grade, and second-grade teachers, 427 respondents indicated their beliefs’ impacted classroom practice and their beliefs about beginning reading instruction. While quantitative survey data were the primary source for the study, Mayo collected open-ended qualitative data to support the overall results generated from the survey items and to extend the findings. For example, 20% of the respondents who provided comments indicated a high degree of constraint on preferred practices stating "scripted programs allow for little or no variance to address specific needs" or "too many policies inhibit teacher autonomy" (Mayo, 2012, p. 84). Mayo indicated that participants expressed concern over autonomy and were prevented by state and local policy constraints to use their preferred practices of instruction.

The following points summarize the research findings relevant to teachers’ constructions about early reading:

- Defining beliefs concerning early reading has proven to be a difficult task.
- Children are exposed to the foundations of early reading prior to the start of elementary school.
• Teachers' beliefs concerning the nature of knowledge affect classroom decisions and behaviors.

• Beliefs held by society influence teachers’ beliefs often rooted in a form of personal practical knowledge. Teachers' beliefs concerning early reading are central to the process of socialization and set the climate for learning.

Summary

Little actual research specifically inquiring into teachers’ beliefs concerning early reading has been conducted since the NRP and the NELP reports narrowed the constructions of reading and early reading to the one being applied in today's public schools. Research on teachers' constructions has been framed in questions about their beliefs. This body of research has focused on: (a) the relationship between teachers’ beliefs and practices (Baumann, et al, 1998; Mayo, 2010; Raths, 2001; Smith & Shepard, 1988; Ure & Raban, 2001; Vartuli, 1999); (b) teachers' beliefs associated with child outcomes (Burgess, et al, 2001; Hindman & Wasik, 2008); (c) beliefs about early print literacy (Lynch, 2009); and (d) the association between teachers' beliefs and the nature of knowledge (Buehl & Fives, 2009; Stoube, 2009). Participants typically have been preservice teachers (Buehl & Fives, 2009), teachers from early care and education settings (Burgess, et al, 2001; Hindman & Wasik, 2008; Lynch, 2009; Ure & Raban, 2001), kindergarten teachers (Smith & Shepard, 1988), and primary grade teachers (Baumann, et al, 1998; Mayo, 2010; Stoube, 2009; Vartuli, 1999). Given the implications that teachers’ constructions may serve as contextual filters that shape classroom practice, exploring the constructions that influence the work of early reading
teachers is important; particularly since the implementation of the range of policies directly related to an official definition of reading.
CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this research was to better understand preschool teachers’ constructions of early reading and the process of learning to read and provide a record of preschool teachers’ views about early reading. A series of phenomenological interviews (Spradley, 1979) was used for data collection to gain a richer perspective on the study of this issue. Data were collected by having the participants reflect upon their personal and professional experiences related to the following research questions:

1. What do preschool teachers say about their early reading experiences and the process of learning to read?
2. What do preschool teachers say about how their other life experiences relate to their constructions of early reading and the process of learning to read?
3. What do preschool teachers say about policy and political influences on their constructions of early reading and the process of learning to read?

This chapter provides a description and rationale of the qualitative research methodology used in the study. The following sections particularize the study’s rationale for methodology, participants, procedures for data collection, and the method of data analysis.

Qualitative Research as a Methodological Approach

Qualitative research is an embedded activity that seeks to translate particular feelings and emotions, human conditions, and situations through interpretive and naturalistic inquiry (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). The term qualitative refers to descriptions
or distinctions based on some attribute or characteristic, rather than on some quantity or measured value. Qualitative researchers emphasize the socially constructed nature of reality, the personal relationship between them and what is studied, and the situational constraints that shape inquiry. Such researchers stress the value-laden nature of inquiry. They seek answers to questions that underscore how social experience is created and given meaning.

Denzin and Lincoln (2011) explain that "the use of multiple methods, or triangulation, reflects an attempt to secure an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon in question" (p. 5). Qualitative research is well-matched for studies seeking to gain insight into questions embedded in political and cultural contexts such as early reading. Qualitative research methods have been used in the past to attempt to identify teachers' beliefs (Harste et al., 1984; Kagan, 1992; Smith & Shepard, 1988). I utilized an approach similar to Lynch’s (2009) approach. Lynch examined Canadian preschool teachers’ constructions concerning print literacy development.

The rationale for using qualitative research methodology lies in its naturalistic approach which complements the framework guiding this study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Phenomenological interviews provide insight into the constructions of the participants. According to Spradley, in "interviews, both questions and answers must be discovered from informants" (Spradley, 1979, p. 48). Questions and answers are not distinct components, but imply subsequent questions and answers; a single element in human cognition. The participants were given an opportunity to articulate and make clear their conceptual models concerning early reading. A qualitative approach allowed participants’ self-understanding and emic perspectives to emerge. The decision to
collect data from interviews, rather than use a survey or questionnaire, involved the
likelihood for having more flexibility for me as researcher and for the participants as well
as for collecting greater depth of understanding regarding the teachers' constructions.

Qualitative research as used in this study consists of three interrelated activities
(Denzin & Lincoln, 2003). The first of these activities involves presenting my personal
biography as researcher and the theoretical framework that guides the inquiry. My
personal biography includes early childhood teaching experience as a classroom
teacher. This interest in early language and literacy supplied the incentive for reviewing
teachers' views concerning early reading.

Participants

I utilized a type of purposeful sampling, known as the unique sample (Merriam,
1998). Merriman described this type of sample based upon unique characteristics or
attributes of the phenomenon of interest. The participants in this study were six
preschool teachers from four early childhood programs in the North Texas area. The
four locations were chosen because each school had a unique purpose and serves a
distinctive population (Appendix A). The schools were selected to provide a maximum
variation sample, representing a wide range of education programs and diverse
populations. The rationale for selecting these participants from the volunteers was
based on their experiences working with preschool children and their educational
backgrounds. Participants were selected as a convenience sample based on the
director's recommendation. Teachers from these programs had a variety of personal,
educational, and professional experiences.
North Texas is rich in diversity, encompassing a broad range of people, cultures, and lifestyles. Early child care and education programs in the area are equally diverse, focusing on providing services to children from families with a broad range of needs, expectations, and income levels. Site A and B were located on higher education campuses and served the children of local families, faculty, and students. Degreed lead teachers supervised assistant teachers and supported the observation and training opportunities for students enrolled in college and university child development and teacher training programs. The mission of Site C was to help children from families living in poverty learn English. Bilingual teachers worked to provide a safe nurturing environment while preserving families' cultural heritage. Site D was located on a church campus. The affordable school served the children of local families and church members. Many teachers held degrees or were working on earning teaching credentials.

As shown in Table 1, the four sites served vastly different student populations and held distinctive goals for their programs. The teachers who worked at the sites had a wide variety of professional experiences and teacher education opportunities as well as diverse cultures and ways of being. Many teachers were immigrants and spoke more than one language. The teachers practiced a variety of religions. All teachers held at least a high school diploma and many had, or were working toward, the bachelor degree in child development, family studies, or education. Professional experiences ranged from just a few years to 35 years or more. Most had taught in a variety of public and private classroom settings. Prior to recruitment, program directors were given an orientation about the study and were invited to participate (Appendix B). Those who
agreed to take part assisted with participant recruitment by randomly inviting teachers within their programs to participate in the study. All participation was voluntary.

Table 1

Comparison of Child Care Centers Used in Study

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Site</th>
<th>Key Words from Mission Statement</th>
<th>Curriculum</th>
<th>Number of Students</th>
<th>Age Range of Students</th>
<th>Licensed &amp; Accredited</th>
<th>Source of Funding</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>Best practice, quality, teacher training</td>
<td>DAP</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>3-5</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Tuition with Public Support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>Family-oriented, multi-age setting</td>
<td>Emergent</td>
<td>25 daytime 50 evening</td>
<td>Infant – 5 School age in the evening</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Tuition with Public Support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>Teach English, literacy</td>
<td>Based on performance standards, child development principles</td>
<td>400</td>
<td>2.5 - 5</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Public</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>Nurture the individual child</td>
<td>High/Scope</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>Infant – 5 School age in the afternoon</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Tuition with Private Support</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

My sample included six teachers. Qualitative research studies typically have a small number of participants (Goodwin & Goodwin, 1996). Merriam (1998) recommended including the adequate number of participants needed to answer the questions posed at the inception of the study. To answer the research questions put forth in this study, six preschool teachers were interviewed. The two research visits involved interviews lasting one to one and one-half hours. The interviews were conducted in quiet areas chosen by the participants and followed up by phone interviews. To ensure that the data collected accurately reflected the constructions of
the participants; a summary of each interview transcript was sent to the respective 
participants for review, additional input, corrections, and clarification.

Gaining the trust and cooperation of research participants was essential to 
ensure an ethical and informed phenomenological study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; 
Spradley, 1979). Participants were asked to sign an informed consent letter (Appendix 
C) before scheduling the initial interview. The informed consent letter was to introduce 
the research study, provide contact information, and request voluntary participation. 
The letter described the procedure for maintaining confidentiality. I stated how the 
participant’s identifiable information would remain confidential and not be released 
without prior written consent. Interview audio recordings, notes, transcripts, and signed 
consent letters were described to be kept in a secure, locked storage area for three 
years following the conclusion of the study, at which time all research data would be 
destroyed. The names of the participants were changed to protect their identities. 
Some details of their experiences were intentionally omitted to avoid any association 
with their personal identifying information or child care program. For the purposes of 
reporting findings, each participant was assigned a fictitious name.

Data Collection and Analysis

As the researcher, I was the primary instrument for data collection, construction, 
and analysis in a qualitative study (Merriam, 1998). The primary method for gathering 
data involved using a series of in-depth phenomenological interviews. Phenomenology 
requires depicting how human consciousness is concerned in the production of social 
action, social situations, and the social world by focusing on individuals’ essential 
perspectives of a shared phenomenon. The phenomenological researcher calls
attention to the human experience and to humans’ interpretations of the phenomenon in an attempt to make known the essence of the experience (Hatch, 2002). Seidman’s (2006) three-interview series of the in-depth interviewing approach allowed me to collect the participants’ personal histories, existing experiences, and reflections on the meanings of these experiences. The in-depth interviews allowed the preschool teachers to share their views concerning early reading to be made clear. The decision to use interviewing as a data collection technique was based upon the information needed (Merriam, 1998), even though phenomenological interviews can potentially be time intensive.

In-depth interviews are used to provide understanding of “the lived experience of other people and the meaning they make of that experience” (Seidman, 2006, p. 9). In this way, participants had the opportunity to respond thoroughly. In turn, I had the ability to respond immediately by tailoring subsequent questions based on information the participant provided. By asking open-ended questions, I enabled the participants to offer complete answers in their own words and to provide their personal voices based on their lived experiences. I also employed the use of probes to ask why or how and to encourage participants to elaborate on and give greater detail to initial responses.

Data Collection

I created the interview questions in advance, and other questions arose from participants’ responses and comments to the initial set of grand tour questions. The in-depth interview consisted of a series of open-ended grand tour questions (Spradley, 1979) to encourage participates to speak openly about themselves, their professional and personal experiences concerning literacy, and their constructions about early
reading. The grand tour questions explored and probed preschool teachers’ constructions concerning early reading. Additional questions were asked to elicit more specific details based on information learned in the interview. The teaching experiences that comprise my personal biography (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003) provided me with an awareness of how my experiences differed from many other preschool teachers. These differences motivated me to comprehend the lived experiences of others rather than to rely on my own experiences as a guide.

Prior to interviewing the participants, I completed four pilot interviews to rehearse the fundamental ways of conducting a qualitative research interview, refine interview questions, and expose and identify biases that could have potentially interfered with the interview and analysis processes. The first was a complete disaster. The interview transcript looked something like this:

**Interviewer:** ramble, ramble, ramble…

**Interviewee:** Uh-huh.

**Interviewer:** blather, blather, blather…

**Interviewee:** Yes.

Obviously, my skills as an interviewer needed polishing. This was a new discourse for me. Because of my anxiety about conducting an interview, I chose as my first practice interviewee a close friend, someone I have known essentially all of my life. We had a lovely chat and trip down memory lane recalling our earliest reading experiences together, our love of encyclopedias, and even those books we share today. I mistakenly assumed we would remember shared reading experiences in our elementary school classroom, but those stories and activities seared into my memory
were not part of her recollections. I was not able to persuade her to accept my statements as true, because she had no connection to them. Even in our shared experiences, we create our own knowledge and truth (Foucault, 1980). I recognized through that discourse that perceptions and experiences make up not only a person’s worldview but also what a person believes to be truth.

I conducted the rest of my practice interviews with colleagues from my university. I knew them and their histories, albeit not intimately. I expected these to be more productive, but I found myself circling around tangents and asking questions about their lives and personal experiences that had nothing to do with early reading. One even asked, “Aren’t we supposed to be talking about reading?” Clearly I needed to find a balance, learn to keep quiet, and develop a list of probing questions. Another difficulty I found was asking questions in a way that did not lead or influence the participant to an answer or eliminate possible directions the participant could take, therefore depriving the teachers of the chance to articulate their experiences in their own terms. Adhering to my list of grand tour questions and a list of probing questions, such as “Could you tell me more about that…,” “Can you give me an example of…,” and “What makes you feel that way…” was helpful to stay on topic and get information that provided meaningful detail.

Also, I quickly realized how difficult and time-consuming the task of transcribing interviews would be. I longed for professional help. However, as I listened to the audio taped interview, I learned how my participants’ answers to my questions could be affected by my tone of voice and word choices. The interview skill development process was powerful and cathartic.
The data collected from the practice interviews were not included in the data analysis for the six participant interviews. Reviews of the pilot interview transcriptions helped refine the grand tour questions. The resulting interview protocol, illustrating general topics and sequencing of the questions, is included in Appendix D. I continued to recruit participants and conduct interviews until each group was adequately represented and information began repeating itself. During each interview, I took field notes to allow me to summarize the major points of the interview and record nonverbal cues. Memos were made after each interview concerning issues raised and to capture my thoughts, perceptions, and understanding of what materialized for an added dimension and richness to the data. Following each interview, the interview audiotape and notes were transcribed immediately. Merriam (1988) suggested this approach and advised that when descriptive categories are recognized early on for coding, the researcher should have easy access to information in the analysis and interpretation stage. I utilized inductive analysis to develop a rich, descriptive portrayal of the participants and their views.

At this point, I summarized the major points of the interview and subsequently invited the participant to react to the constructions I made. I provided the participants with the opportunity to share additional comments as well as elaborate on their original statements. A set of focused questions was used in the second round of interviews for developing a structure for data analysis.

*Multiple Readings*

After multiple readings of the in-depth interviews yielded general impressions about pattern and generated additional questions, a second round of interviews followed
the initial in-depth interviews where I explored particular issues. I used second interviews to ask questions I had following the initial interviews. These follow-up questions dealt with much smaller aspects of an experience, comment, or pattern emerging from the interview transcripts to allow the participants to expand on issues they think might be important. Following the initial interview each of the teachers provided demographic data about their teaching experience, level of education, and racial/ethnic background. Participants were given the opportunity to review transcripts, to check for completion and accuracy.

Data Analysis

The analysis phase began with the preparation and organization of the text data in transcripts and concluded with inducing the data into groups through a process of coding, using margin notes and entries on note cards. In order to identify the themes that surround preschool teachers’ constructions of early reading, the text of each interview transcript was unitized to index cards, and categorized recursively as patterns emerged. The transcripts were read to flag units of meaning related to the research questions. A good code is one that captures the qualitative richness of the phenomenon by categorizing segments of data with a brief name that simultaneously summarizes and accounts for each piece of data. The data were also compared with previous units in the same and different groups coded in the same category. This was followed by the search for potential categories through the codes in data, as shown in Appendix E. As analysis progressed, emerging codes and categories were compared to previous ones and used to guide questions in the second interview.
Taking an inductive approach, themes – those abstract constructs that link specific kinds of expressions – were derived through an informal processing technique. Repetition, those ideas that occur with recurring regularity constitute an important theme. Themes were then peer debriefed with a volunteer associate with early childhood expertise and experience with inductive analysis. Along with a volunteer associate, I engaged in several discussions concerning the patterns, categories, and emergent themes to complete the analysis. The associate was given a sample of transcript excerpts and list of categories. The samples were sorted with ninety-five percent accuracy to maximize the confidence in the findings. Reflective notes, both hand-written and electronic, were taken throughout the content analysis to record the process of the study, the construction and reconstruction of categories, themes, and the final results. The primary function of this analysis was to delineate the themes concerning preschool teachers’ constructions of early reading. The themes, which emerged from the data, are grounded in evidence in the interview transcripts. Results are presented in chapter 4. The themes offer a specific researcher perspective. Therefore, the results are not exhaustive of other potential codes, categories, and themes.

Summary

The purpose of this study was to better understand preschool teachers’ constructions of early reading. Data were collected through a series of in-depth interviews with six preschool teachers. Data were unitized and categorized to search for emergent themes. Based on the limited research on preschool teachers’ beliefs about early reading, this study included an exploratory account of preschool teachers’
construction of early reading. Chapter 3 described the methodological design and rationale, a description of participant selection, data collection procedures, and data analysis techniques. Chapter 4 presents the results of the study.
CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

The purpose of this study was to better understand preschool teachers’ constructions concerning early reading and the process of learning to read. The key guiding questions were:

1. What do preschool teachers say about their early reading experiences and the process of learning to read?
2. What do preschool teachers say about how their other life experiences relate to their constructions of early reading and the process of learning to read?
3. What do preschool teachers say about policy and political influences on their constructions of early reading and the process of learning to read?

The findings from this study were derived from the analysis of interviews with six preschool teachers and field notes that occurred over a nine-month period between September of 2012 and May of 2013. Each of the six teachers was interviewed twice with a two-month interval between the first and second interviews. The derived themes were confirmed and refined by a volunteer associate and the supervising investigator. The terms participant and teacher are used in this chapter to refer to the preschool teachers who participated in this study. The following section of this chapter provides a brief description of each participant. These stories provided a context for their constructions of early reading.

Following the introductions to the participants is a discussion of the findings related to the first research question, which is the most general: What do these teachers
say about their early reading experiences and the process of learning to read? The evidence points to three inter-related themes, as well as an over-arching theme – the teachers’ emphasis on the interdependent and relational nature of early reading influences. In other words, the influences of these preschool teachers’ families and upbringing, home language, schooling, education and training, and personal experiences and the relationships, both positive and negative, with parents, and siblings, are the foundations for their constructions. Following that is a discussion of the findings for the second and third research questions – which focus on the influence of other life experiences and policy and political influences on their constructions of early reading and the process of learning to read.

Introductions to the Participants

Kayla

Kayla is a 26-year-old female. She holds a bachelor’s degree in child development and has been teaching three- and four-year-old children for five years. She did not set out to be a preschool teacher, but knew without a doubt that she wanted to teach young children after taking an early childhood course with an inspiring professor and field experiences at her university’s laboratory preschool. Thoroughly impressed with the program’s emphasis on learning through play, she continues to stress authentic learning in her own classroom today.

Kayla began thoughtfully answering my questions and chose her words carefully, as though she was being examined. Only when she began to discuss her father did she seem to relax and enjoy our conversations. Her father is an artist and was often home. She smiled when she talked about her father and the stories he invented for her and her
sister about animals that lived in the forest behind their house. Kayla became animated as she told me about these happy memories.

Family camping trips were also some of Kayla’s special memories, and it was during these trips that she realized reading was important. Her father taught her to read a compass and maps, and enlisted her help as he assembled the tents; teaching her sequencing as it was critical to put the tent together in a certain order. For Kayla, this was meaningful reading and the experiences encouraged her to work harder to learn to read.

Her recollections of first learning to read included a pullout resource program at school, which she believed helped her improve her reading skills. She practiced reading by playing school with her younger brother and reading to her cousins when she looked after them, but knew that her literacy skills were not as good as her classmates who played spelling games on the school bus; spelling words that she could not. While the school’s pullout program was helpful, she felt most successful with reading when she engaged in meaningful activities such as reading a set of instructions, places on a map, and street names.

In Kayla’s teaching position, she plans opportunities to provide reading experiences, but looks for real and meaningful situations that motivate children to read or write such as writing a letter about a lost coat. Some of her students’ parents express concern about the lack of worksheets, and one offered to bring worksheets from her son’s kindergarten program to share with the class. She explains that the center’s philosophy of early education does not include these types of worksheets, that they try to provide authentic opportunities to read and write. I asked if this explanation
appeased the parent. She responded, “No. They asked me again if they could bring in the worksheets. I’ll keep working on it [smiling].”

Andrea

Andrea is a 29-year-old female and always knew that she wanted to teach. Her mother teaches college math in a business school and taught eighth and ninth grade math for many years. Andrea holds a bachelor’s degree in interdisciplinary studies and while she is certified to teach early childhood through sixth grade, she chose to teach preschool after her student teaching experience in fourth grade — elementary school just did not seem like a good fit. Now, she has been teaching, or as she says “playing” with, four- and five-year old children for six years at her current center.

Not all of her memories of early reading were pleasant. While she did enjoy bedtime stories and weekly trips to the library, she disliked kindergarten and reading practice around the kitchen table. Andrea referred to this as “table top time,” the extra reading lessons her mother had her do at home after school. I noticed her different tone of voice when she spoke about table top time and bedtime reading and asked about this. “It was [different]. [giggling] Table top time was not my favorite time of the day, but bedtime… that was another story. No pun intended.”

She credits her anxiety about kindergarten to the poor relationship she had with her teacher. Pressure to learn reading skills that were too advanced or not appropriate for her age and ability caused her to pull away. More successful in first grade when reading began to “make a little more sense,” she developed a positive relationship with her teacher who she also had for second grade. She truly believed that her first/second grade teacher cared about her, which, in Andrea’s view, allowed her to be “more open
and cooperative.” These events shaped Andrea’s constructions of early reading, that her students should have meaningful experiences that are authentic and important to them.

Andrea responded to my questions quickly and with passion when she spoke about standardized testing in schools. Reflecting on the what she remembered about her mother teaching high school, “… you have to teach this, and you have to teach that. It was all about the test. She spent so much time testing and retesting… trying to meet the objectives of standardized tests. I didn’t want to do that.” She is happy to be teaching at a center with few mandates about curriculum and learning outcomes.

Lori

Lori is a 47-year-old female. She is currently taking classes to earn her associate degree in child development and has worked with young children for more than 30 years. For the past ten years, she has taught four- and five-year-old children. Lori indicated that she was a bit nervous about answering my questions, but quickly relaxed as she shared personal early reading experiences and the incidents that have occurred during the many years she has worked with preschool children.

During her interview, Lori recalled learning to read in kindergarten using Rebus books and memorizing sight words. At home, her older sisters read to her while playing school. As they got older, she took over as the teacher and read to her younger sister. They also played grocery store using pretend money and played post office using the family’s junk mail. She did not remember trips to the library but thought her sisters brought home books from the school library. These sisters are now teachers, too.
In school, she was part of a reading group. In second grade “there was a small group, between six and eight children. I really enjoyed it. And it helped me with my reading. There were very many distractions, and I think that really helped. That was one thing I noticed… was that I was easily distracted and being with a small group you can really focused.” She preferred this learning environment due to the lack of distractions compared to what happened in the regular classroom and believes the small group setting helped her acquire strong reading skills. As an adolescent, she became an avid reader and “would read, and read, and read, and not even notice that it was getting dark outside.”

In Lori’s current teaching position, she provides many early reading experiences for her students such as pictures and sight words, environmental print in the classroom, and reading games. The center where she teaches follows a formal curriculum and assesses children’s learning progress. Lori strongly believes that parental influence makes a difference in her students’ early reading skills and she encourages families to read together often and sends materials home to support early reading.

Ann

Ann is a 61-year-old female. She has a master’s degree in elementary education and is certified to teach kindergarten, home economics, and first through eighth grade. Her earliest memory of reading was learning with Dick and Jane books in first grade. Kindergarten and preschool programs were not offered where she grew up, but she did recall her older sisters reading to her. She reminisced about a rare experience when she and her father were both ill, and he read to her. She felt they created a special bond during this time. This was a pleasant memory, as her father died when she was
ten years old. Her mother, although not educated, encouraged all her children to graduate from high school and seek college degrees. Even though her mother did not finish high school herself, she was very supportive of the education system and was active in the local parent-teacher association and attended parent-teacher conferences.

Currently, Ann is an early literacy specialist working individually or with small groups of children on targeted reading skills. After spending more than 30 years teaching a variety of grades and subjects in public schools, she has chosen to teach at a private preschool with fewer mandates and curriculum guidelines. She has seen many changes during her career and referred to the changes she saw as a “pendulum” that swings back and forth. Although the children at this school were younger than her previous students, she still uses many of the same strategies to teach early literacy skills to the children, such as rhyming games, memorizing poems, letter recognition, and separating and blending sounds. While Ann feels these approaches are helpful to teach, she also expressed concern that many of her students are not ready for the stress of these academic practices. A focus on self-help skills, historically ever-present in early childhood classrooms, has become nonexistent. She worries that children are not getting the support they needed to learn to tie their shoes and socialize. I asked her, “Where are the kids getting those skills now do you think?” “I’m hoping at home. If not at home, I hope they are getting some at school. Because parents… so many of them both work. And here, some of the kids get here at 7AM and don’t leave til 6PM. That’s a long time.”
Natalie

Natalie is a 25-year-old female. She has a bachelor's degree in child development and has been teaching three- and four-year old children for four years. During our interview, Natalie described her earliest memories of reading as observing her mother reading Spanish self-help books. At the time, she found it curious that her mother spent so much time with this genre. Her mother encouraged her to read these stories, and she reluctantly read a few. In college, Natalie found that many of her friends were reading self-help books by the same authors, and she was pleased that she had already read some of the identical titles.

Natalie also recalled, that when she was a child, her mother would recite Spanish nursery rhymes to her. Now, she reportedly recites these same rhymes to her students. Natalie could not remember learning to read, but did remember struggles with homework in English because only Spanish was spoken in her home. Reading and other assignments became much easier as her English improved in second grade. She feels she was more successful because of her relationship with her second grade teacher. This teacher brought stories “to life” by “doing voices,” and through enrichment activities connected to the story, such as baking a thunder cake after reading Patricia Polacco’s book.

In Natalie’s preschool classroom, she attempts to engage students when reading stories by changing her voice for different characters, adding props, or using puppets. From her campus education specialist and training experiences, Natalie learned these strategies to help her students with early literacy skills, such as phonological awareness, letter knowledge, and rhyming. One primary focus is the child’s name, so
children can begin to recognize the letters in their names. She uses a developed curriculum, and from that she chooses themes of interest to her students. At this time, the majority of the students in her class are boys. She searches to find books that interest them. She also encourages her students’ families to work with their children at home, even reading billboards and street signs while in the car. Her center administers outcome-based assessments with each child to determine their areas of strengths and weaknesses.

Gina

Gina is a 27-year-old female and holds a master’s degree in constitutional law studies. Along with her preschool teaching position, she teaches political science courses at a local community college. This was my only participant that did not have a degree in education or related field. Her career in preschool began when she took a job teaching in the infant room ten years ago. She moved to the four- and five-year-old classroom last year.

Her earliest memory of reading was time spent with kindergartners at her day care when she was only four years old. She believes these early experiences boosted her abilities and helped her read at an early age. Her early teachers made reading “fun” by linking stories with learning activities, such as making gingerbread men, retelling stories with puppets, and going on a hunt. Even though she read early, she was a slow reader, disliked reading aloud, and became anxious when called on to read in front of others. Her family eventually took her to see a doctor who determined that her eyes were sensitive to the florescent lights typical in a classroom and prescribed a pair of purple tinted glasses to wear while reading. Amazed at the results, her reading
improved, and she was no longer fearful about reading aloud. She even began going back to her kindergarten classroom to read to the younger children; an undertaking she would not have considered save for the strong bond she had with that particular teacher, who was very supportive.

Gina did not set out to become a preschool teacher, but loves her bi-vocation career teaching both very young and adult students. She began teaching part-time at this center while in high school. Quickly, she grew to love her students and realized that “a lot of people don’t give infants enough credit.” With her co-teacher she designs creative activities to expose her students to social, self-help, and academic skills. Her co-teachers were able to help her make the transition to teaching older students. Because of her experiences with the infants, she is aware how far students come in their early literacy skills in just three or four short years.

Summary

One of the primary goals of my research agenda was to bring to the forefront the perspectives of preschool teachers’ voices which are rarely heard outside the classroom. This qualitative study is based on several assumptions concerning discourse – that knowledge is created through discourse, that discourse is culturally constructed and circulates throughout society, and that discourse positions into regimes of power. As I desire to give voice to my participants, I recognize that my interpretation of their experiences is exactly that – my interpretation. Nonetheless, I hope that these vignettes provide an introduction to the six preschool teachers who agreed to participate in my study, allowing an opportunity to get to know them as people and possibly relating to them.
General Patterns in the Interviews

The participants I interviewed for this study represented varied backgrounds with respect to the family structure, home language, education and training, and personal experiences leading to their constructions of early reading. While these variances were often significant, the participants shared similar experiences. For example, while growing up, all but one of the participants had siblings in the home that either read to the participants or were read to by the participants. Often these shared reading experiences were in the context of “playing school,” an significant childhood activity for these teachers. These were important events that shaped their constructions of early reading.

Lori explained, “I was always the student; when I got older and had a little sister then I got to be the teacher.” Andrea recalled the temperament of her inner-child teacher when she described how she played school with her younger sister:

I made sure she was sitting in her desk; we had a little chalkboard thing that my mom left out for us and I would write things and have her copy things down on her paper. I was that teacher.

My participants’ reading experiences with siblings were important, but so were the times they shared stories with their parents; being read to, watching them read, or engaged in reading activities. Every participant shared that their parents read, although in different forms such as novels, the Bible, technical writing for work, self-help books, newspapers, and magazines. Text surrounded my participants, and all had access to and used their schools or public libraries. Opportunities to read were available.
My participants were strongly influenced by their families and upbringing. Andrea shared that, “When my parents were having barbecues or people over, we [she and her younger sister] would go back to this little nook in the backyard. It was covered, a little hideaway in the backyard.” She told me she was very close to her younger sister and she looked forward to her parents’ parties so she could spend time with her in this special place.

As Kayla told me about her dad fabricating stories for her and her sister, she began to smile and became animated:

I remember this one story he would tell us. It was scary . . . about a cheese monster that lived in the forest behind our house. The cheese monster would come into our house and get our cheese. He’d make this noise that sounded like opening the cheese wrapper.

Kayla revealed that her father was an alcoholic, and these storytelling sessions when he gave her his undivided attention became much-loved chances for her to spend quality time with him.

Ann reminisced, “I do remember the one time my dad read to me. He was sick, and I was sick, and we bonded that way together. And now that you are asking me, I am thinking about that.” She was very close to her mother, but did have an opportunity to know her father well. This was an important memory for her and the only time she could remember him reading to her.

While my participants tended to be content with early reading experiences, and most recalled pleasant memories, several of the women shared stressful experiences learning to read. My small sample experienced the same struggles as many U.S.
children. Only one of my six participants recalled no difficulty learning to read. The other five associated their difficulties with attention, visual reception, phonemic awareness, learning English as a second language, and maturity. All six felt that the relationships shared with their teachers made the biggest impact toward their success in early reading.

As adults, and now preschool teachers, the influences of their early experiences shaped their literate self. From birth, they interacted with people out-of-school (parents and siblings), in-school (teachers), and with text (books, maps). Their teacher education programs, field experiences, and experiences in their own classrooms continued to form and shape their professional perceptions through a process of generating and refining convictions concerning early reading. Along the way, they uncovered incongruities between their own constructions and what occurred in other classrooms, schools, and more broadly, in the policies and politics that influence reading and reading instruction.

What Preschool Teachers Say about Early Reading

Inductive analysis points to three strong themes in response to the first research question that are illustrated in Table 2: What do preschool teachers say about their early reading experiences and the process of learning to read? The responses of these preschool teachers to my interview questions focus on three influences that they see as most powerful: 1) Out-of-school interactions related to teachers’ early reading; 2) In-school interactions related to teachers’ early reading; and 3) Interactions with text related to teachers’ early reading. The sub-sections in Table 2 identify the categories that provide the evidence for each of these themes. In addition, these three themes
overlap in an important way. Clearly, for these preschool teachers the *interdependent* and *relational nature of early reading influences* affected their constructions about early reading.

Table 2

*Development of Themes Relating to What Preschool Teachers’ Say About Their Early Reading Experiences and the Process of Learning to Read*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Examples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Out-of-school interactions</td>
<td>Parents</td>
<td>• Observing parents reading</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>related to teachers’ early</td>
<td></td>
<td>• Parents reading to them</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>reading</td>
<td>Siblings</td>
<td>• Older siblings reading to them</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Reading to younger siblings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Special places/times reading together</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Playing School</td>
<td>• Being <em>that</em> teachers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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For these preschool teachers, their constructions of early reading from pre-readers, to readers, to teachers of reading was a journey influenced by observing readers, discovering reading, struggling with reading, and engaging in relationships that involved reading with parents, siblings, teachers, their own students and their families.
Positive relationships with individuals were more likely to lead to positive relationships with text.

Out-of-school Interactions Related to Teachers’ Early Reading

The theme out-of-school interactions related to teachers’ early reading was derived from the conceptual categories of parents, siblings, and playing school. This theme reflected how the participants experienced reading from a very early age. Judging from the field notes that described their engagement and their animation during these responses this theme represented, perhaps, the most enjoyable part of interviewing for my participants. I began each interview by asking the same question, “Starting with your own childhood, could you tell me a little about your early reading experiences.” Most of the participants confessed that early reading experiences were not something they had thought about recently, or like Natalie, stated, “I don’t remember much.” As I continued to probe, they found they could bring to mind more and more information about their earliest reading experiences.

Andrea tried to capture the memory of her parents: “Every morning they would sit around the kitchen table drinking coffee and reading the newspaper.” As she spoke, she pointed to the places her parents sat and simulated opening the paper and drinking coffee. Many participants shared similar recollections of watching parents read. Gina stated, “My mom could finish a novel in a couple of days. She read incredibly fast.” Natalie, who had trouble recalling anything at the beginning of our interview, shared; “Now I know what she [mother] was reading. Back then, it was just like books, not now . . . what do you call those? . . . self-help books. Now I know she reads that. Before I just thought she was reading books.”
Not only did they observe their parents reading, but their family members also read to them. “He [father] would read to us at bedtime . . . every night, and I’m pretty sure my dad made a lot of it up,” answered Kayla. Siblings also read to participants. Lori remembered how, “We would sit down and play school. They [sisters] would read to us.” Kayla said her cousins “would make up fantastical stories like dad did for me and my sisters.”

Books and stories were not the only forms of literacy used by my participants when they were young. When Lori played school with her sisters, “We would try to play grocery store to learn how to use money, and whatever mail my mom didn’t want, we would play [school] with that.” Kayla’s “dad was a really good teacher, and he showed me how to read the maps and the compass.”

The participants reported feeling pressured or influenced by their family, as they explained about the amount of time spent towards becoming a good reader or the expectations their families held concerning education. Andrea shared that after she spent her mornings in kindergarten, her mother continued reading instruction in the afternoons at the kitchen table. Andrea referred to this as “table top time” and expressed the following:

I felt like it was really forced on me, and I know that it was supposed to be helpful. I know she wanted me to be successful and to be a good reader, but at the same time, I feel like it was just forced on me. It was really too much. And I felt myself pulling back . . . I think it was growing up in my house with my mom and the way she was. She was teaching us all these things all the time. It wasn’t just at the kitchen table. We did have a lot of more positive experiences. I think
she just wanted to make sure that she was contributing to our beginning reading and education experiences.

Ann, my oldest participant, spoke kindly of her mother and said the following about her mother:

(She) did not finish high school. She had five kids, and she always wanted us to get an education; there wasn't another option. We had to get some kind of education, whether it be technical school or finishing college. She was like that; she was really supportive of us going to college.

The earliest relationships with parents and siblings - those behaviors observed as children - are often the behaviors that continue throughout life. While individuals may not always emulate the behaviors learned from family members, those early behaviors do influence future choices and behaviors. It would be impossible to extrapolate from the responses that the participants’ family influences caused all six women to teach preschool, but their parents’ reading practices and their experiences with being read to, playing school in some way influenced their current constructions about early reading and early reading instruction.

In-school Interactions Related to Teachers’ Early Reading

The second theme from the data analysis, in-school interactions related to teachers’ early reading, emerged from the conceptual categories of student-teacher relationships and learning to read. The participants frequently cited examples of the importance of the relationships they had with their first teachers. Even though Gina experienced great difficulty learning to read and was reluctant to read in front of her peers, she would read to the children in her former kindergarten class. “The only class I
would go read to was my kindergarten teacher’s. That’s the only reason I could do it, because I knew her and had a really good relationship with her. I felt safe.” Teachers build trusting relationships by helping and encouraging students. The type of classroom environment that a teacher creates has the potential to affect students’ motivation. While most of the participants could not recall specific experiences, they expressed that in classrooms with caring and responsive teachers they showed greater success. For example, Gina said:

I think I blocked out that whole [kindergarten] year because it was such a bad experience [due to the relationship with the teacher]. I’m an emotional person. So it’s important to me that I have a good relationship with the people who are trying to teach me something. And the relationship I had with my teacher, I felt like it affected everything else. I didn’t get along with my [kindergarten] teacher. Andrea shared with me that she disliked kindergarten and felt much of her feelings had to do with the poor relationship she had with her teacher. As she shared, she frowned and sighed. When I asked her about first grade she began smiling and became enthusiastic:

I loved first grade! My teacher moved to second grade with us, so I had her for two years. She was awesome! I can't remember anything specific; but I remember that I had a really positive relationship with her, so I was more open and cooperative with what she was trying to teach me and help me. I felt like she cared about me.

Now, in their own classrooms, these preschool teachers understand the importance of the student-teacher relationship and work hard to make connections and
encourage students. Ann explained that students “know when the parents and teachers care, they feel it . . . I hope they have. I’m keeping in touch with some of the kids I’ve had as students from a long time ago.” Far into the future, students are impacted by something a teacher said or did. Natalie found, “her passion for science, because of science experiments in second grade.” Her second grade teacher continued to maintain their relationship and persuaded Natalie to apply to attend a magnet high school for science, technology, engineering, and mathematics. At the magnet school, Natalie took an elective course in child development. She associated her love of science with the unfolding of childhood and pursued a degree in early childhood education.

As young children, the relationship these preschool teachers had with their first teachers played an important role in their constructions of early reading. Regardless of the teaching method, they responded better when they felt their teacher cared about them. And, even though Gina disliked “table top time” when her mother drilled her on reading skills, she responded to her first-grade teacher whom she felt was concerned with her success.

**Interactions with Text Related to Teachers’ Early Reading**

The third theme, *interactions with text related to teachers’ early reading*, evolved from the interviews as the preschool teachers described their own experiences as readers - how they connected to text as children and as teachers. During the interviews, I noted that the word *meaningful* reappeared as the teachers described how children best learn to read. The significance of this term was discussed with two of the participants. “In my classroom, I have printed material in our dramatic play center. There is always something that goes with our theme… menus, grocery store ads, maps,
catalogues. Something with text on it and something for the children to write on,” Gina said. Lori frequently “cooks with my students. They help me make a shopping list and read the recipe. I add pictures of cooking tools and utensils and the food.”

With the exception of one teacher, Ann, each interviewee articulated how reading must be meaningful to children. Ann often mentioned that it was important to make reading fun. During our second interview, I questioned her about the use of fun as a term, thinking she might instead intend to convey that reading should be meaningful. “No, it should be fun,” she explained. “It should be interesting to the child, or they will not continue to want to read.” In a follow-up conversation with Ann she further clarified, “Good teachers are able to persuade students to care about what they are learning. Some make it fun. Some make it interesting. But one way or another, good teachers make learning relevant and students learn better when they care about what they are learning.”

I was interested to learn where the teachers developed the motivation and the skills to be preschool teachers. Several of the participants identified lessons they had learned growing up or experiences they had as students. One participant, Lori, attributed experiences as a young girl with helping her second grade teacher. She explained that it was during these early experiences that she learned, as she was pulled out for help with reading, that she was easily distracted. She stated, “I’m working on an associate degree . . . so I’ve taken early childhood classes, and I’ve learned to have hands-on materials” to help maintain students’ attention. The majority of Lori’s students were learning English as a second language. Most of Natalie’s students were also
Spanish speakers, so she thought the boys and girls in her classroom were “well rounded, they’ll sit for anything . . . as long as I make it interesting.”

Each of the other teachers used the words meaningful, important, or interesting to describe the successful interactions they had or that their students had with text. Andrea explained this well:

I think what these children are experiencing [authentic reading and writing experiences] is so much more effective [than learning discrete skills; using worksheets]. If they can get meaningful experiences with writing and reading it will be so much easier to teach . . . to have them read later. This morning [child’s name] drew a picture of a cat, and she wanted to call him Jingle Bell. So, I helped her spell, or write, the letters to make the words Jingle Bell. She ended up with J I M G L and then B E L. I feel like it [correct spelling] was crammed down my throat so much that all I wanted to do was regurgitate it and then be done with it. And since she’s writing Jingle Bell it means so much more to her. And her mom’s going to love her work, and she’s going to feel that sense of pride in herself to do something more difficult.

As a child, Kayla struggled to learn to read. When I asked her about her early reading experiences, she remembered, “reading the names off the street signs” and that she “liked reading maps.” She explained that this was different than reading in school and that, “perfection didn’t matter like it did in school.” While she did not mind the pullout reading program at school and believed it helped develop her reading skills, the worksheets and sight reading flashcards used were not meaningful to her. The lessons were “nothing meaningful, just practice on phonics and the components of reading to
help us catch up.” Andrea also explained her relationship with reading and why she so badly wanted to learn to write. She said that meaningful experiences with literacy were “important to me. When I wanted to write someone a thank you note, that was meaningful. When someone sent me a Christmas card, I wanted to send one back.”

Now, in their classrooms both Andrea and Kayla capitalize on the experiences and opportunities that enable their students to relate to text in meaningful ways. For example, when I visited Kayla’s campus, I observed her students engaged in an activity designed to simulate the experience of voting. Her preschoolers were allowed to register to vote, anonymously cast a ballot, and participate in the counting of votes to determine the crackers they would have with snack that day as an authentic event that depended on literacy skills. Kayla shared:

Many of our parents have older children in grade school, and they are taking standardized tests. They see skill and drill and want to know why we don’t have a letter of the week and want more emphasis on the alphabet and worksheets. A few weeks ago, I had a parent ask if they could bring in some worksheets to share with the students. Her grade school child was bringing them home and her preschoo ler enjoyed working on them at home. She thought it might be good for all the kids. Our program just doesn’t do that. I had to explain to her our philosophy. The other day her child wanted to write a letter about a lost jacket. That was real to them. I made a copy and sent it home.

The participants repeatedly expressed the significance of personally meaningful interaction with text, implying that children learn best when interested and engaged.
Interdependent and Relational Nature of Early Reading Influences

As I became absorbed in the process of transcribing interviews, coding, unitizing, and categorizing data, I uncovered the predominant theme. I hoped to give my participants a chance to talk about issues surrounding early reading that were important to them. I believed they had that opportunity and competently described the variety of interactions they previously had and continued to have with early reading.

From the teachers’ earliest recollections of observing their parents read and of being read to, the words spoken revealed cherished time spent with family members. For the most part, these happy times led to playing school with siblings, visits to the library, or retreating to a backyard hideaway. Later, as the interviewees described how the process of learning to read, the importance of interactions continued to be evident. They reported that they accomplished more and were more likely to cooperate when they felt their teachers cared about them. None shared anything about their early teachers’ abilities to teach reading, but they connected a caring, responsive relationship with their earliest teachers to their success with reading. These findings suggest that for these preschool teachers, their constructions of early reading and the process of learning to read were intertwined with memories of family, childhood, schooling, education and training, and personal experiences and the relationships with those closest to them as they discovered early reading.

Now, as teachers of preschoolers they looked for ways to encourage their students to develop a relationship with text by making reading meaningful, interesting, and organic and by taking advantage of authentic experiences for children to read and write. These six teachers even considered it valuable to develop a strong rapport with
their students’ families, who were the children’s first and most important teachers. They believed relating to the family enabled success in reading to be supported at home. Within the development of every category, an underlying notion of a connection with a person, process, or thing was discovered. Constructions about early reading and learning to read influenced almost every aspect of these preschool teachers’ instructional decisions and practice.

Other Life Experiences as Influences on Teachers’ Constructions about Early Reading

How preschool teachers come to know and construct views concerning early reading was the focus of this study. The second research question addressed the influence of other life experiences related to their constructions of early reading and the process of learning to read. Without exception, these teachers referred to these experiences as influencing their approach to teaching in general and to reading in particular. An examination of history from the perspective of these individuals led to uncovering the patterns about early reading as a personal and professional experience. Ann shared, “she [her mother] just wanted us to do the best we could at everything… not that we had to make straight A’s, but she wanted us to try. She didn’t finish high school, but I think if she could have gone to college she would have majored in English. Reading was very important to her and she passed that on to me.”

Ann was my oldest participant and reflected on how her constructions of early reading have evolved during her years of training and experience, “My lesson plans back then [when she began teaching Kindergarten] were not as detailed as they are now [laughing]. I went back different times for three different degrees so everything’s
changed since then. But it keeps on changing. Maybe next year they’ll go back to several other ways.”

According to Natalie, life experiences directed her career path, “I didn’t really plan on it [becoming a teacher]… we had an option to take an elective [in high school] and they had a course in child development. So, I took that and two more semesters of it. And, I really enjoyed it. That’s why studied early childhood education.” And, according to Andrea life experiences influenced her behaviors in the classroom, “Kindergarten was not a very good year for me. I just remember crying every day and being really sad. It was not good. I feel like it [early reading] was crammed down my throat so much that all I wanted to do was regurgitate it and then be done with it. Maybe that’s why I think it’s so important now.”

Lori recognized the influence of her own family when she was young and observed how the students in her classroom were influenced by their families. She said:

If I could get all the parents together and let them know how important it is and how it would help their child to succeed in school not just with reading and not just do it when they’re preschoolers, but to continue when their children are in elementary school.

These teachers were in agreement that, whether or not individuals realize it, or like it, the influence of family is powerful in relational to early reading. They also reacted to the cultural environments of the children they taught and their families. All of the teachers reported needing the support of their students’ families to help develop strong reading skills; they could not do it alone. No one teacher seemed to have a pat answer for how
to get more families involved in reading activities at home or to appreciate the value in reading to their children. The teachers could not ascertain a pattern for those family members who showed an interest in supporting reading at home and those who did not. The students served by these teachers came from a wide diversity of home environments; some lived in urban areas, thick with poverty, and others lived in affluent, suburban neighborhoods. All of the teachers described having some difficulty enlisting help from their students’ families.

No two teachers, even if they worked with the same age group or even in the same preschool center, approached reading in exactly the same way. Though they might have shared the same instructional goals and followed the same guidelines, the teachers made decisions and engaged in practices based on what they knew and believed to be worthwhile for their individual students. The perspectives uncovered in the interviews revealed different beliefs about early reading, including the process of learning to read. From a lifetime of interacting with people, ideas, and things, these preschool teachers learned to construct knowledge about early reading as they engaged in a process of seeking and making meaning from their own personal, practical, and professional experiences.

Policy and Political Influences on Teachers’ Constructions about Early Reading

These preschool teachers each had unique responses related to my final research question asking what policy and political influences related to their constructions of early reading and the process of learning to read. While their answers did hint to knowledge of the neo-liberal and neo-conservative climate influencing the current public education system and the changes to instructional approaches in reading
(Apple, 2006), the majority of my participants wanted to say little about this topic. They had developed a discourse that was successful for them to address the needs of their students and families (Foucault, 1972).

I anticipated an overflow of opinions concerning the present state of early literacy instruction. After all, these practicing teachers should be feeling the pressure of the National Early Literacy Panel’s (2008) recommendations that had influenced the state’s prekindergarten guidelines. As I consider the meaning and implication of the responses I did receive, I reflect that the content of my questions, the way I posed questions, and whether or not I adequately probed for expanded answers influenced the data I gathered for this research question. Another possible place to look for meaning is in what my participants did not say about policy and political influences.

As Andrea finished telling me how her observations of her mother’s experiences with standardized testing was the basis of her decision to become a preschool teacher, I asked her if she would discuss that further. She responded, “I don’t want… [pause] I’m getting on my soapbox.” I assured her that was okay. She continued about her mother’s experiences, but indicated that she was not feeling any particular pressure concerning her preschool class and policy or political influences, stating that, “politics is something I just don’t spend a lot of time on.” Two of the preschool teachers appeared visibly uncomfortable when I questioned them about policy and political influences. One replied that she would rather just talk about reading, and another said that politics were things her parents worried about. Other participants did want to discuss policy and political influences at all. These non-verbal behaviors and attempts to avoid this line of questioning could be as telling as what other participants did say.
Ann, the most experienced teacher, wants stakeholders to visit her classroom. Apparently, she feels that there is a disconnect between their policies and the realities in her classroom. She said,

They [politicians] need to come visit the classroom and stay for more than 30 minutes. I don’t know if their perception would change, or if they could do anything about it, but I think their eyes might be opened to see what all is involved. You’re teaching, and a child throw’s up. Well, you can’t keep on teaching. You have to be flexible, so you don’t want to make it so hard-core that you can’t give any. You’ve got to have that interest, love, caring, and flexibility.

She was aware of changes to reading instruction. Again Ann,

Everything has sort of drifted down, especially the kindergartens; they are wanting them to be on the first grade level. They want them to be reading. The district I just left two years ago… they wanted them to be reading on level five or six by the end of kindergarten, which is a higher level. But, they think they are getting them ready for first grade. Which in a way they are, but a lot of kids are not ready for that.

Kayla explained, “because of the push in grade school for children to master reading early, we are careful to expose children to lots of books.” Andrea, who as a child felt that early reading instruction had been forced on her, shared, “My director has said this several times, ‘Second grade is like fourth grade used to be.’ We’re trying to drive it down more and more. So instead of letting kids play, and have a good time, and develop useful skills… they [policy mandates] are forcing kids to do developmentally inappropriate activities.”
Three of the participants discussed their concerns about standardized testing and a teach-to-the-test mentality, but acknowledged that most testing occurs during elementary school. It was not something this collective group of preschool teachers was particularly concerned about. These responses indicate that policy and political influences were making their way into these preschool teachers’ classrooms, impacting their instructions practices, and possibly reshaping their constructions concerning early reading. Ann explained it best,

It’s that pendulum; it switches back and forth. Sometimes the school districts don’t know what’s best, so you have to take a little bit of this and a little bit of that to make it work in your own classroom. Everything won’t be the cure all, and we just have to do some positive thinking and just do basic concepts of things you know the kids need. And add it to, you can’t give up the public part, you have to do what they require. It’s gotten worse now, because they are testing more.

One of my friends said, “They are always testing.” Well they are testing not only for reading, but math, science, social studies. I don’t know how to get away from that because it’s what the State of Texas wants. They want to be on top. I say well, you do what you can, the best you can. And make sure you feel you’ve given the kids a whole year of things you think they need, then it’s up to the next grade level to go on.

These responses also led me to believe that as most teachers, these are committed to a greater extent on the happenings within the four walls of their classroom rather than what might be happening at the state capital. Teaching is a demanding job that requires great dedication and too often gets inadequate support from stakeholders,
including policy makers, elected officials, families, and the general public. This data may not offer enough evidence for a strong finding, but definitely suggests potential questions for future research and deserves additional attention as implications from this study. These are discussed further in chapter 5.

Summary of Findings

The findings from this study answered the research questions concerning preschool teachers’ constructions of early reading. Their constructions evolved from their childhoods to their current teaching positions, rather than from fixed positions that could be measured at a given point in time. In addition, the three themes from the data analysis – out-of-school interactions related to teachers’ early reading, in-school interactions related to teachers’ early reading, and interactions with text related to teachers’ early reading – suggest that influences on these teachers’ constructions of are interdependent and relational. In other words, these influences are not independent and discrete, but connected in complex ways.
CHAPTER 5
DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The purpose of this study was to better understand preschool teachers’ constructions concerning early reading and the process of learning to read. I chose to approach this research project as I believed it might enable a unique way of exploring preschool teachers’ constructions, and ultimately, evoke opinions concerning the definition that has emerged from policy concerning early reading, the means by which reading is taught, and how reading success is measured has evolved in the past several decades. Key guiding questions were:

1. What do preschool teachers say about their early reading experiences and the process of learning to read?
2. What do preschool teachers say about how their other life experiences relate to their constructions of early reading and the process of learning to read?
3. What do preschool teachers say about policy and political influences on their constructions of early reading and the process of learning to read?

I recorded, transcribed, and analyzed what my participants had to say in order to identify categories and themes. With this in mind, in this chapter, I reflect on what I learned about preschool teachers’ constructions, what I was not able to learn, and implications for the future. The sections of this chapter are a discussion of the findings, reflections on the research process, followed by sections that offer implications for practice, for future research, and conclusions to the study.
Significance of the Findings

The technique of using interviews to collect data provided an opportunity for these participants to share, and proved to be an effective strategy for eliciting rich comments and gaining deeper insights into their constructions of early reading and the process of learning to read. In this section, I first explore the possible explanations for the themes uncovered and discuss the implications as well as the limitations of this study. This study was designed to explore preschool teachers’ constructions, not to identify, sort out individual reasons, or seek truth. Therefore, I can only speculate that several factors could have influenced or affected these preschool teachers. These influences could have been their students and families they serve, the programs in which the teachers taught, and/or several aspects of their own educational and background experiences.

Because the teachers viewed the reading process through different lenses, their perceptions decisions and classroom behaviors varied. No two teachers, even if they worked with the same age group or even in the same preschool center, approached reading in exactly the same way. The perspectives uncovered in the interviews revealed different beliefs about early reading, including the process of learning to read.

Findings for What Preschool Teachers Said About Their Early Reading Experiences

My first research question involved exploring what preschool teachers said about their early reading experiences. The findings point to the complexity of these influences as they weave into teachers’ beliefs and practices. As the preschool teachers shared some of their earliest memories of reading, observing parents, and being read to, it became apparent that differences in the literacy approaches of their families and family
influence (Snow, 1998) significantly impacted the ways in which the participants became readers and developed their constructions about the meaning and value of reading. These attitudes and considerations became embedded in their conceptual frames concerning early reading and the process of learning to read and influenced their decisions and classroom practice. The literacy perspectives of my participants were nurtured from the influences of their upbringing and home environments (Sulzby & Teale, 1991).

Findings for Other Life Experiences Impacting Constructions of Early Reading

My second research question was designed to answer what preschool teachers said about their other life experiences that impacted their constructions of early reading and the process of learning to read. While none of their responses explicitly answered this question, the participants described many influences that contributed to their constructions of early reading from earliest encounters to teacher education programs to collaboration with colleagues. Most salient were the proficiencies they had acquired in their own teaching experiences. All of these events involved relationships with parents, professors, administrators, fellow teachers, students, and families. The interplay between the authority and power held in these relationships and the discourse afforded to the members of these relationships contributed to the eventual constructions of early reading the teachers characterized. Whether these discourses created what was held to be truth by my participants is not known, but could have added to what the teachers believed to be knowledge and truth (Foucault, 1977), as knowledge is constructed through the organizations, associations, and relationships that make up
language; create truth and *truth-effects* (Foucault, 1980); and persuade individuals to accept constructions as true.

**Findings Regarding Policy and Political Influences on Teachers’ Constructions of Early Reading**

As mentioned earlier, teachers are both colonized and are colonizers (Apple, 1995). These teachers never voiced concern about the educational system; rather they believed they held the authority over the experiences in their classrooms by presenting activities and opportunities they believed were beneficial to their students and meet their individual needs. Certainly, they learned many of their reading instruction skills and techniques in their teacher preparation programs and through in-service training. However, their constructions of early reading had been accumulated over many years, through many channels, and from a process of generating and refining convictions.

The school setting at which the participants taught appeared to have greatly influenced them in the areas of curriculum and program goals. For example, one teacher described the mission of her school as “literacy.” She said, “That’s our thing; that’s what we do.” Ironically enough, this same teacher denied offering her students any pre-reading opportunities or instruction. She described flash cards, the instructional strategy of introducing a letter of the week, and vocabulary development activities. Only when I mentioned the word “literacy” did she respond with, “Oh, yes! We do pre-literacy, just not pre-reading.” While this difference in terminology may only be a matter of semantics, it does seem to imply this teacher and/or her education program emphasizes a type of static, prescriptive teaching method rather than the kinetic unfolding of emergent literacy. Likewise, another teacher responded that they did not do letters at her school.
Regardless of the terminology used to describe early reading and the process of learning to read, these findings indicate that children are influenced by their school and home environments, and begin doing the critical cognitive work of learning to read during their preschool years. These influences make a vital contribution in these years to children’s success as readers.

What became evident to me in the end was how the relationship between knowledge and truth is actually about “relations of power, not relations of meaning” (Foucault, 1977, p. 114). These relations of power are socially constructed and lived out in these preschool teachers’ classrooms. The power of the teachers’ discourse elevated their work and connected them with one another. Their discourse provided a view of teaching and learning and established a space in which they could operate seemingly unaffected by the outside influence of policy and politics and with little desire for altering the discourse.

**Findings Compared to Previous Studies**

The findings of this study will now be compared to the findings of the previous studies mentioned in the early literacy literature review. The present findings seem to be consistent with other research (Buehl & Fives, 2009), which found that defining beliefs concerning early reading is a difficult task. The preschool teachers interviewed for this study defined early reading and the process of learning to read in a variety of ways. In one case, just interchanging the word ‘reading’ for ‘literacy’ made a significant difference in her constructions about early reading and the process of learning to read. After asking several questions about instructional practices in her classroom, she finally straightened in her chair and responded, “Literacy, yes! Reading, no… we don’t do
that.” It was as if a light bulb appeared over her head. This was a distinct disconnect that appeared to somehow sever emergent literacy – developing language and literacy in the context of play, interacting with books, figuring out the meaning of an unfamiliar sign, or authentic needs to read and write – from the process, or mechanics of teaching early literacy skills, “I think I try to do everything – rhyming, analogies, beginning sounds, letter knowledge. We focus a lot on their names. So they can recognize the letters in their names” – she described. She did not believe that children were engaged in early reading activities in her preschool classroom, but that she was exposing her students to the pre-literacy skills they would need when they began receiving reading instruction in elementary school. Perhaps some of the children were not only recognizing the letters in their names, but also making meaning of the letters as they read their names – certainly blurring the concepts of early literacy and early reading.

Undoubtedly the words ‘literacy’ and ‘reading’ convey different meanings, but in the context of an early education program one would not expect that reading activities were not occurring. Reading experiences start early in life, and preschool children are in various stages of developing the literacy skills necessary to learn to read. A possible explanation could be that she is echoing the current policy discourse, but indicates that to some degree all early childhood educators hold different constructions about early reading and the process of learning to read. Comments like this pose the question of whether or not the concerns of the critiques (Dickinson et al, 2009) of the NELP (2008) are actually coming to pass – instruction of only narrowly prescribed skills at the expense of focusing on background knowledge and oral language that form the foundation for extracting meaning from print.
As in previous research (Moats, 2009), the current study found that often children are exposed to the foundations of early reading prior to the start of elementary school. From bedtime stories, *Bible* reading at the breakfast table, playing school, visits to the library, and practice with worksheets or flashcards; all of my participants reported that they had many reading experiences prior to Kindergarten. Some of these recollections were extremely positive, but even the negative experiences during this early exposure influenced their constructions.

As mentioned in the literature review, teachers’ beliefs concerning the nature of knowledge affect classroom decisions and behaviors (Kagan, 1992; Raths, 2001). The participants did not particularly feel any pressure or the need to adapt their definition of early reading to the definition emerging from current policy. For the most part, they felt they were the authority in their classroom; making decisions to best meet the needs of their students.

The findings of this study are consistent with those of other studies and suggest that beliefs held by society influence teachers’ beliefs often rooted in a form of personal practical knowledge. Teachers’ beliefs concerning early reading are central to the process of socialization and set the climate for learning. For these teachers, developing positive student-teacher relationships and providing early reading activities that were meaningful to their students is an important component of their current teaching practices. Most had reported both encouraging and discouraging early experiences that as classroom teachers they either emulate or avoid. Speaking about their earliest memories of early reading, the struggles many had learning to read, and what they have
discovered about their own philosophy of teacher helped them acknowledge their constructions of early reading and the process of learning to read.

Reflections on the Research Process

Qualitative interviewing involves a process of continuous reflection, examining both me as researcher, and my relationship with my participants. It is a subjective practice, where the questions asked, data collected, and the themes that emerge are part of an evolving process. A researcher comes to the project with certain preconceptions, biases, and prior assumptions. These affect research decisions, including the format of the interview questions. While qualitative research allows us to explore social phenomenon and permits us to better understand the social and cultural contexts of our participants, the preconceptions I brought to the project shaped the end product of the dissertation. Though I had no expectations of truth, I had anticipated more discussion concerning cultural and political circumstances related to my participants’ constructions concerning early reading and the process of learning to read.

As I continued to learn more about the challenges of qualitative research, I began to understand the tentative nature of research studies. Challenges of sample selection, data collection, and data analysis make the process messy, difficult, and imperfect.

While I will never write another dissertation, I will engage in other research projects. In the course of this study, I have learned that successful interviewing requires many skills such as:

• slow and careful observation – thoughtfully reflect on the participants response in order to ask probing questions that will elicit more details, examples, explanations and rationales,
• maintaining a curiosity about what they are saying – pause and think about how to explore their meanings, rather than rushing on to the next question,

• trying to not impose my constructions on what they are saying – bracket my preconceptions and expectations by asking, “You mentioned this concept and this other concept. I’m really curious to understand what you mean by both of those. Would you talk more about them?”

• wording my questions to better understand their justifications and motivations without using the wording of the research questions. For example, instead of asking about ‘policy’ or ‘politics’ I could have asked, “Things have changed in early reading. Are you teaching early reading in the same way you have always taught early reading? Why, or why not? What kinds of changes have you made? Why are you making these changes?” Questions such as these may have drawn out more in-depth answers relating to policy and political influences.

With each subsequent interview, I felt that my skills as an interviewer improved. This was due in no small part to the reflective memos written after each interview that both summarized the content of the interview and analyzed the interview process. Also, as I began transcribing the interviews, I discovered the need for a written list of probing questions to guide me as I invited my participants to share more deeply. This simple list included phrases such as, what did you think about that, would you give me an example of that, and would you explain that further? While this list was helpful and always at my side, I began telling my participants that during the interview there may be periods of
silence while I recorded notes. I used these opportunities to process what they said, reflect, and think of how to word my next question.

Thinking qualitatively about the data and its analysis forced me to not only think outside the box, but to think without a box altogether; as if I were constructing a puzzle with no guiding image. Initially, each of the 875 bits of data seemed to belong in its own category. After spending considerable time grouping and re-grouping, I noticed the connections in the text or context of the data and they began to glide into the categories described in Appendix E. Returning to field notes, and thoughts about the interviews helped in the interpretation of the data. Viewing the data inductively, through a different lens, and with an associate allowed for the search for deeper meaning as themes emerged. This also allowed the data to drive the analysis, rather than imposing my own constructions on the data. By exploring this topic using qualitative methods, I believe I gained a deeper, more insightful perspective on my participants’ constructions of early reading.

Implications for Practice

The knowledge gained in this research can be helpful in a few ways, such as encouraging teachers and researchers to pay attention to teachers’ constructions and to further explore the implications of those constructions on their instructional practice. These findings provide some support for the conceptual premise that understanding teachers’ constructions are important for improving educational processes. The same holds true for stakeholders as they continue to reshape policy.
Implications for Future Research

At the end of a qualitative study, often all that is accomplished is a list of more questions (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011), because perhaps constructions are never complete and early reading continues to evolve. As stated, I framed this project around the theory that teachers’ voices were not often heard in conversations concerning early reading. Therefore, the following are my recommendations for future research:

1. Using a similar framework, but another qualitative research method, such as an observational case study could provide a complex, detailed examination of one preschool teacher.

2. Additional studies could focus on the constructions of Kindergarten, first, or second grade public school teachers working with children at different stages of the reading process and operating under state standards and accountability mandates.

3. Study is needed to give power to teachers’ voices, which are not generally considered in the creation of education policy.

4. Finally, questions like those presented in this study should be reconsidered to ensure the possibility for reconceptualizing those programs and practices considered essential to the future of educational research.

Conclusion to the Study

Learning to read is a critical milestone for children living in a literate society. In the US, reading skills are the foundation for academic success. Researchers and stakeholders have spent a considerable effort attempting to identify components of early reading instruction (NICHHD, 2000). Education, particularly approaches to reading, has
been plagued by the cliché of the swinging pendulum – a “been there, done that” syndrome. Each fluctuation is made to solve a problem, but must be presented by those in authority to practitioners as the current, most efficient approach, thereby altering the value of the previous approach.

Unquestionably, teachers are feeling the enormous push to provide learning environments that expose young children to precursor skills identified as necessary for later success in reading (NELP, 2000). Regardless, the preschool teachers interviewed for this study also understood the importance of supporting young children by providing authentic learning experiences and emphasizing relationships with the early reader and through encouraging the early reader to develop a relationship with reading. Whether or not these teachers’ expressed it, it is very likely that outside influences of policy and political circumstances did affect them. I was not able to uncover this influence, or at least not as well as I would have liked. I can attribute this lack of information to my unsophisticated interviewing skills and the ideas of shared discourse and relationships.

For the past several years, I have attended classes, read widely, and written broadly about topics surrounding early reading and education policy. While I have focused on more theoretical issues related to early reading instruction and policy, my participants have spent the past several years in preschool classrooms interacting with children in the earliest stages of literacy. They have prepared and presented lessons, spent time one-on-one with children, and encouraged families. Their constructions are grounded in these practical experiences. My worldview has become top-down and philosophical; while theirs remains bottom-up and practical – in the trenches – dynamic, ever changing with the individual needs of the children they teach. Perhaps this
suggests why researchers and policy-makers continue to see a gap between theory, policy, and practice.

Stakeholders in education who are in a position to make policy and recommendations concerning reading instruction include elected officials, business leaders, teacher preparations programs, and to a minute extent administrators, classroom teachers, and the public. Yet those who spend the most time involved in education with young children are rarely included in the decisions that directly affect classroom practice. The choices families and educators make about the quantity and quality of time spent engaged in early literacy activities vastly affect the subsequent constructions concerning early reading held by that child or student. Those positive and negative early interactions both with individuals and text become embedded in their future conceptual models concerning early reading. These constructions have less to do with definitions, policies, and instructional strategies, and everything to do with a caring, responsive relationship with an adult focused on helping a child learn to read and a meaningful, personal relationship with text. The preschool teachers interviewed for this study conveyed this as the most relevant strategy used to support their students.

The goals these preschool teachers had for their students and their instructional decisions were indications of their unique and evolving constructions of early reading and are absolutely grounded in their practice – in their life experiences and in their daily interactions with children. This study suggests that stakeholders should remember that these practical experiences are a primary influence on how preschool teachers think about early reading and the process of learning to read. If we ignore these personal
constructions, we miss important opportunities to influence how these teachers support young readers.
APPENDIX A

DESCRIPTIONS OF WORK SITES A THROUGH D
Site A

Site A is a research center and student teacher training site situated on the campus of a large university in North Texas. Children ages three to six belonging to university faculty and staff, as well as children from the community, participate in a half-day or full five-day a week program. Several student assistant teachers and university students are supervised by four degreed lead teachers with the goal of providing opportunities to observe child behaviors and teaching strategies. The staff consists of 20 teachers and support staff. Enrollment in 2010-2011 averaged 50 children. There is great diversity among the staff and children at the center. Many of the student assistant teachers are studying abroad from China, Thailand, Taiwan, South Korea, and Malaysia. The children are equally diverse having multiple nationalities, languages, and social and economic backgrounds.

According to the program's online information, children at Site A experience developmentally appropriate activities based on early childhood development theory and best practices, including many meaningful language and literacy activities. The laboratory school is fully licensed by the Texas Department of Family and Protective Services, accredited through the National Accreditation Commission for Early Care and Education Program (NAC), and a designated vendor for Texas Workforce Solutions Child Care Services. This site was chosen because of its unique purpose in providing practical training to student teachers, while offering children opportunities to learn through play.

Site B

Site B is an on-campus center that provides care for infants to children five years
of age. The center serves the needs of both a North Texas metropolitan community college and the surrounding neighborhood, while providing a contemporary observation site for students in the campus' child development and teacher education programs. The center is open Monday through Friday from 6:00 a.m. until 10:00 p.m. Children are enrolled in a full five-day a week program. Site B also provides low cost evening child care to children 12 months old through 12 years old while their parents attend class.

The staff consists of 23 teachers and support staff. Enrollment in 2010-2011 averaged 25 children in the day program and 50 in the evening program. Teachers are degreed and supervise assistant teachers, many who are college students from the child development and teacher education programs. According to the program’s online information, Site B’s developmental program incorporates a family-oriented philosophy in a multi-age setting. The center is fully licensed by the Texas Department of Family and Protective Services and accredited by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC). This site was chosen to provide additional insight into the beliefs of teachers from a laboratory school setting.

Site C

The mission of Site C is to teach English to children from all cultures and prepare them for academic success. Since 1978, the program has provided a focused service to children considered at risk of school failure. Most of the children come from city dwelling families living at or below the poverty level. Children ages two and one-half to five years old are taught English as well as other the literacy and social skills necessary to succeed in school and life. The centers provide a full five-day a week program and are open from 7:00 a.m. until 5:30 p.m. Currently, Site C has 22 classrooms at five
centers located throughout a large North Texas city. The program has a staff of 69 teachers and support staff and a corps of more than 148 community volunteers. In the 2010-2011 school year enrollment averaged four hundred children.

According to the program's online information, the preschool's main focus is to provide a safe, nurturing environment supporting non-English speaking children while preserving their cultural heritage. This Head Start program is fully licensed by the Texas Department of Family and Protective Services and accredited by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC). Site C has developed a specialized curriculum designed to meet the needs of low-income children whose native language is not English. The curriculum coupled with family literacy components gives children a strong foundation before they enter the formal educational environment. This site was chosen because of their distinctive focus on non-English speaking children from low-income families.

Site D

The mission of Site D is to provide an environment that nurtures the individual development of each child. With school readiness as a primary goal, the North Texas suburban school's curriculum focuses on holistic child development. The program does not focus only on academics, but also places emphasis on social and emotional development. Classrooms are designed to provide play-based experiences to promote learning that is meaningful to children. The center is open five days a week and provides an affordable full day program, as well as an extended early morning, afternoon, and summer programs. There are 35 teachers and support staff members, and more than half hold degrees or are pursuing degrees.
The area surrounding this center has been rapidly changing to include families from diverse backgrounds. The campus has actively sought to meet the needs of these children by hiring teachers raised in Mexico, Poland, and India who can communicate in languages other than English. According to the program's online information, all classes, infant through prekindergarten, follow the High/Scope Curriculum based on the NAEYC's concept of developmentally appropriate practices. Music-and-movement classes are beginning in the two-year old program. Spanish classes begin in the three year-old program. To promote students' spiritual development an early childhood chapel is held each month and includes singing as well as an interactive Bible story and prayer for two-year olds and older. This religiously affiliated site was chosen because of their response to a changing student population.
Dear <Director of Site A-D>,

My name is Karen J. Walker. I am developing a research proposal for my doctoral dissertation at the University of North Texas titled Constructions of Preschool Teachers’ Beliefs Concerning Early Reading. I am requesting your permission to invite teachers from your center to participate in my study. This research will involve a series of one to three face-to-face interviews (approximately one and one-half to two hours each). I will audiotape the interviews. The data collected during the interviews will be assembled into a report. The identity of your center and teachers’ identities will not be revealed.

I am not asking you to send the letter of invitation (attached) at this time. I must first obtain official approvals from my university and your organization. Once my proposal has been approved, then I will ask you to invite your teachers on my behalf at that time.

I would welcome the opportunity to discuss this with you by phone if that would be helpful. In addition, I would be happy to provide any further information you may require in order to make a decision.

Thank you for your time.

Sincerely,

Karen J. Walker, M.Ed.
xxx-xxx-xxxx
Karen.Walker@unt.edu
APPENDIX C

LETTER OF CONSENT
Subject: Constructions of Preschool Teachers’ Beliefs Concerning Early Reading

Dear <participant name>,

You are invited to participate in an exploratory research project. My name is Karen J. Walker. I am a doctoral candidate at the University of North Texas, Denton, in the Teacher Education & Administration Department. While a significant body of literature has been created related to early literacy and language, few researchers have specifically explored the beliefs of preschool teacher concerning early reading.

This research will involve a series of one to three face-to-face interviews (approximately one-half to two hours each). I will audiotape the interviews. The data collected during the interviews will be assembled into a report. Your identity will not be revealed. I will assign you random code that will be used in the final report to insure confidentiality. The digital audio files will be coded and stored in a locked file cabinet. I will transcribe the audio files. They will not be used for any other purpose without your prior written consent. At the conclusion of this study, the audio files will be stored in a locked filing cabinet for possible future analysis. Your participation in this study will be confidential, and there are no foreseeable risks or discomforts. Your responses will not be linked to your name in any written or verbal report of this research project. To ensure that data collected during the interviews accurately reflects your perceptions, a summary of the interview will be sent to you for review, further input, clarification, and corrections. Possible benefits of this research include contributing to a better understanding of the constructions of teachers’ beliefs about early reading.

If you have any questions about this study you can contact me by e-mail, Karen.Walker@unt.edu, or by telephone at xxx-xxx-xxxx. This research report will be submitted as a final project for my dissertation study at the University of North Texas. My advising professor for this study is Dr. Gaile S. Cannella. She can be reached at (940) 565-4901, or by e-mail at Gaile.Cannella@unt.edu.

Your signature indicates that you have read the information in this letter and have decided to participate in this study. You may withdraw from this study at any time. Please notify me verbally or in writing if you decide to withdraw from this study. If you have questions or would like to read your interview summaries or a copy of the report, please contact me. If you agree to participate please sign and date the bottom of this letter and return to me in the enclosed envelope. I will provide a copy for your records.

I give my consent to audio record my interview(s). Initials of Participant: __________

I agree to participate in this study.

Signature of Participant: _________________________________ Date: __________

Signature of Investigator: _________________________________ Date: __________

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APPENDIX D

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL
INTRODUCTION:

The purpose of this research project is to better understand preschool teachers’ constructions about the process of learning to read and the ways children acquire literacy skills.

INTERVIEW INFORMATION:

Date of interview: __________ Time: from ______________ to ______________

First Name: ______________ MI: ___ Last Name: _________________________

Interview 1 Grand Tour Questions:

1) As I stated when I scheduled this interview, I’m interested in hearing your thoughts on early reading. Starting with your own childhood, could you tell me a little about your early reading experiences?

   Were there books in your home? *Were there reading materials in your home?*

   Did anyone read to you? *Who do you remember seeing read when you were a child? What… When… Where did they read? Did they read to you?*

   What do you remember about learning to read?

2) What other life experiences have you had that relate to early reading?

3) What has influenced you to be in a professional position involving early reading?

4) *Everyone has opinions about early reading. Often individuals or groups in a position of power influence early reading.* Are you familiar with what different groups say and how those perspectives are similar to or different from what you think about early reading?

   Have the perspectives of politicians, parents, educators, child care workers, researchers, and curriculum publishers influenced yours? If so how?
5) Is there anything you would like to add about early reading?

Interview two:

Questions asked during the second and possibly third interview will be created based on themes that emerge from the constant comparison of the first interviews.

CLOSING THE INTERVIEW:

Thank you very much for participating in this interview. I will be transcribing the audio recording and/or my notes. I will provide you a summary of the interview, for clarification and/or further input. If you have any additional thoughts before you receive the summary, please feel free to email me at Karen.Walker@unt.edu or call me at 972-741-9994. *(I will mail a thank you note with my contact information).*

RESEARCHER'S INTERVIEW NOTES

A. Comments about the manner, tone, progression of the interview

- was the participant comfortable and cooperative, reserved, unreceptive?

- were there interruptions impacted the pace or success of the interview?

- what are my feelings and thoughts about the person I interviewed and the interview manner, tone, and progression?

- what questions emerge as a result of this interview?

B. Comments on interview protocol

- were there problems encountered?

- is there anything I would consider changing before I use this protocol again.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Inductive Categories</th>
<th>Samples of Participant Responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>On Learning to Read</td>
<td>She [her first grade teacher] had… and this is not what we do now… she had everything labeled – clock, door, chair… I don’t really remember reading anything until I got into first grade. During my time, they did not have Kindergarten, or PreK… all the programs they have now. I know the teacher would get little cards that we would use… umm… with sight words.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Books</td>
<td>We had library cards, and we would do summer book club reading, and we did all kinds of stuff at the library. We also had encyclopedias and we would look thing up in the encyclopedias. There were always books, novels and things all over the house. And now as a teacher, I am always going to the library.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family</td>
<td>I do remember the one time my dad read to me. He was sick and I was sick and we bonded that way together. I don’t really remember my mother… although she was pro-education… I don’t remember her reading to me. …he [my dad] would tell us. It was scary… about a cheese monster that lived in the forest behind our house.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Playing School</td>
<td>…we would play grocery store to learn how to use money. Whatever mail my mom didn’t want we would play [school] with that. When I was little I would play teacher with my little sisters.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College/Training</td>
<td>My fundamental learning how to really sit down with the children one-on-one has been from my co-teachers. They have been teaching for a long time. …we do training here. We are required by the state to have 24 hours of training every year. Sometimes we have speakers come during our in-service and talk to us about early reading and give us ideas about</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
activities to get the children engaged.

**Difficulty with Reading**

| [on being pulled out of class for help with reading]…one thing I noticed was that I was easily distracted and being with a small group you can really focus.  
| …the little books at school and the work that we did in the pull-out program really helped.  
| [mother spoke no English] It was a struggle with homework at home, and bringing it back to school.  

**Outside expectations**

- My director has said this several time, “Second grade is like fourth grade used to be.” We are trying to drive it down more and more. So instead of letting kids play, and have a good time, they develop useful skills…
- Everything [changes in early reading] sort of drifted down…especially kindergarten… they are wanting them to be on the first grade level.
- All the time [her teaching conflicted with the districts expectations]. But you sometimes have to go in and do what’s right for the child, within reason.

**Important for early reading**

- We focus a lot on their names, so they can recognize the letters in their names.
- How we can introduce the sounds of letters, and sounding out the beginning and ending sounds… and the nursery rhymes.
- …pre-reading – phonological awareness, the onset rime, rhyming words, letter knowledge. All the things they needed to know before they actually sit down and put those letters into make a word.

**Meaningful**

- Things that [what children write about] are important to them.
- It [reading] has to be important to the child.
- If they can get meaningful experiences with writing and reading, it will be so much easier to teach… to have them read later.

**Parents**

- I like it when parents help.
- If I could get all the parents together and let them know how
important it [reading] is and how it would help their child to succeed in school.

I think that some [parents who are reluctant to read to their child at home] didn't finish school and they had to get out of school for whatever reason… they are intimidated by it.

Changes in Curriculum

Years ago the beginning of Kindergarten was letter recognition and the sounds. They wanted them to read, but not at as high a level they do now.

Teacher's got together and said what do they need the first 6 weeks, and so on. A lot of it was tying their shoes, buttoning their buttons, zipping, things like that.

We have a curriculum that provides the books that we can use and it gives us ideas on how we can implement.

Classroom

…reading is all around the environment [preschool classroom].

…early care environments [preschool classrooms] like this really prepare children for the reading they'll need when they start elementary school.

Early reading is just part of the environment [preschool classroom].

Public Policy

Politicians… to be honest I don’t pay too much attention to what is going on out there just because I don’t want to be involved in all that.

They [politicians] need to come visit the classroom.

I hate that they [politicians] are trying to cut pre-school, the program and the money. Head Start… I think I heard they were trying to cut something like that.
REFERENCES


