Literacy Microsystems of Children Ages Birth to Four:

A Strength Approach

A Dissertation

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This has been a long and challenging process. Changing jobs, several moves to different parts of the state, driving nearly 200 miles one way to get to class at UMN once a week after those moves, children getting married and adding grandchildren to the family, and needing to take semesters off to prepare for new employment have all contributed to physical and financial obstacles to overcome. The phenomenology expert retired precipitating a rather dramatic change in my research plans, and my advisor retired before I made it to the finish line. Unfortunately, there were also a few people along the way who discouraged me from continuing. Despite the slow pace, I continued to move forward one step at a time and have reached the point of thanking the many people who were supportive of me throughout this process.

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Dedication

To Rebecca. Dreams do come true, usually with a lot of hard work.

To my students past, present, and future. May you always discover your

strengths as you face challenges, surmount them, and continue in a positive

direction toward your goals.

Abstract

The purpose of the study was to ascertain which human, material, and experiential resources supporting emergent literacy of children were present in the microsystems of some low-income families with children under the age of four. This mixed methods study used naturalistic inquiry as the primary strategic approach. Methods included home visits and conversations with parents; the Infant-Toddler Home Observation for Measurement of the Environment was used to assess the home environment. Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory was the theoretical framework; social constructivism was included in the discussion of findings and recommendations for action.

The research questions addressed are 1) what do parents consider as human and material resources of their family that will support the literacy development of their young children 2) what resources, both human and material, are present in the microsystem of the very young child that the as supportive of literacy development in young children and 3) what resources, both human and material, are present in the microsystem of the very young child that may not be included in the literature yet could be supportive of literacy development in young children.

Results challenged some stereotype images of low-income families related to literacy activities. Another finding was that while parents were actively engaged in communication with their young children they did not usually make the connection between developing literacy skills and a variety of family activities.

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Chapter One: My Journey

A hundred years from now it will not matter what my bank account was,

the sort of house I lived in, or the kind of car I drove. But the world may

be different, because I was important in the life of a boy. (Witcraft, 1950,

p. 2)

For over 20 years a variation of this quote has hung over my desk; my version

says "life of a child" rather than boy. It exemplifies my feelings about the more than 30

years spent working in the early childhood profession. I have taken on a variety of roles

in those years, each presenting different challenges. This dissertation represents my

current focus and is a culmination of what I have learned over the past fifteen years,

including questions that have challenged me to continue to make a difference even

though I am no longer providing direct care for young children. I would like to share

some of my life history in this chapter, so that you have a glimpse into why this work is

so important to me.

I grew up in a homogenous farming community of about 3,500 people. My

parents worked together in a family owned business; I was the youngest of five and went

to the parish elementary and high school. I left that small town for a major metropolitan

area, but enrolled in a small, private, religion-based college where once again most

people looked and sounded like me. As I think back on those years, I knew nothing about

how different some people's lives were from what I experienced.

I experienced academic frustrations and a lack of success for the first time in my

chosen major of music performance. I did not have the tools needed to master the

intricacies of music theory. For that, one needed to know not just the names of notes and

how to play an instrument, but major and minor chords, scales, writing in multiple music keys, and so much more. Had piano lessons been a part of my younger years, the struggle might not have been so great. Perhaps there would have been positive achievements rather than a series of failures in that first year of college that led me to consider remaining in my tedious summer factory job rather than return to college in the fall.

Thankfully I had supportive friends and family members who advised me to consider a different major rather than simply dropping out of college. One suggestion was to consider a career in business, so I found myself enrolling in accounting. I could manage to record credits and debits in the wrong places and still balance my account. The rules of accounting practices eluded me and I could see failure in my future again with the first accounting exam. This time I was lucky enough to be volunteering at a special needs preschool across the street from the college. My work with the children, especially a young girl with cerebral palsy whose first crawling experience was to cross the room to me, showed me my vocation was teaching.

This choice got me back on the success track and I completed my degree in preschool and elementary education without major struggles. Still, it would be eight years before I would be a teacher of young children due to getting married and having children of my own. I stayed involved with my college community while starting my family and when the opportunity to teach part time in the campus childcare program became available I began my teaching career. I spent the next twenty years as teacher, administrator, and finally director of that program.

My baccalaureate studies did not include much about diversity. I learned a bit about multicultural education, but coursework at the time primarily focused on racial

differences and I did not see any relevance to my work in such a homogeneous community. My outlook changed with two significant events. The first was a weeklong class on the development of Black racial identity. As one of only two White people in the class, I listened a lot and spoke very little. A completely new world opened before me. I learned of Langston Hughes and W.E.B. DuBois and other significant people and events in Black history; other participants were stunned that I had never heard of them before. The second event was one I experienced as the director of the campus childcare program. A mother and her daughter got in the habit of stopping by my office to talk to me before going home for the day. On one occasion, this four-year-old biracial child said to me, "I wish my skin was the same color as yours". It hurt to hear this beautiful child say those words. I found myself motivated to learn about the experiences of others who were different from me. Soon I realized that learning was not enough, I also needed to take action to teach and interact with others in ways that would support all children feeling good about who they are in all aspects of their identity.

My graduate work began shortly after that event. From the first class, I was encouraged to consider what my thesis topic might be and to integrate that focus in coursework so that I would be preparing for that capstone paper throughout the entire program. It seemed a daunting task, but I recognized my research interest by listening to children once again. I heard children make many statements that seemed intolerant of differences between them. Topics included skin color, language differences, religious beliefs, family structure, gender issues, and more. In my master's thesis study, I questioned why children said the things they did. I wanted to understand their reasoning and looked for ways adults in their lives could respond to them in order to encourage an

appreciation for multiple types of diversity rather than perpetuating biases.

After twenty years I moved to a university in a smaller city to start a new campus childcare program. Most people I met still looked like me and spoke the same language I did, but the social culture of the area was very different from my previous experiences. The priorities appeared to be different. Family budgets were tight and entertainment included activities I did not enjoy. In order to work efficaciously with families, I had to understand them. I needed to find a way to communicate in a credible voice, rather than simply being someone who was a 'big city person' who just did not understand their ways. There were particular words and phrases that had been an integral part of my speaking that now resulted in others simply shutting down. I could actually see in their facial expressions that I was no longer communicating effectively. Previously, I had been able to illustrate my ideas by telling stories out of my experience; now my stories appeared to be evidence of how little I knew about this community. "But this isn't there, so your point is invalid" was the response I heard in many of those conversations.

My first-hand experience of what it is like to not have a job came when the university restructured the program I was in after a couple of years, leading to my lay-off. There were limited local opportunities at the time. Moving seemed a likely possibility for me and losing my home was a real possibility. My master's degree had opened an opportunity to teach as a college adjunct several years earlier, and now led to teaching full-time at a community college in another part of the state. When I taught as an adjunct instructor at the metropolitan college, my students were primarily from families of middle to high socio-economic status and the academic admission standards were rather high. In contrast, this new teaching position was in one of the poorest areas of the state,

and since community colleges are an open access point to higher education, many students came with academic records that highlighted their previous difficulties within the educational system.

I struggled to understand and connect with my students in the same ways I had with colleagues and families in past work situations. Once again, if I spoke of previous experiences students dismissed them because they were too different from their own situations to be of any value to them. My work at four-year colleges appeared to be a detriment in their eyes rather than an asset.

Reflective practice was critical for me to learn how to communicate appropriately with this low-income and diverse small-town community. Just as I had struggled with music and accounting early in my college work because I lacked the foundation to build upon, I was asking my students to use teaching strategies with young children that they had not ever experienced themselves. They had learned that while teachers say they *want* the ideas of students, in their experience those were only words because the instructor really wanted a textbook quote or a regurgitation of the lecture without interpretation. I learned that earning the trust of students is overt and intentional. I needed to tell them often that I valued their thoughts, that their experiences helped to teach me, and that there is seldom, if ever, one right answer.

I gained my students' trust by acknowledging that individual communities have their own particular cultures and values to understand and respect, and the result was a qualitative change in class discussions. When we turned to the topic of diversity there was much I learned from them such as the impact of financial insecurity on learning and social interactions. My students were able to name and share about multiple types of

diversity and they actively discussed the impact these areas have on the lives of children and their families. We also discussed the prevalence of negativity in the world. As a case in point, my question would be "What sorts of things do you hear or say when a child is a challenge"? The negative statements flowed easily from my students: "His parents never play with him; he is always in front of the TV"; "Her mother is always yelling"; "They never come to conferences or school events". I am sure everyone could easily say a few. The next question I asked was, "How can we frame our thinking differently to see the strengths of this family rather than focusing on what we judge as deficits"? Then the class was silent. It is difficult to re-frame negative thinking to positive statements. I suggested a possibility might be, "These parents are working multiple jobs to provide for their family; it must be difficult to not be able to attend school events because you are working. I wish I had the organizational skills it must take to coordinate all these schedules of work and school."

I experienced another layoff, this time due to declining enrollment. My next teaching opportunity took me back to a metropolitan area, this time to a large community college where over half the students are of color and the estimate is that at least ten percent of the student body is homeless, many also experiencing food insecurity. I knew that my developing skills of recognizing and supporting diversity in all its aspects would be challenged again as I started working with this new community.

Nearly every textbook I have used in the college classroom refers to research results indicating the deficits presented by poverty. The topics include family stress, health and safety issues, low self-esteem, and ultimately the relationship of these elements to lack of academic success. Further, it points out that the limited financial

resources restrict children's exposure to diverse experiences that support cognitive skills. In particular, this deficit of material resources is a consistent factor considered as contributing to poor academic performance including poor literacy rates among children in lower socio-economic families (Henniger, 2013; Amatea, 2013; Arnett & Maynard, 2012). My students, who are typically poor, are reading repeatedly that children in poverty have the deck stacked against them. These texts state it is likely that they will not succeed in school, primarily because of limited literacy skills. Yet here are students in front of me who have maintained enough motivation for learning to be in a college classroom. What must it feel like to read and hear that you are likely going to fail?

I am an instructor of future early childhood teachers or childcare providers. My interest cannot end with simply understanding the college student. It is likely that students in my classes will work with children in the areas served by the community college. These future teachers must also learn how to respect and view the children and families they will work with in ways that see strength rather than deficit, particularly in children from low-income families.

My employment journey led me to my current research interest. The teaching experiences in community colleges located within financially depressed areas in the past ten years have challenged me to consider the relationship of poverty, family and cultural language practices, and educational praxis that currently play out in my college classroom today. While it would be simple to look at these students through a deficit lens and consider them poor learners who have little to bring to the educational experience of the college classroom, my personal and professional beliefs are more aligned with the strength-based model. This demands me to look for what is present in families that can

support the development of young children.

I believe that each part of my life journey contributed to my passion to look for each child's strengths, the resources that are already present in homes, and low or no-cost opportunities that are available to everyone, regardless of income. In this research study I strived to use a strength-model lens to ascertain human, material, and experiential resources supporting emergent literacy that were present in some low-income family homes. Through conversations with parents I sought to discover what was *present,* rather than what was *missing* in the home setting. In the next chapter, I share my theoretical framework and some of the literature I have read about the history of emergent literacy and research related to this topic that guided my efforts to recognize the strengths present in the environments and experiences of children within their family.

Chapter Two: Review of the Literature

My intent in this research study was to learn about the home microsystems of children in lower socio-economic families without bringing a preconceived notion of what they might look like. However, I must acknowledge my own perspectives, framed by the multiple life experiences described in Chapter One including my academic studies in early childhood development and professional experiences with young children related to emergent literacy. In this chapter, I introduce the theoretical foundations of my work including a strength-based perspective I keep at the forefront of everything I do. In this literature review, I present the context of significant national events and initiatives related to poverty, education, and literacy; share a historical summary of the views on developing reading skills that led to the terms *reading readiness* and *emergent literacy;* and outline a selection of research pertinent to emergent literacy in the home microsystem of children ages birth to four years.

Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Systems Theory

Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Systems Theory provided the essential framework for my study (Bronfenbrenner, 1989/1992, 1993/1994). Over a number of years, Bronfenbrenner engaged in a process of developing and revising his theory that he intended to guide researchers in the consideration of human development within an interactive and multi-layered context. While the idea of a layered ecology remained consistent for him, as his theory evolved he cast a wider net in terms of the environmental aspects of development. Over time he converted the term layer to system, expanded definitions, and continued to develop and rename his theory. In this chapter I provide a somewhat detailed summary of his theory, followed by a more-focused description of the

two systems of influence that I found most relevant to my research.

The Environment in Childhood Development

Bronfenbrenner attributed his grounding in ecology to his childhood experiences with his father. Speaking of his father's guidance on walks in natural surroundings of farmland, woods, and hillsides he stated, "Wherever we were he would alert my unobservant eyes to the workings of nature by pointing to the functional interdependence between living organisms and their surroundings" (1979, xii). Those practical experiences were foundational for Bronfenbrenner's interest in the development of human ecology (1979).

In the early 1970's Bronfenbrenner explored the connections between the environments of children and their development. Policy makers in government as well as private businesses often asked him questions about to early childhood development such as the impact of the care provided for children while parents worked, or how the design of housing developments could optimize child development. His quest for information to answer these types of questions included both professional journals within his field and information from a broader perspective. In his 1974 article, *Developmental Research, Public Policy, and the Ecology of Childhood,* Bronfenbrenner cites a New York Times article that led him to consider environmental influences on children's behaviors. A government-funded study in West Germany compared the artwork of children in older, established towns to those living in newer cities designed with large open spaces for children to play. They found the resulting art from the two locations to be quite different. Children in the model cities "often painted what were considered despairing pictures of the world the adults had fashioned for them depicting an uninviting, concrete fortress of

cleanliness and order and boredom" (Fellows, 1971, p. 14) while children in the older towns "seemed enthusiastic about their surroundings, painting a great amount of detail into a variety of things they found exciting around them" (Fellows, 1971, p. 14). Bronfenbrenner saw this as evidence that the relationship between science and policymaking is bi-directional. The questions posed to him were as valuable to research methodology as to public policy because, "these questions focus on the impact on the child, both direct and indirect, of the *enduring environment in which he lives*, or might live if social policies and practices were altered" (Bronfenbrenner, 1974, p. 2).

Bronfenbrenner went on to call attention to the child's environment and describe layers in it. In his publication *Developmental Research, Public Policy, and the Ecology of Childhood*, he called the environment "the child's ecology" in (Bronfenbrenner, 1974, p. 2) and described it as having "…two concentric layers, the first superimposed upon the second" (p. 2). The first layer was the setting of "…home, school, playground…" (Bronfenbrenner, 1974, p. 2) each containing "…design…people… activities…that include the *social meaning* of these activities" (p. 2). A second layer was the "…supporting and surrounding layer…which limits and shapes what can and does occur within the immediate setting" (Bronfenbrenner, 1974, p. 2). Examples of the second layer included geography as well as community practices.

Bronfenbrenner developed his perspective on the importance of environmental conditions in *Toward an Experimental Ecology of Human Development* (1977). He referenced the research of the time and pointed out that these studies considered child development without reflecting on how environments influenced their development. While respecting the research as scientifically important, he claimed that the predominant

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methodology did not provide the most complete picture of the developing child. That is, the studies tended to be situated in a laboratory setting with an unfamiliar adult interacting with the child. He stressed the importance of studying child development in naturalistic ways and incorporating environmental information in the research findings because, without considering both the ecological environment and the child, resultant findings would be incomplete. Bronfenbrenner took care to note that the environment for a study needed to be consistent with the research question. Studies in naturalistic settings do not answer the same questions as those in laboratory research and do not replace such studies. Rather, different questions required development of a different methodology. The challenge he saw was to design studies that were relevant, but also rigorous.

Environmental Systems

In 1977 Bronfenbrenner expanded on the layered concept present in a child's developmental ecology. He called on the work of Brim (1975) who defined three levels of socio-cultural structures: micro-, meso-, and macro- that influence child development. The micro-structural level was "primarily with the *people who care for children*" (Brim, p. 517). The meso-structure was the "…middle level of influences and includes the *institutions that serve children*" (Brim, p. 517). The macro-structure was "economics, cultural values, politics, law, and sociology in relation to child development…" (Brim, p. 516).

While closely aligning his definitions of the levels to what Brim proposed, Bronfenbrenner (1977) adapted the terminology by changing the word "structures" to "systems" and applied the environmental concept of widening circles of influence on child development to what he then referred to as "…*the ecology of human development*"

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(p. 514). He described the systems as "…*a nested arrangement of structures, each contained within the next*" (p. 514). His 1979 text *Ecology of Human Development* aimed to "…offer a new theoretical perspective for research in human development. The perspective is new in its conception of the developing person, of the environment, and especially of the evolving interaction between the two" (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p. 3).

Bronfenbrenner continued to draw upon his previous writings and expound upon the interconnected ways that the environment and personal interactions influence development. He viewed the environment as extending beyond the physical surroundings of the moment and noted, "the person's development is profoundly affected by events occurring in settings in which the person is not even present" (1979, p. 3). *Ecology of Human Development* included his definitions of major theory terms as well as propositions for research designs to measure this development in context (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). He named and defined the systems: micro-, meso-, exo-, macro- and chrono- each with more distal, yet pertinent, influences on the child.

Development of Bioecological Systems Theory

In *Ecological Systems Theory* (1989/1992) Bronfenbrenner described himself as both "critic and creator" (1989/1992, p. 187) while examining and questioning his previous writings. He aggregated his thoughts about research in child development between 1979 and 1989 in a process of "… re-assessing, revising, extending…" (p. 187). Recognizing his research focus changed during the 1980's from considering development irrespective of context, to focusing almost exclusively on environment, he identified a need to modify his theory to specify that an individual is an active participant in processes taking place within particular surroundings.

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This evolution of theory maintained his original essential elements, but Bronfenbrenner expanded his definitions of some systems as well as the theory itself. He also inserted the element of time to recognize its relevance to development which occurs over time in the environment. He considered this inclusion of time as the chronosystems in research design (Bronfenbrenner, 1986, 1989).

The first modification was to his theory definition and includes the factor of time. Below is the theory definition with Bronfenbrenner's change is in italics.

The ecology of human development is the scientific study of the progressive, mutual accommodation, *throughout the life course*, between an active, growing human being, and the changing properties of the immediate settings in which the developing person lives, as this process is affected by the relations between these settings, and by the larger contexts in which the settings are embedded.

(Bronfenbrenner, 1989/1992, p. 188)

This additional phrase, throughout the life course, while of particular importance to longitudinal studies, is still a critical aspect of development. He notes that while much research is conducted in designs that take place in a short time frame, true development occurs over time and with experiences that are more complex with time.

Having made this adaptation to his theory definition, Bronfenbrenner also modified his definitions of the micro- and macro-systems to include people as well as physical aspects of environments. The most intimate level of interaction in Bronfenbrenner's bioecological systems theory is the microsystem. Here the child has direct and ongoing contact with others, primarily parents and family. In his definition of the microsystem Bronfenbrenner addressed a twofold level of interactions, those among

people in the environment, as well as material aspects of the setting itself. His definition with 1989 revisions in italics is below:

> A microsystem is a pattern of activities, roles, and interpersonal relations experienced by [the] developing person in a given face-to-face setting with particular physical and material features, *and containing other persons with distinctive characteristics of temperament, personality, and systems of belief.* (Bronfenbrenner, 1989/1992, p. 227)

The phrase, *throughout the life course*, added to the theory definition, impacts what one would consider a microsystem by highlighting that the microsystem involves a sustained engagement with others and the environment rather than a one-time occurrence. It is not simply any situation where a child interacts with someone such as a one-time visit to a public health nurse even though it was an interactive experience. There must be sustained interactions with others and the environment and an increasing complexity to the engagement such as on-going visits with the public health nurse over a period of time growing from a health check to interactions with the child to support cognitive development. Bronfenbrenner calls these "*proximal processes*" (Bronfenbrenner, 1999, p. 5). These proximal processes can be with either people or the environment and they are bi-directional indicating that in interpersonal events, each person has an impact on the other. In the case of the child in the environment, "for reciprocal interaction to occur, the objects and symbols in the immediate environment must be of a kind that invites attention, exploration, manipulation, elaboration, and imagination" (Bronfenbrenner, 1999, p. 6). The additional phrase, *and containing other persons with distinctive characteristics of temperament, personality, and systems of belief,* describes parents and

siblings with whom the child interacts in the home as each bringing his or her own history of development, skills, and beliefs to dynamic interactions.

Bronfenbrenner named the outermost layer in his theory the macrosystem and his definition is as follows (with updates set in italics):

The macrosystem consists of the overarching pattern of micro-, meso-, and exosystems characteristic of a given culture, subculture, or other broader social context, *with particular reference to the developmentally instigative belief systems, resources, hazards, life styles, opportunity structures, life course options, and patterns of social interchange that are embedded in each of these systems.* The macrosystem may be thought of as a societal blueprint for a particular culture, subculture, or other broader social context. (Bronfenbrenner, 1989/1992, p. 228)

Recall that each of the systems: micro-, meso-, and exo- embeds in the next larger system. Thus, the macrosystem encompasses all previously named systems and is set within the chronosystem as context. Every system is impacted by the subculture and culture and is influenced by the dimension of time, the chronosystem. What we do, and how we do it today, are influenced by what occurred both historically and in the moment it occurs. One example is that language is not heard in the same ways today as children heard it in the past. Technology advances include television, videos, computers, electronic toys, and even electronic reading devices that make what children hear not confined to the context of an interactive conversation; they are hearing language but are not necessarily participating in conversation (Healy,1994).

The bioecological systems theory demands one acknowledge that understanding a

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child can only come through natural settings inclusive of people and surroundings and recognition of the processes present that are interactive with each person having an influence on the other. Further, each context is embedded in larger circles of influence including the historical impact of values, beliefs, and social systems; each of the systems has impact on the others. Thus the bioecological systems theory is not static, nor one in which a solitary element can be viewed individually; it is a dynamic system of interactions.

While my study focused on the microsystems of low-income families, it behooved me to consider the context of the macrosystem because it is at this system level that one would place social and political initiatives such as legislation about education, public service programs, and funding for programs such as Head Start. Research about child development, including potential influences on developing emergent literacy skills, is also part of the macrosystem within the context of the chronosystem because knowledge created in the past influences literacy practices today through review, research, and implementation. Thus, before I review the literature that directly relates to emergent literacy microsystems in families, I describe U.S. legislation and initiatives connected to education programs including those for low-income families.

To the extent possible, I present information in chronological order of its introduction to the legislative process. Some initiatives cover a significant period that overlap others, thus it is at times topic driven rather than by date. Programs evaluated and amended over a period of years include the changes and timeline.

U.S. Social and Political Initiatives Addressing Poverty and Education

The United States has a long history of support for improving educational

experiences for low-income families dating back to the late 1700's. Funding focused on development of higher education programs, primarily in manufacturing, agriculture, and vocational training until the mid-1930's when agricultural supports turned to the purchase of excess commodities that were then provided to the public schools to supplement lunch programs. Those federal supports for state and local efforts to provide appropriate food and facilities for school lunch programs continue today.

War on Poverty

In his 1964 State of the Union Address President Johnson declared a *War on Poverty* and stated that one aspect of that fight was to improve schools (Johnson, 1965). A year later, also in a State of the Union address, Johnson advanced his agenda with the words, "I propose that we begin a program in education to ensure every American child the fullest development of mind and skills" (Johnson, 1966, p. 5). President Johnson then set out to secure funding for multiple programs to address poverty, enhance education, and fight discrimination; he succeeded with the Equal Opportunity Act of 1965.

Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965. Two major items emerged because of the Equal Opportunity Act. The first was that the U.S. Congress passed the *Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965* (ESEA). This Act provided additional funding for schools in economically depressed districts in order to "…provide all children significant opportunity to receive a fair, equitable, and high-quality education, and to close educational achievement gaps" (United States Congress, p. 8) and "…provide low-income and minority students greater access to effective teachers, principals, and other school leaders" (United States Congress, p. 155). The U.S. Congress reauthorized ESEA in 1974, 1978, and 1981. The legislation was amended in the past twenty years and

underwent name changes to correspond with expanding goals such as providing education for the education of migrant children, creation of the Even Start Family Literacy Program, a multi-dimensional approach to improve literacy in low-income families, funding for school libraries to improve literacy and two new reading programs, *Reading First* and *Early Reading First,* both designed to provide grants to programs using scientifically based reading instruction. Additional amendments in the early 2000's mandated national standards and annual testing in reading and math for children in grades three through eight and once in high school. The 2015 version of the legislation, the *Every Student Succeeds Act,* maintains the goal of educational equity for low-income students and funding for schools serving low-income populations but gives individual states back the right to determine academic standards appropriate assessment measures.

Head Start. The second major item that came from the Equal Opportunity Act of 1965 was funding for *Head Start*, a program planned as a culturally and linguistically responsive early childhood program focused on improving the school readiness of low-income children (Office of Head Start, 2017). In measures of overall school success and social competence for children who participated in Head Start, results support the efficacy of the program and, for this reason, has resulted in its on-going re-authorization (Miller, 1986; Puma et al., 2012; Ziegler & Styfco, 1994). In 1967, Head Start extended program services to families with infants and toddlers in a program titled Early Head Start. The scope of Head Start also grew to include children of migrant and seasonal agricultural workers and children with disabilities. Head Start's most recent reauthorization was in 2007 although the program funding continues.

Education and Literacy

While not focused only on low income families, there have been other governmental initiatives that address declining literacy rates. Publications such as *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform* and *Investing in Our Children: Business and the Public Schools* (1985) outlined national concerns about the functional illiteracy of U.S. adults and high school student prompting State Governors to meet and develop Goals 2000, a set of six education goals including all children starting school ready to learn, and literacy for every adult.

Two groups particularly focused on literacy instruction in the United States in the past 20 years. Congress convened The National Reading Panel (NRP) in 1997 to assess the research-based knowledge on effective methods for teaching reading in schools. Because strategies to use with children from birth to five years were not included in the NRP report, the National Early Literacy Panel (NELP), funded by the National Institute for Literacy, convened in 2002 to consider ways that parents and teachers could support emergent literacy skills of young children. Information about the methodology and findings of NELP are included later in this paper.

<center>**Development of the Construct of Emergent Literacy**</center>

In a historical view of research related to beginning reading, Teale and Sulzby (1986) state that from the late 1800's to the 1920's few researchers considered reading and writing skills in children prior to first grade. Educational practice for reading instruction involved a whole-class approach where all children received the same instruction and remained at that grade level until they were successful with the requisite skills. Significant numbers of children failed in the large group instruction mode, leading

to a focused research interest on how to prepare children for reading and writing skills in the years leading up to school entry (Teale & Sulzby, 1986).

To address that concern, the National Society for the Study of Education (NSSE) undertook the task of taking a focused look at "…experimental evidence, as far as possible…" (Ballou et al., 1925, p. vi) or "expert opinion when evidence was lacking" (Ballou et al., 1925, p. viii) on the most effective teaching practices for each reading (Ballou et al., 1925).

While the complete report of the reading committee of the NSSE expands beyond the scope of my current literature review, there are three findings important to share as historical context. First, the report described a shift in instructional approach from whole class instruction. In their words,

> Most mass methods are of administrative origin and have little pedagogical sanction. They originated in an era, the psychology, sociology, and pedagogy of which are now passé, and nothing but professional inertia accounts for their prevalence in this day and generation. (Ballou et al., 1925, p. 231)

Further, "…individual differences must be considered and provision made for children at different levels of advancement" (Ballou et al., 1925, p. 17) and "…pupils of a given grade or class probably belong to two or even three different stages of progress and therefore have a great variety of needs (Ballou et al., 1925, p. 25).

The second finding of NSSE relevant to my study was the recognition of literacy activities that precede formal reading instruction. While not advising reading instruction before first grade, the report states the "period of preparation for reading… includes the pre-school age, the kindergarten, and frequently the

early part of the first grade" (Ballou et al., 1925, p. 24). The child's experiences in these years are "…training that is needed" (Ballou et al., 1925, p. 26) and include such elements as exposure to books, listening to stories being read, telling stories from pictures, and oral language use. Delays in the development of reading skills are likely without these experiences (Ballou et al., 1925).

The third item of particular interest in the report of the NSSE is that it contains the first recognized use of the phrase "readiness for reading" (Ballou et al., 1925, p. 233). While educators referred to the concept of readiness in other subjects, this was the first application of the word in connection with reading.

Reading Readiness

Teachers and educational researchers agreed that the child needed to be cognitively ready for instruction in a reading, but there was a lack of consensus about how that state of readiness developed. Some researchers believed that readiness came with a level of brain maturity that simply required waiting for that to occur. They undertook studies to determine when that point of maturing was likely to occur and determined it was at about six and one-half years of age (Dolch & Bloomster, 1937; Morphett & Washburne, 1931) although other studies refuted that determination (Bleismer, 1954; Davidson, 1931). Other researchers considered whether experience led to readiness to read in which case, brain maturation might develop through skill exercises. By using the subtests of available assessment tools intended to measure a child's mental age, a child's weakness in a particular reading readiness skill such as vocabulary or phonics could be identified leading to a teacher providing experiences designed to teach

that skill (Teale & Sulzby, 1986). No matter the viewpoint of how the brain reaches a maturity for reading, "the reading readiness approach creates a boundary between the 'real' reading that children are taught in educational settings and everything that comes before" (Whitehurst & Lonigan, 2002, p.12).

The Inclusion of Oral and Written Language Development

The 1960's saw increased observational research of child development in the early years. One facet of the research was the study of oral language, including language acquisition. Scientists developed multiple theories about the development of oral language from initial cooing through complex sentences. Aspects of research included how brain structure facilitates infant vocalizations, differences in children's receptive and expressive language, and how adult interactions with children extend their vocabulary. Over time the scope of oral language research expanded to examine correlations between the development of oral and written language, and ultimately to learning to reading.

In the late 1960s, Marie Clay brought attention to the precursor elements of writing seen in the samples of young children. In her 1972 text, *Reading: The Patterning of Complex Behavior,* Clay included a series of drawings to illustrate a child's ability to "transmit what he knew into a clear statement on paper" (p. 33). She surmised that the reason a child with above average intelligence drew a "primitive creature" was due to "limited opportunity to explore a two-dimensional paper and pencil world" (p. 33). Other works connecting written language to reading skills include Read (1971) in which he recognized invented spelling as a way that children categorize sounds, and Chomsky's (1971) assertion that writing should precede reading.

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Emergent Literacy

In choosing the title for their text, Teale and Sulzby used the word *literacy* to include the context of both written and oral language as well as reading-related skills. They adopted the phrase 'emergent literacy' from Marie Clay's 1966 unpublished dissertation (as cited in Teale & Sulzby, 1986). She used it to describe her observation that skills considered pre-reading or part of reading readiness actually resembled the behaviors of a child reading independently. In contrast to the belief that pre-reading and reading are separate stages of development, Teale and Sulzby state

> …the first years of the child's life represent a period when legitimate reading and writing development are taking place. These behaviors and knowledges are not *pre-* anything…. Rather, at whatever point we look, we see children *in the process of becoming* literate, as the term *emergent* indicates. (1986, p. xix)

Additionally, Teale and Sulzby state that the word emergent signifies development that is occurring, that is moving forward, and that "the growth that has been observed occurs without the necessity for formal teaching. Instead, it results from the use of writing and reading in the everyday contexts of home and community" (p. xx).

This definition of emergent literacy guides my literature review. Teale and Sulzby's assertion that "growth in writing and reading comes from within the child and as the result of environmental stimulation" (p. xx) is consistent with Bronfenbrenner's definition of the microsystem environment. Researchers have considered multiple facets of the microsystem in the development of emergent literacy skills, including the child's interactions with people and items in their environments in search of elements that might be most significant. While I will not be able to address every aspect of children's

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development in the first four years that might relate to emergent literacy, the following

review incorporates influences in the micro- and macrosystems.

The Research on Emergent Literacy

In keeping with the theoretical framework of my research study, the initial

sources I considered began with the larger context of the macrosytem. As noted earlier,

the socio-political policies enacted in the U.S. over the past 150 years give evidence of

national leaders' recognition of the need to improving educational practices, provide

equitable education to all children, and alleviate on-going gaps in school success

particularly as they relate to socio-economic status. A plethora of research focuses on

economic factors that might influence student progress in literacy. As noted in my policy

overview, public concern about declining literacy rates among schoolchildren led to the

establishment of a National Reading Panel in 1997 to review the literature on reading

instruction with an eye to determining the most effective ways to approach literacy

education. Because the group's report did not address learning during the preschool

years, a new group, the National Early Literacy Panel (NELP), convened in 2002 to

evaluate early practices that would benefit parents and teachers in their literacy

interactions with children ages birth to five. It is the NELP report that provided the

starting point for my literature review for this study (2008).

With the understanding that the conventional literacy skills of "decoding, oral

reading fluency, reading comprehension, writing, and spelling" (NELP, 2008, p. vii) are

not typically seen in very young children, NELP developed a list of "precursor… or

emergent skills" (2008, p. vii) with a high correlation to conventional reading skills. A

list of nine categories "language, cognition, motivation, schooling, home and family,

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word learning, fluency, reading comprehension, miscellaneous" (NELP, 2008, p. 3) and related terms guided the panel's search for studies meeting their methodological requirements. Their summary results identified the precursor skills that are highly correlated to conventional reading skills as alphabet knowledge, phonological awareness, rapid naming tasks, writing or name writing, and phonological short-term memory skills. Additional skills considered important with moderate correlations included concepts about print, print knowledge, reading readiness, oral language, and visual processing (NELP, 2008). The panel discovered a lack of intervention studies for conventional literacy skills with children under the age of five and the NELP report states, "…it is unlikely that such interventions would be considered developmentally appropriate for preschool-age children" (2008, p. 56).

After reviewing studies meeting the panel's methodology, the NELP report addressed five categories of research-based interventions: code-focused interventions, shared-reading interventions, impact of parent and home programs, impact of preschool and kindergarten programs, and impact of language enhancement. Of those five categories, I identified four themes I considered relevant to the microsystems of young children to include in my review of the literature: oral language and vocabulary; shared book reading, parent beliefs about literacy and the home environment. I decided to encompass the NELP categories of code-focused interventions such as alphabetic principle and phonemic awareness, and language enhancement in a broader theme of *oral language and vocabulary development* of young children. In keeping with the context of the child's microsystem, I elected to address *parent beliefs about literacy* and the *home environment* separately, and included *shared book reading* as a practice embedded in the

microsystem of the child. The impact of preschool and kindergarten programs fell outside the parameters of my research and thus I did not address it in my literature review.

The panel looked for effective 'interventions' implying that a deficit existed and needed to be remediated, an approach that is inconsistent with my study. For this reason, my review expands upon the NELP report to include literature based on a strength approach as a means of respecting what families contribute and discovering children's microsystem assets.

Oral Language and Vocabulary Development

Although recent studies of the youngest children and their families are limited, brain development in the first three years of life has been well-documented (Diamond & Hopson, 1998; Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000; Siegel, 1999). In the first three years, brain structures develop, and emergent literacy skills have their foundation (Goodman, 1986; Snow, 1977; Snow & Ninio, 1986; Teale, 1986; Teale & Sulzby, 1986). Kuhl referred to the "breathtaking feat" (2010, p. 715) of the infant brain that has the capability to take in volumes of information, process it, and then reproduce words that can make their desires known as early as one year of age. Kuhl considered the importance of social connections in language learning and elaborated on a theory that social factors "gate" language acquisition and that social development systems must actually work with cognitive systems in order for learning to take place (2010).

Several studies that I reviewed considered the connection between oral language acquisition and emergent literacy. Many researchers asked, "At what point is it important to talk to babies?" Infants appear hard-wired for social interaction and research has shown that infants "are particularly responsive to speech from birth onwards" (Dehaene-

Lambertz, Hertz-Pannier, Dubois, & Dehaene, 2008, p. 400) and that language develops in "a responsive and supportive social environment" (Tamis-LeMonda, Bornstein, & Baumwell, 2001, p. 763). Infants' responses to verbal interactions include behaviors such as wriggling their bodies in pleasure and attempting to imitate adult sounds (Woods, 2003). In a study of mother-child play interactions at 9- and 13-months of age, Tamis-LeMonda et al. (2001) sought to determine whether the type and frequency of maternal verbal responsiveness impacted the timing of the child's language milestones. Milestones considered were the first word approximations, first words, reaching 50 words in their vocabulary, combining words in speech, and using speech to talk about the past. They discovered a noteworthy shift in achievement of language milestones that corresponded to maternal responsiveness to the child at 9 months of age and proposed sustained responsiveness over time likely relates to oral language development in their second year (Tamis-LeMonda et al., 2001). Snow (1977) considered the reciprocal oral language between an infant and mother and considered multiple contexts for these interactions. She found that mothers used more complex speech in book reading situations particularly when the interactions included naming of items and discussions related to the book (Snow et al., 1976; Snow & Ninio,1986).

When considering oral language and vocabulary development, an oft-cited study of children's vocabulary is the research of Hart and Risley who began their work at Turner House Preschool, a community based project designed to support the language development of children in a high-poverty area in Kansas City, Kansas as a part of the War on Poverty. They described their work as researchers studying the language and vocabulary patterns of children ages three and four in their book, *Meaningful Differences*

in the Everyday Experience of Young American Children (1995). After working with the children for some time, they found themselves puzzled as to what interventions they should pursue because, "…when we listened to the Turner House Preschool children talk during free play, they seemed fully competent to us, well able to explain and elaborate the topics typical in preschool interactions" (Hart & Risley, 1995, p. 8).

In order to determine what interventions were needed, these researchers "…decided we needed to know, not from our textbooks, but from advantaged children, what skilled spontaneous speech at age 4 is in terms of grammar and content" (Hart & Risley, 1995, p. 8). In doing so Hart and Risley effectively determined that the advantaged children were the norm and created the scenario for the lower income children to have a deficit. They collected language data from 42 families to determine the vocabulary size of both parents and children in three groups formed based on socio-economic status: welfare, working class, and professional. Analysis of the data collected over two and one-half years yielded results indicating that children in the welfare families had a working vocabulary half the size of children in professional families. Hart and Risley posited the sheer quantity of talk children heard from their parents was the most significant factor. Subsequently, assuming the pattern of parental speech to be consistent over time, they predicted that children in the lower income families would hear adults speak 30 million fewer words than the children in affluent families

There are several hazards in applying Hart and Risley's conclusions to children in low socio-economic families. Critics of Hart and Risley's work describe methodological flaws such as the small sample size and the lack of control for all potential variables including race, culture, the impact of observer presence, and whether similar activities

were taking place among all participant groups. The study groups were not representative of the racial, ethnic, and cultural diversity that exists in low-income families. Further, the data from six welfare families in Kansas is insufficient to make generalized claims about all low-income families (Dudley-Marling & Lucas, 2009). Hart and Risley also assert that the cultural practices and speech patterns of low-income families, such as using directives rather than requests, are detrimental to the language development of young children. without consideration of the cultural practices of communication within families (Dudley-Marling & Lucas, 2009).

Because of advances in technology, children today have multiple opportunities to hear language from sources other than active social interactions. Healy, in a 1994 article *Who's teaching the children to talk?* points out that children hear language through electronic devices such as television, videos, computers, electronic toys and electronic reading devices. By 2017 that list grew to include several interactive toys for children from infancy through the early childhood years. The question arises of the impact on cognitive skills, including oral language if children have greater exposure to language from sources other than within active social interactions. Research results on the topic are mixed.

Looking at language acquisition, Kuhl (2010) asserts, "…social interaction appears to be necessary for language acquisition, and an individual infant's social behavior can be linked to their ability to learn new language material" (p. 715). In a study of infants learning phonetic contrast, Kuhl (2007) exposed ten- to twelve-month-old infants to Mandarin for twelve sessions over four to five weeks. The control group heard no Mandarin, one experimental group hear native speakers of the language and a second

group heard Mandarin from a television or audiotape. Children who exposed to Mandarin via the television or audiotape showed no learning; their assessments were equal to those of the control group. The infants who heard native speakers scored at levels similar to Taiwan infants who had heard Mandarin for ten months.

In a study of toddlers by Kirkorian et al. (2016), researchers observed eye movement patterns of toddlers watching real events and video demonstrations. These 24-month old children attempted to find a sticker on a felt board after watching someone hide it, either in person or on the video. Children watching the video were more attentive to the felt board during the demonstration, but subsequently had difficulty actually locating the sticker. Children who had the in-person demonstration were more successful at finding the sticker even if they did not give the felt board their full attention during the demonstration. Kirkorian et al. concluded, "Findings indicate that selective attention differs when toddlers view on-screen versus in-person events, perhaps because toddlers encode information more slowly when it is presented via video" (Kirkorian et al., 2016, p. 60).

Neuman, Wong, and Kaefer. (2017) designed a study to look at three-year-olds ability to understand a story and learn new vocabulary words from a live storybook reading and listening to a digital story. All children heard four stories considered at the same reading level; two were in digital format and graduate students read the other two. All four stories were read in both formats; no child heard the same story in both formats. Free recall and story sequencing were the assessments for comprehension. The protocol for determining vocabulary learning involved telling the child a word from the story, and then using the word in a sentence. The child then stated what they thought the word

meant. The results showed little difference in comprehension and word learning between the two mediums, however two stories had significantly lower scores in both measures. Neuman et al. determined the content of the two lower scoring stories was more difficult to understand and enjoyed less by the children. Thus their conclusion was that story content, more than manner of presentation, that influenced children's learning.

Landry and Smith (2006) assert that the parental style of interaction with their children is important to the child's development of language skills and describe several behaviors that parents may engage in to support the child's growing self-regulation and attention span that in turn increases the likelihood the child will be more actively engaged in activities. Examples of parenting behaviors that assist in developing receptive and expressive language skills include aiding the child in maintaining attention, following the child's interests, and being responsive to the child's behavioral signals (Landry & Smith, 2006).

Books and Shared Reading

The shared reading experience is not a simple event for a child engaging with a mature reader. There are many influential factors such as: home literacy environment, parent-child relationship, conversations while reading, motivation, frequency, as well as book format, genre, and why a particular book was chosen (Alexander, Miller, & Hengst, 2001; Baker, Scher, & Mackler, 1997; Bus, 2003; De Temple & Snow, 2001; Moody, Justice, & Cabell, 2010; Pellegrini & Galda, 2003; Pellegrini, Perlmutter, Galda, & Brody, 1990; Price, van Kleek, & Huberty, 2009). With a focal point of studies including the frequency of shared book reading with preschoolers Bus, van IJzendoorn, and Pellegrini (1995) conducted a quantitative meta-analysis of 41 research studies to test

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several hypotheses about the relationship between parent-child book reading and the development reading achievement. They concluded that shared reading experiences are a significant factor in future reading success, particularly in the areas of language growth and emergent literacy. They further noted that the frequency of book reading was influential regardless of the family's socio-economic status. While having books available to children is important, "without parental support, books are only partly accessible to young children who are not yet conventional readers" (Bus et al., 1995, p. 16). There is a correlation between the quality of reading experiences and their frequency. If the experience is "less satisfying to parent and child, frequency of reading is likely to be affected adversely" (Bus, Belsky, van IJzendoorn, & Crnic, 1997, p. 83).

Parental style of interaction with their children is important to developing language skills. The parent must possess the ability to maintain the child's interest in a book or activity, thus potentially increasing their attention span and supporting increased language skills as well as the development of complex cognitive structures, and a growth in play patterns (Landry & Smith, 2006). Another element that is important for language development is the parent's approach to the text. Dialogic reading where the adult, through questioning techniques, moves toward the role of listener while the child takes on the story reader/teller role, has been associated with increases in a child's expressive vocabulary as well as in the number and complexity of vocalizations (Whitehurst et al., 1988). It is important to note that all conversational strategies are appropriate for children at different points in their development. The aware and responsive parent will ascertain their child's experiences and skills with a particular text and match their demands on the child appropriately, so the child is successful (Landry & Smith, 2006; McArthur,

Adamson, & Deckner, 2005; Pellegrini et al., 1990; Reese & Cox, 1999).

Different genres elicit different types of conversations and influence a variety of future literacy skills (Pellegrini & Galda, 2003; Price et al., 2009; Stadler & McEvoy, 2003). When sharing an expository text rather than a storybook, parents and children have conversations that tend to be more cognitively complex and include twice as many verbalizations with more diverse vocabulary usage (Price et al., 2009).

Illustrations support vocabulary development (White, 1984). In *Books Before Five,* White described incidents in which her daughter made connections between book illustrations and real-life experiences. She sensed her daughter's puzzlement when reading about concepts in books that she had not experienced in life, and delight when her child recognized a familiar experience in the reading of a book (White, 1984). Ganea, Pickard, and DeLoache (2008) studied children's transference of knowledge from picture books to real life. Their findings indicated that, overall, older children are more successful in this process, although the type of illustration also had an impact. Realistic illustrations facilitate children's transfer of information from the text to the real world more readily.

Parental Beliefs

Parental literacy beliefs influence their child's receptive and expressive vocabularies. If it is clear that the adults in the child's life enjoy and value the role of supporting their child's literacy development, there appears to be a stronger growth rate in vocabulary skills (Weigel, Martin, & Bennett, 2005, 2006). Weigel et al. (2005,2006) examined relationships between parental beliefs, habits, and interactions with their child's literacy and language ability over a one-year period. They postulated that parental

literacy beliefs and habits influenced the extent that the parent engaged in literacy activities with their child. They believed that strong, positive, parent child experiences would influence the child's literacy interests and correlate with language and literacy skills (Weigel et al., 2005, 2006). Their findings supported the logical outlook that parents who have strong positive beliefs create an attitude that fosters developing literacy skills, whereas parents who exhibit negative beliefs and fail to engage their children actively in literacy activities transfer an attitude that reading is unimportant (Weigel et al., 2005, 2006).

In studies of parental beliefs, Marvin and Mirenda (1993) considered which parental beliefs in general influenced the priority they gave to school experiences, rather than correlating parental literacy beliefs to their child's progress. Results indicated that parental beliefs about the future skill sets they perceived their child would need tended to affect the priority they gave to literacy activities. In their study, Marvin and Mirenda found that parents of children with special needs ranked social skills and interactions as a higher priority for their children in preschool, rather than becoming more skilled with academic subjects such as literacy, due to their child's skill needs their future (1993).

In a review of literature Baker et al. (1997) identify three parental perspectives for providing literacy activities in the family home. One viewpoint is consideration of literacy activities as entertainment. Other parents think literacy involves learning a set of skills, and a third parental approach is considering literacy as an integrated part of daily life. Baker et al. (1997) described the entertainment stance toward literacy as including a playfulness contributing to a positive experience that is relaxing and engaging, and would be likely be repetitive. When focus was on the development of skills, parental

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interactions with children were more like drills that may be stressful and performance-like, and may interfere with a child developing a positive attitude toward lifelong reading. When viewed as integrated into daily life, motivation included an attitude or interest with affective dimensions (Baker et al., 1997). This was described in an example by Holland (2008) where the infant appeared to snuggle closer to the parent in the reading moments.

Home Environment

The role of genetics and influences of the environment have long been debated. The debate evolved to a compromise position that credits both elements (Angoff, 1988; Diamond & Hopson, 1998; Plomin, 1983; Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000; Scarr-Salapatek, 1971). The home is a primary environment for the young child and, as such, there has been an interest in the influence of multiple elements of the home environment in literacy research.

Many literacy research studies have taken place in laboratory settings, yet they may include an evaluation of home and family practices, and parental beliefs by using a parent survey. Information elicited in the survey has included: the number of books in the home, shared reading experiences, library visits, parent-child literacy activities, parental education, beliefs about the importance of literacy, and at times the parent's personal literacy activities (Evans, Shaw, & Bell, 2000; Frijters, Barron, & Brunello, 2000; Hood, Conlon, & Andrews, 2008; Marvin & Mirenda, 1993; Phillips & Lonigan, 2009; Roberts, Jurgens, & Burchinal, 2005; Weigel et al., 2005, 2006). In addition to the survey items just listed, some research studies have included more detail in the questionnaire such as: age of child when the parent began reading to them; literacy activities such as singing, rhymes, finger-plays, and telling stories; watching educational television; frequency of

independent play with literacy materials, including writing and drawing tools; adult reading materials such as books, magazines, and newspapers; whether the child observed the parent reading; and parent beliefs related to literacy (Evans et al., 2000; Frijters et al., 2000; Hood et al., 2008; Kim, Im, & Kwon, 2015; Marvin & Mirenda, 1993; Phillips & Lonigan, 2009; Roberts et al., 2005; Weigel et al., 2005, 2006).

Studies that have taken place in home observations provided information about the communication between parents and children (Hart & Risley, 1995; Pellegrini & Galda, 2003; Snow, 1977; Snow, et al., 1976; Tamis-LeMonda et al., 2001). While research often addresses parent-child interactions, sibling play also supports developing literacy skills for both the older and younger child (Gregory, 2001). The types of interaction between parent and child were an element of the extensive work of Hart and Risley (1995) whose data analysis included factors such as vocabulary size, types of utterances, and encouragement or directives in families of different socio-economic groups.

Definitions of what is included in the home literacy environment (HLE) vary. Rather than using a survey approach, Burgess, Hecht, and Lonigan (2002) considered the type of interactions in the HLE and determined that environments that had active elements provided stronger correlations to oral language and emergent literacy than passive ones. Since parental socioeconomic status correlates to children's outcomes in many studies, this finding leads to the possibility of considering relationships based on the type of interactions within the HLE, rather than from resources that are dependent on financial capacity.

While much of the research on HLE focuses on the years from preschool on, Kim

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et al. (2015) looked at the impact of the home environment of toddlers in predicting vocabulary and decoding skills in the preschool years. Their findings that quality toddler-home experiences promoted both vocabulary and decoding skills in the preschool years were not consistent with studies finding the home literacy environment to be predictive of vocabulary skills but not decoding skills. Kim et al. posited that one possible reason for their divergent findings was the use of a broader definition of literacy interactions that included both storytelling and singing songs, while most studies focus on the frequency of parents reading to children.

Melvin et al. designed a study to take a closer look at when infants achieve perceptual tuning, that is, the point at which an infant only focuses on the sounds to which they are exposed. At birth, all children have the capability to learn and speak all language sounds worldwide. As time progresses, the sounds not needed for the primary language fade as perceptual tuning is acquired. This process of perceptual tuning typically takes place between six and twelve months of age. The Melvin et al. study looked at SES and the home environment as factors that potentially influence the individual differences in the timing for development of this skill. They expected SES to show a strong association with timing of this skill attainment based on prolific literature that high SES families have richer environments for learning and parents are likely to be more nurturing and responsive. However, the stronger association was with the home environment with rich literacy experiences. This finding is of particular interest because the linguistically rich environment was not necessarily due to SES.

In another look at children's developing oral language skills Liebeskind, Piotrowski, Lapierre, & Linebarger (2014) included media access as part of the home

literacy environment and considered how it might influence parent-child interactions. There are multiple media present in children's homes potentially including television, computer, internet, video game systems, and radios. Liebeskind et al. believed that access to media was indicative of parental beliefs and values and, as such, influenced the organization of household furnishings and the amount of time spent engaged with media (2014). They thought there were two ways that media use might influence parent-child interactions. One was that parent-child experiences would increase outside of the media event itself and relate to the media content. Alternatively, media access and increased use may lead to parent engagement with the media rather than with their child, leading to decreased parent-child interactions. Liebeskind et al. did not consider the interactions taking place in the presence of media; rather they looked for the influence of the media experience and content to carry over into other daily activities and interactions. Their results did not support either hypothesis. While parent-child interactions overall were found to impact the development of children's vocabulary, a result consistent with past research such as that of Hart and Risley (1995), access to media itself did not influence parent child interactions and vocabulary development. They described parents potentially interacting with children at the time of media use, but with no connection to interactions outside of that experience with the exception of radio. Parents listening to the radio were more likely to use content from that exposure at additional times throughout the day such as singing a song heard on the radio.

Studies have shown improved school success for children when there is a positive relationship between home and school. This is true for the child's learning in a childcare setting as well as an elementary school. Crosnoe et al. (2010) set out to explore the

relationships between the home, school, and childcare environments and the extent to which consistent cognitive stimulation influenced the child's learning in math and reading. Assessments for quality in all three environments focused on the factor of cognitive stimulation. Children's learning in math and reading took place at 54 months, and grades one, three, and five. The environment most influential in the child's learning was the family home. An additive effect was present when a cognitively stimulating home environment pairs with a quality childcare and/or school environment. The additive effect was greater for children in lower income families than their higher income peers on assessment measures of reading and math.

In the previous section I presented a summary of Bronfenbrenner's micro-, macro-, and chronosystems. I gave an abbreviated historical account of the political, social and education aspects of the macrosystem and reviewed studies related to elements in the child's microsystem to provide more context for this study. These studies included the topics of oral language, shared book reading, parental beliefs and practices, and the impact of the home environment.

Why Use a Strength-Based Approach?

Bronfenbrenner did not use the phrase strength versus deficit in his theory, however, there are several clues to his thinking on this topic in *Ecological Systems Theory* (1989/1992). In one case, he described a medical study with data presented from a negative perspective. He stated, "although such findings are typically interpreted in terms of increased risk, the very same facts can be viewed from the perspective of positive growth…" (1989/1992. p. 194). Then, speaking of studies based on cognitive learning, he stated,

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…most scientific conceptions and measures of cognitive capacities are

characterized by an underlying assumption that the abilities in question…are

invariant across place and time: that is, they are presumed to have the same

psychological significance irrespective of social structure, culture or historical

era. (1989/1992, p. 203)

Later, he reminded the reader that measurement tools define…

…a person's level of competence solely by that person's achieved status in the

environment. Entirely lacking is any specification of psychological qualities that

may have enabled the person to attain the given status, but the underlying

assumption is that such qualities do in fact exist. (1989/1992, p. 203)

Bronfenbrenner included what I consider important reminders. "Note that the

criteria of 'positive' vs 'negative' outcomes of development implicit in such operational

definitions are socioeconomic and social success versus failure as defined by the society

at large" (Bronfenbrenner, 1989/1992, p. 204) and that these definitions come from a

value base. Further, "…the attributes mentioned are those that are valued in Western –

and especially American – white, middle-class culture" (1989/1992, p. 196).

Deficit Perspective

By definition a deficit represents something that is lacking; thus, a deficit model

attempts to determine what shortfall exists in order to supplement or fix it. The medical

field has long used this approach to diagnose a health problem and then prescribe a

treatment to restore salubrity. Llewellyn and Hogan, describe it this way: "The general

framework of the so-called medical model emanates from the disease model used in

medicine, which predisposes practitioners to think of a 'condition' which needs

appropriate 'treatment'" (2000, p. 158). The National Reading Panel used this same perspective when they defined methodology for their work "the evidence-based methodological standards adopted by the Panel are essentially those normally used in research studies of the efficacy of interventions in psychological and medical research" (2000, p. 1-5). Yatvin (2002) challenged that approach, "No one discussed the fact that the types of medical research referred to is applied to the treatment of disease or deficiency, not to the processes of normal, healthy development, which is what learning to read is for most children" (p. 5).

There is a plethora of research describing the negative impacts of poverty on young children, including academic challenges, while fewer efforts focus on children who are successful despite the challenges presented by poverty and what role their parents may play in the process (Cabrera, 2013). Research on oral language and emergent literacy skills that center primarily in race, ethnicity, and socio-economic status result in perspectives that focus on the perceived deficits of participants (Garcia & Guerra, 2004; Gardner-Neblett & Iruka, 2015), for example "…children living in poor families were more likely to have weaker language and narrative skills…" (Gardner-Neblett & Iruka, 2015, p. 900).

Potential Impact of Deficit Approach

The literature on the impacts of poverty focuses more on the resultant failures and obstacles than the attributes of families and children who are successful in schools. Given this framework, educators may feel a need to provide special services or more instructional time in hopes that certain children, who did not have exposure to some of the experiences of their more financially-advantaged classmates, will begin to show the

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learning behaviors of these higher income students (Boykin, 2013). This approach of

ameliorating the deficits of minority and poor children may be well intentioned, but it

inherently determines success by whether the child comes to look more like the perceived

norm, the advantaged student. Unfortunately, these efforts are set in a system that

requires some students to be at the bottom levels of achievement in order for others to be

at the top. Boykin (2013) describes educational practice as,

> …largely still animated by the paradigm of *talent identification and sorting*. In
>
> this regard, formal education, coupled with its customary assessment tools,
>
> functions primarily as a way to discern which students are the talented, smart,
>
> able, motivated and best equipped ones. And in turn, by implication, it separates
>
> out those students who are judged to be less well-endowed. All too often this
>
> leads to differential treatment, labels and perceptions that are readily understood
>
> by students, even at relatively young ages. Students consciously or implicitly
>
> come to know their place in the educational pecking order, and in turn, often act
>
> and think accordingly. (p. 14)

This deficit perspective presents potential long-term effects for low-income or

minority children and families. One effect is for educators to lower expectations for a

child or parents. To the surprise of no one, disadvantaged children when met with low

expectations are likely to continue to be in the lowest-performing group. In contrast,

particularly resilient children are 'extraordinary' if they perform at high levels. At times,

members of the ethnic or social group may shun a high achieving child for no long fitting

societal expectation (Boykin, 2013). Garcia and Guerra (2004) maintain that when

interventions are not successful, the deficits present in the family are reinforced and the

cycle repeats over time "because deficit beliefs become a filter that blocks educators' abilities to examine their assumptions and to look beyond traditional solutions for real and meaningful change" (p. 151).

Alternative Paradigms

Amatea, Smith-Adcock, and Villares (2006), writing from a school counselor perspective, describes a changing paradigm in *From Family Deficit to Family Strength: Viewing Families' Contributions to Children's Learning from a Family Resilience Perspective*. She offered this description of researchers studying school success prior to 1980, "These researchers, who took a *family structure* perspective, believed that only one type of family structure -- the two-parent intact family with a stay-at-home mother -- was 'normal' and had a positive effect on children." Thus, the reason a child did not experience school success centered on their "…*location* in particular family groups…" (p. 177-78) that did not meet the standard of normal due to factors such as divorce, immigration status, family income, or race.

The 1980s saw an alternative approach emerge that looked at family processes rather than family structure. "Embracing a 'family systems' perspective, researchers looked at the family as an interdependent unit and assumed that the behavior and beliefs of the children in a particular family could only be understood by looking at how family members functioned together" (Amatea et al., 2006, p. 178). Thus, assessment of family functioning considered family strengths and interactions with each other rather a comparison to a perceived norm and viewed as deficient when the family structure varied from that norm.

Another Kind of Capital

Another perspective presented by the field of anthropology is to consider strengths as valuable assets. An anthropologist, Eric R. Wolf is the first to use the word *funds* to describe assets that exceeded family essential needs (1966). In his 1966 work *Peasants,* Wolf named multiple types of funds such as replacement funds needed when a family item breaks. Vélez-Ibáñez used the phrase f*unds of knowledge* in a 1988 paper *Forms and Functions Among Mexicans in the Southwest: Implications for Classroom Use* presented at the annual meeting of American Anthropological Association. Vélez-Ibáñez and Greenberg (1992) used the term in *Formation and Transformation of Funds of Knowledge Among U.S.-Mexican Households* when writing about how schools structure education for children in U.S.-Mexican families.

> Public schools have relied on a deficiency model to structure instruction for minority children that underestimates the funds of knowledge that U.S.- Mexican households contain. We argue that these funds are not only a key to understanding the cultural systems in which U.S.-Mexican children emerge, but are also important and useful assets in the class. (Vélez-Ibáñez & Greenberg, 1992, p. 313)

Views similar to the anthropological concept of funds of knowledge exist in critical race theory where the phrase used by Bourdieu is *cultural capital*. Yosso (2005) reframed cultural capital theory and offered an alternate concept she named *community cultural wealth* in her article *Whose Culture has Capital: A Critical Race Theory Discussion of Community Cultural Wealth*. While cultural capital theory asserts "…some communities are culturally wealthy while others are culturally poor (p. 76), Yosso asserts

that all families have cultural wealth and uses the following example to illustrate her position. If a family middle to upper class family has a home computer, the child living there develops the vocabulary and skills associated with its use and brings that knowledge and skill to the school classroom. Because those skills are valued in the school setting, the child has cultural capital. In contrast, she describes another student,

> …a working-class Chicana/o student whose mother works in the garment industry may bring a different vocabulary, perhaps in two languages (English and Spanish) to school, along with techniques of conducting errands on the city bus and translating mail, phone calls and coupons for her/his mother. This cultural knowledge is very valuable to the student and her/his family, but is not necessarily considered to carry any capital in the school context".

In cultural capital theory, the second student is culturally poor. Yosso's conception of community cultural capital recognizes that different ethnic, racial, or socio-economic groups bring skills, assets, materials, or cultural knowledge to the school classroom other than those typically valued in the norms set by the White middle class. However, the deficit mindset in U.S. schools assumes because students do not come with the cultural capital valued in the educational setting, students are not successful. The result is and assumption by educators that because "schools work … students, parents and community need to change to conform to this already effective and equitable system" (Yosso, 2005, p. 75).

Cultural Capital as Strength

The work of Heath (1983) stands out as an example of respecting the community cultural capital available in the contexts of neighborhood, home, and school while

considering how teachers might integrate children's knowledge and experience in ways that would be successful in the academic environment. Heath's work stressed the cultural strengths present in family ways of communicating and recognized that while different communities implemented diverse strategies in language development and use, the ways people used language served them well in communicating with others. This meant that all children coming to the school had strong communication skills; there was a difference, not a deficit, in language skills.

In *Ways with Words,* Heath (1983) described her work between the years of 1969 and 1978 as influenced by the desegregation laws and the subsequent issues that arose as adults and children from different backgrounds entered work and school environments and experienced difficulty communicating in forms that were validated out of school. At the time, Heath was teaching in education and anthropology and her graduate students included teachers as well as businessmen. The question raised by all of her students was "What were the effects of preschool home and community environments on the learning of those language structures and uses which were needed in classrooms and job settings?" (Heath, 1983, p. 2). Heath's students consistently commented that the research available at the time focused on race and socio-economic status and ignored cultural and community contexts. This fact was particularly salient because, while the population under discussion primarily consisted of families who were living in poverty, the language differences had no racial basis; both Black and White students could vary their language use from Black, Southern, or Standard English based on what the occasion required.

To answer their question, Heath's students examined language use in daily teaching or work in the mills while Heath sought to understand the development and uses

of oral language in the home communities. The communities in the study were Trackton "…a black working-class community whose older generations grew up farming the land, but whose current members work in the mills" (Heath, 1983, p. 1), and Roadville "… a white working-class community of families steeped for four generations in the life of the textile mills" (Heath, 1983, p. 1). Heath interpreted the data from a cross-cultural perspective that led her to conclude that "…in schools, commercial establishments, and mills, mainstream language values and skills were the expected norm, and individuals from communities such as Roadville and Trackton brought different language values and skills to these situations" (Heath, 1983, p. 4). This new insight led to the realization that children needed to learn the mainstream tools of Standard Academic English to express what they knew in ways recognized by the school. Rather than acting on the perception that children from Roadville and Trackton could not communicate and would be unsuccessful in school, they modified teaching practices so that "… their approach was not a remedial one designed for poor learners. Instead, they felt that the attention given to different ways of talking and knowing, and the manipulation of contexts and language benefitted all students" (Heath, 1983, p. 355).

Another example of the tension between a deficit or strength view is the work of Duke and Purcell-Gates (2003) that considered home-school differences in literacy by comparing the practices of low-income families in using the printed word. One study collected data in home settings, the other in a school's first grade classroom. Nearly 32% of the genres observed in the two studies only occurred in the school setting, while 41% took place in home environments alone. A deficit perspective would assume that children in low socio-economic families struggle in school because they do not have access to the

types of materials needed for their academic experience. A strength perspective considers the increased variety in the genres of literacy experiences at home and how, in total, a child's capacity increases when they are added together. When educators frame the situation in this strengths-based manner, teachers honor the child's experiences with particular genres by initially integrating literacy skills in familiar materials. Children's knowledge develops through the introduction of new genres in a manner that focuses first on comfort with the new content and style before addressing the skills embedded within them. A teacher can also draw comparisons between the familiar and the unfamiliar to aid in children's skill development. Families are more likely to engage with both their child and the school when there are crossover experiences (Auerbach, 1995; Bodovski & Farkas, 2007; Duke & Purcell-Gates, 2003).

Louisa Moats was a member of a project team studying reading instruction in the District of Columbia for four years when she wrote the article *Overcoming the Language Gap: Invest Generously in Teacher Professional Development*. In the article, she describes several difficulties children in the elementary school have with literacy concepts in reading, writing, and vocabulary. She gives two examples that I find illustrative of opportunities for teachers to use a positive response that honors cultural assets. The first example is this:

> A second grader, when asked to find multiple meaning words on a list, picks 'jail.' The teacher asks, 'What else does that mean besides the place where they put people who've been arrested?" the child answers, "It's that stuff you put in your hair (gel)" (Moats, 2001, para. 8).

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This story illustrates the need to recognize the intonation of the speaker and account for the influence of those patterns on the phonemic understanding of the listener. It is likely that a White, native speaker from the Midwest says and hears the words jail and gel differently. But having the expectation that all students hear and say those words differently presents a potential deficit situation.

The second story presents a situation where a teacher could either use a positive approach or denigrate a student for their error.

> In a fourth grade class, dynamic Ms. Woods asks the students for several meanings for "shock". A student responds, "a big fish." Ms. Woods adeptly takes the cue. Writing both shock and shark on the board, she contrasts the phonemes, asking the student to repeat them and use the words in sentences. The student looks surprised at the discovery that they are, indeed, two different words. In spite of previous exposure to each word, the girl has not fully attended to the internal details of sound and spelling or made the contrast implicitly.
> (Moats, 2001, para. 8)

In both examples, teachers had an opportunity to respect the knowledge a student brought to the learning experience, rather than consider the child through a deficit lens and simply dismiss their answer as wrong.

Multiple Pathways

In speaking about a child's development of writing skills, Dyson (1993) describes some lessons she learned by observing low- to middle-income children in a culturally

diverse kindergarten and first grade. A key element in her viewpoint relates to the social

motivations for oral and written language use, and the fact that these motivations have a

basis in cultural practices. Dyson describes the teachers approach to teaching spelling and

writing, and then uses stories of children she observed to illustrate how the children in the

class developed their own motivation and processes for developing written language.

The teacher used a traditional approach to spelling and dictated words for the

children to spell. However, during the children's writing time she wanted them to focus

on the content they were writing and encouraged invented spelling and when they shared

their writing with classmates the attention was on whether the story made sense or was

missing information. The information she shares about one child was the importance of

social interactions and personal competence when speaking. This child actively

developed social relationship and relied on them for assistance when she needed it. She

also had a good visual memory and was aware of the resources in the classroom. Dyson

says she "…*actively* made use of teacher-prescribed lists, words modeled by collegial

others, and her own powers of invention; that is, she orchestrated her knowledge to

produce spellings not modeled by others" (1993, p. 420). A contrasting approach to

writing is that of another child who is not interested in socialization, but performance. He

spends the writing time alone working on songs or poems that he could perform at the

class sharing time. Both children made progress in spelling and writing skills over the

course of the year but took very different paths to achieve that result. They used the tools

provided by the teacher but integrated that information into their preferred approach to

spelling and writing.

Similar to the work of Heath (1983), the approach to teaching children literacy

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skills involved allowing children to use the community cultural capital they bring to the classroom to develop the oral and written languages skills to communicate with others. The end goal of literacy instruction should not be for children to excel in a particular format, but to have the capacity to mediate differences in presentation and communicate in ways that are appropriate to their context (Dyson, 1993).

> If our educational aim includes fostering children's social and political intelligence – their ability to manipulate language in astute ways in varied situations – then it does not matter exactly how children enter school literacy. It matters primarily that they enter, using whatever resources they have to begin to manipulate the code, energized by whatever social goals and text means are sensible to them. And, of course, it matters that, over the years, teachers help children to expand the social situations that make sense to them (Dyson, 1993, p. 422).

Not all cultures value similar literacy practices. An oft-advocated activity for all families is shared book reading. It is inappropriate to assume that a family does not have any literacy practices of value if they do not engage in a particular practice. Telling stories or singing songs might be included in their repertoire as well as any number of other literacy-based activities (Anderson, et al., 2010). Janes and Kermani (2001) described a project in which shared reading became more of a punishment than an enjoyable family activity for their participants. Eliciting information about the practices of the participants' culture and traditions resulted in a migration from a 'fix it' mindset to one that embraced the differences and integrated them into appropriate literacy practices. When participants felt a sense of validation of their values and practices in the stories and

activities, they became more willing and active.

Collaboration and Power

Power is inherent in relationships and interactions. This is not a topic often discussed, seldom even acknowledged. Power is intangible, but that does not diminish its existence. Power has many forms, such as strength, knowledge, or financial resources and has the potential for a variety of outcomes. Physical strength can destroy or protect; knowledge can enlighten or mystify. Auerbach (1995) speaks of the dynamic of power in interpersonal interactions and states that in order to work with in authentic ways with others, power must be recognized and acknowledged. For example, in the deficit approach the power resides in the entity with *more* of the commodity. The strength approach is collaborative, requires mutual respect between participants, and shares power in the quest to address a common goal. Rather than a teacher deciding what parents need to know, collaboration embraces co-leadership, recognizes that both parent and teacher bring knowledge and experience to the interaction, and a discussion helps to determine priorities (Auerbach, 1995; Manz, Hughes, Barnabas, Bracaliello, & Ginsburg-Block, 2010; Reyes & Torres, 2007). This approach allows for enrichment in knowledge and experience of all concerned as they work and share resources together.

When collaborating with parents, it is also important not to equate difference with deficiency as so often happens when the majority culture is normalized (Dyson, 1993). Beneficial conversations focus on the ways parents know they support their child(ren)'s success. Educators in such conversation must remember "…not to diminish the various activities, skills and routines in which families engage, no matter how different they may be from their own" (Iruka, 2013, p. 21). Collaborative practice allows educators to reflect

on the impact this knowledge has on their perception of the child and family and how to integrate this new knowledge into their teaching strategies (Boykin, 2013).

Individuals must take care not to perpetuate deficit thinking disguised in the rhetoric of strength. To say "…all learners possess strengths and prior knowledge…" (Auerbach, 1995, p. 645) may merely shift the blame for the deficit from the child to the parent; in other words, the child has strengths, but the parent failed to provide appropriate experiences. If that is the perception brought to the interaction by members of the education system, they will still need to determine deficits and provide what they deem as appropriate interventions. The result may often be that school personnel tacitly express that they believe educational system is superior to home-based literacies. Norms based on White, middle to upper-class experiences that exclude other family cultural practices contain an inherent deficiency perspective of some sort (Auerbach, 1995).

Programs serving families may philosophically state a strength-based approach, but that doesn't ensure that the philosophy will be put into practice. Green, McAllister, and Tarte (2004) worked to develop an assessment tool to measure whether program implantation reflected its stated philosophy. They also considered whether families enrolled thought the plan built on their strengths. While it proved challenging to find distinct categories for measurement, their results could be informative for early childhood professionals seeking to develop a strength-based approach to working with families. Four categories emerged from the Green et al. data:

1. An empowerment approach where parents felt the service provider was a partner who supported them in recognizing their personal strengths and encouraged them to approach problem solving with that knowledge

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2. A cultural competency that respected family culture and provided materials for children and families that reflected their culture in a positive light

3. Staff sensitivity and knowledge required to understand family needs and the resources available that might be of assistance to the family, including a knowledge of when requesting help may be difficult for the family and allowing families to make the decisions appropriate for them

4. Encouraging supportive relationships not only between service provider and family, but also for families to reach out to other community members in ways that might be mutually helpful

The previous section enumerated many facets of the strength-based approach I included in the theoretical foundations of my work. While some aspects of this approach are philosophical in nature, they require implementation in practice. The discussion applies to this research study as well as my professional practice.

Summary

In this chapter I reviewed the literature on the topics of oral language and vocabulary; shared book reading, parent beliefs about literacy, and the home environment. I outlined my theoretical framework of Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Systems Theory and provided an accounting of the concept of emergent literacy against the macrosystem backdrop of U. S. legislation and social programs. My review included information about strength- or asset-based approaches consistent with the work of Bronfennbrenner, who described the possibility of reporting data in positive terms rather than naming deficits.

In the next chapter I describe my methodology, including my research paradigm

and the strategy of inquiry used to answer the following research questions.

1. What do parents consider as human and material resources of their family that will support the literacy development of their young children?

2. What resources, both human and material, are present in the microsystem of the very young child that the literature typically includes as supportive of literacy development in young children?

3. What resources, both human and material, are present in the microsystem of the very young child that may not be included in the literature yet could be supportive of literacy development in young children?

Chapter Three: Methodology

In this chapter I first state my research paradigm, my belief of how knowledge is constructed, my strategic approach, and strategy of inquiry. Then I will describe the parameters I used to recruit participant families, followed by the data collection measures and the procedures used to implement them. Finally, I will describe my data analysis process and the basis for considering my interpretation to be valid.

Research Paradigm

In this study I aimed to discover resources and strengths present in the homes of a group of participants in lower socio-economic families. My intent was to identify material and human resources available to support the emergent literacy skills of the very youngest of children in those families in order to enhance my teaching practices with college students preparing to be early childhood professionals. Underlying my search for these strengths was a belief that knowledge is socially constructed and that families within various communities may have differing beliefs. "Humans engage with their world and make sense of it based on their historical and social perspective – we are all born into a world of meaning bestowed on us by our culture" (Creswell, 2003, p. 9).

Naturalistic inquiry was the strategic approach. Rather than limiting my evaluation of the home environment to a parent survey of previously identified factors within the standard literature on emergent literacy, I believed I would discover a more authentic view of parental beliefs and family strengths through a conversation and, potentially, a home visit. I hoped a visit would allow me an opportunity to observe parent-child interactions and to discover what was present in the home environment that could support the development of emergent literacy skills.

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Thus, I designed my study using a mixed-methods approach. Fundamentally, I sought to add the voice of parents in low-income families to the research literature and recognize potential resources for emergent literacy that are not frequently included in environmental surveys. To do this my strategy of inquiry was utilization of an inventory assessment measure and an interview procedure in order to "understand the context or setting of the participants through visiting this context and gathering information personally" (Creswell, 2003, p. 9).

Participants

I recruited five low-income families who had a child up to the age of four years to be in this study. I identified low-income as the level to qualify for free or reduced lunch. I selected families who spoke English as their primary language to eliminate language as a possible variable in the study.

Several of my college students at that time expressed an interest in helping with recruitment; these students shared informational flyers with people they knew or met. My contact information and a request to call me were on the flyer. This means of contact assured there was no pressure on anyone to participate. To preserve the ethics of participant recruitment as well as to ensure the integrity of informed consent, I did not recruit any of my current students to be participants.

I collected demographic data from participants that included family size, age and gender of children, primary language used in the home, parental education and employment, child care arrangements, and family income.

Measures

In this section I describe the measures used to collect data from participant

families including conversations, a home environment evaluation, field notes, and photographs.

Infant Toddler Home Observation for Measurement of the Environment

I used the Infant Toddler Home Observation for Measurement of the Environment (IT-HOME) to assess quality of the environment, but modified the method of implementation. The tool includes a Record Form listing items to observe in the home or inquire about in an interview (Caldwell & Bradley, n.d.). I placed a (+) or (-) on the Record Form to indicate whether I observed the item or if the parent provided information that indicated the item was a usual part of the home environment. I embedded the items intended for the interview in my interview guide and conversation. The IT-HOME organizes questions and observation items in four categories: outside trips, available toys and learning materials, family routines, and training and discipline. Scoring is done through six subsets.

Foundational work for IT-HOME came from the Syracuse Early Learning Project in the mid-1960's. Recognizing there are multiple factors that comprise a high-quality environment, this group sought to discover the facets of an environment that contributed to child development (Elardo, Bradley, & Caldwell, 1975). Bettye Caldwell developed the list of 45 home factors from "empirical data, developmental theory, and expert opinion" (Elardo et al., 1975, p. 72) that comprised the earliest version called the Inventory of Home Stimulation (Elardo et al., 1975). It has undergone modifications and development of additional versions for particular populations.

I selected the IT-HOME for several reasons. There are a limited number of assessment tools for use with very young children. My review of the literature showed

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the IT-HOME as the most widely used instrument. In a 2004 review of the IT-HOME, Totsika and Silva describe its use as "without doubt the most commonly used environmental assessment instrument in developmental research" (p. 33) with both at-risk and normally developing populations. While often used to determine quality elements in the environment in order to develop early intervention strategies (Elardo & Bradley, 1981), its use for identifying strengths in the environment made it a good choice for this study.

The IT-HOME is consistent with the theoretical framework of my study as it focuses on the microsystem, that is, a child within an enduring environment and interactive with a parent. Bradley (1993) describes it this way:

> HOME is designed to measure the quality and quantity of stimulation and support available to a child in the home environment. The focus is on the child in the environment, the child as a recipient of inputs from objects, events, and transactions occurring in connection with the family surroundings (para. 3).

Additional reasons for my selection of the IT-HOME were its design for children from birth to three years and that it does not require significant training in its use. Key designers of the IT-HOME developed it as one measure that could be completed in a family home by an observer rather than simply using a parent survey or interview in a setting such as an office (Caldwell & Bradley, n.d.). IT-HOME combines a directed observation and a parent interview in its standard use. Using a checklist of items in six subscales, the observer simply checks items as seen or not. In several cases, there is an associated numerical factor such as whether at least ten books are visible. Adding the number of items marked as present gives the score in each of the subcategories.

Conversations

      While a dialogue is most consistent with naturalistic inquiry, because I was conducting a dissertation study I prepared an interview guide to use as a framework to ensure that I covered my selected topics with all participants. The guide was two pages organized into five categories with space provided for written notes (See Appendix A). I formulated questions based on the Home Observation for Measurement of the Environment for Infants and Toddlers (IT-HOME) and added questions about parental perspectives of literacy, family resources, activities, oral language, and children's toys and play. I formulated the questions based on the literature reviewed and in consultation with literacy faculty. I believed these questions would provide critical information needed to answer my research questions. I conducted two practice interviews with non-participants prior to officially beginning my study.

      I audio recorded and transcribed the conversations with participants for analysis. Below is a list of the topics and questions.

1. Demographic Data
    a. Parent name (to personalize conversation)
    b. Child's first name, age, and gender (name is for clarity in conversation)
    c. Family composition
    d. Family primary language
    e. Parental education
    f. Parental employment
    g. Childcare arrangements
2. Parent Perspective and Personal Experiences

a. What does it mean to you when I say I am interested in literacy practices in your family?

b. What were your childhood experiences with reading?

c. What are your expectations for your child related to reading/literacy?

d. What sorts of activities do you think are important to develop literacy skills for your child? (In home, outside of home, with child, or child independently). Are there activities you want your child to see you doing?

e. Are there particular items (things) you think are important to develop literacy skills? What are they and why do you think they are important?

f. If I ask you about things to read in your home, what do you think of?

g. What types of books do you have in your home? (stories, adult/child, poetry, concept books, information books, electronic books, etc.)

h. Are there other things in the house that have printed words but you did not think of related to reading?

3. Related to the Child(ren)

a. Have you started to read with your child? (If yes, when?)

b. What can you tell me about those experiences? (How often? Enjoyable? Who initiates? Do you read the pictures? Words? Ask questions while reading?)

c. Who usually reads to your child?

d. Do you tell stories to your child?

e. Tell me (more) about the places you go with your child outside your home. (How often, where do you go together, who else might go with

you?)

    f.   Do you think these trips help develop literacy? How?

    g.   Tell me about the toys your child has.

    h.   How do you decide what to get them?

    i.   Where do you keep them?

    j.   Does your child choose what to play with?

    k.   Do you think some or all of these toys support learning literacy skills?

    l.   Who does your child play with?

    m. Does your child have access to writing materials? (if yes, which ones?)

    n.   What does your child do with those materials?

4.   Oral Language Use

    a.   Tell me about the ways you communicate with each other (Verbal, non-verbal, conversation, debate, questions and answers, directives)

    b.   Are there some times of day or certain activities that have more communication than others? Tell me about those.

    c.   Do some members of the family communicate more than others? Tell me more about that.

    d.   Do you talk with your child? Tell me more about that (When? Type of talk) Can you give me an idea of some things you might say? (In play, in routines such as toileting, bathing, eating, getting ready to go somewhere, etc.)

    e.   Do you sing or chant with your child?

    f.   How does your child learn new words?

5. Family Tasks and Routines

   a. When do you do family tasks such as laundry, cleaning, or cooking? Is the child awake or sleeping at those times?

   b. Do you include your child in those tasks?

   c. Do you see them imitate these tasks in their play? What sorts of things do you hear them say when they are playing this way?

   d. Can you give me examples of other things your child says while playing?

   e. How does your child let you know what they want?

6. Other Interactions

   a. Who cares for child? Any differences in the interaction styles of individuals?

   b. How do you respond if your child does something they should not do?

   c. Does the child have contact with other family or relatives?

7. Final Question

   a. Is there anything else about literacy and your family you would like to share with me?

I adapted order of questions in the conversations as needed to fit with individual participants and situations and allow a more natural flow of conversation. This was consistent with the IT-HOME Inventory that allowed for either a structured or an informal approach to the interview. I did not ask all questions of each family due to time constraints and attention to hearing the parent voice by following their ideas.

Field notes

I took field notes on non-verbal aspects of the visit such as who was present and

my observations of interactions. I wrote these on the interview guide in space included

for that purpose. During the conversation I focused my attention on the parent and our

interaction, rather than taking many field notes. After leaving the home, I reviewed field

notes and added missing details in order to capture all data collected within the same

general period. A sample of my field notes is included in this paper as Appendix D.

Photos

I asked parents if I could see the areas of the home where the child(ren) played

and the items most often used in this play. I obtained permission to photograph the play

areas and toys as a visual record of my data.

<center>**Procedures**</center>

I followed the informed consent protocol prior to commencement of data

collection. Parents received information about the study in a written document; I also

verbally shared the contents of the letter at the start of the conversation. One potential

risk to the participant in a conversation, particularly when recorded is that every audible

sound becomes a part of the recording. In other words, I may hear statements not

typically shared with outsiders to the family, and audiotaping means those statements

would be included in the recording. I assured participants that all documentation from our

meeting had no purpose other than for use in my study and my paper would include no

personal identifiers. All electronic data would be secured in a password protected

computer and cloud-based memory during the study and for a period of three years

following it. All hard copy data and back up flash drive would be held in a locked file in

my home for the same period. Data would be destroyed after a period of three years.

Participants had an opportunity to ask questions and have any element clarified before

signing the consent form. Signature of the informed consent form gave me permission to begin our conversation.

To the extent possible, I planned a "concurrent procedure" (Creswell, 2003, p. 16) in data collection. After securing informed consent I collected demographic information about the family. I then engaged parent(s) in conversation while completing the IT-HOME and taking field notes. Our conversation was audio-taped. I took some notes but primarily engaged in eye contact and responsive interactions with the parent. At the conclusion of the conversation, I asked for permission to see and photograph the child(ren)'s toys and play spaces. With permission, I photographed those items.

I transcribed and analyzed the recorded conversations in a manner similar to text analysis used in phenomenology. Dahlberg, Drew, and Nystrom (2001) describe data analysis in phenomenology as beginning "…when data is scribed text, that is, the verbatim transcription of interviews…" (p.185). Acknowledging there are challenges to considering the transcribed interview as text, Dahlberg et al. state that there is "…equal support in favor of transcription as valid text" (p, 185).

Data Analysis

While this is a naturalistic inquiry study, I borrowed the text analysis technique from phenomenological methodology of the personal process of bracketing or reduction. This is a process of becoming open to the text itself rather than interpreting it through the lens of experience or any expectations. I acknowledged my professional work and study on topics of families and literacy, and set aside, to the extent possible, predispositions and expectations in preparation for analysis of the interview transcriptions.

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Conversations

I used the following multiple-step process to analyze and interpret, first with each individual participant text and then with all five conversations as a whole.

1. I began by transcribing the interview tapes to commence familiarizing myself with the text.

2. I then read the text of an entire conversation multiple times. I gained some familiarity in the transcription process, but multiple readings of an entire conversation gave me an opportunity to immerse myself in the text before attempting any analysis. These readings did not take place consecutively; I spent some time in reflection after each reading. Dahlberg et al. describe this phase as,

   …a familiarizing phase which means that the researcher reads the whole text, that is, the transcribed or written data material, a number of times to get a sense of it as a whole. The open-ended approach is significant in that the researcher does not intend to make anything of the data but just opens up her/his mind to the data and the meanings that are there (2001, p. 187).

3. After several readings I created a two-column table, placing the text in the left column and leaving the right-hand column free for notes. I then underlined portions of the text I deemed to be significant or revealing about that participant's literacy experiences. I began making notes of potential significant elements. van Manen (1997) refers to being attuned to statements that appear to be "essential or revealing" (p. 93). Dahlberg et al. describe the process this way:

   Sometimes a sentence or statement is noted because it seems especially

interesting and important even if one does not know just then what makes it seem interesting.

> During continued reading, similarities and differences in meaning are observed and in this way a pattern of understanding emerges… Therefore, we might have to be patient and wait, and we might have to stand the uncertainty and the "woolly" or awkward feelings that come when we do not know exactly what is going on and what the result will be. (2001, pp. 189-190)

4. After completing the right-hand column, I reviewed my comments for consistency with the whole text and examined the field notes. If it appeared the participant gave different answers for similar questions, I reviewed those responses for consistency or expansion of ideas.

5. I analyzed my narrative comments in the right-hand column for inherent meaning, and color-coded any potential emergent themes. Once again, after coding I returned to the full text to verify consistency.

6. Once I completed analysis of individual conversations, I implemented a similar protocol considering all five conversations as a whole, looking for common themes. In order to facilitate this approach, I created a six-column table and inserted the text of each conversation into a column. Because each conversation unfolded in its unique order, I re-ordered individual conversations within the table to align answers to similar questions.

7. With the table completed, I considered the answers from all five conversations as a whole and recorded common themes, when they occurred, in the sixth column. Because I intended to give voice to parents in this study, I also included multiple key

points in the sixth column. Justification for this comes from Patton (2002),

> The openness of naturalistic inquiry permits the evaluator to be especially sensitive to the different perspectives of various stakeholders. This sensitivity allows the evaluator to collect data and report findings with those differing perspectives clearly in mind, but with special attention to those whose perspectives are less often heard (p. 171).

I color coded and highlighted text to match my notes in the right-hand column and easily see the elements to check for accuracy.

Photographs

After visiting homes, I had a number of photographs of family toys. I had difficulty in identifying many toys because they were unfamiliar to me. My process for identifying photographed toys included a google.com search for images based on a descriptor. When I found a google image that appeared to be the pictured toy, I followed the hyperlink to the company web page associated with the image. Details on that webpage usually identified the toy by name and often by manufacturer. In order to ascertain characteristics of the toy beyond the visual record, I used descriptions of toys provided by manufacturers or sales sites to confirm accuracy of identification. A document with the identified toys became a part of the data along with the transcribed conversation for each family.

I created a four-column table to show the toys for each family I visited. I placed toys common to all families in the top rows; all other toys are in alphabetical order by toy name.

IT-Home

The IT-HOME record form is a checklist with 45 items sorted into six categories. Information to complete the checklist comes from both the conversation with the parent and the observation of the home environment. It is a binary system, all items receive a (+) or (–) to indicate whether something is present or not. The sum of items represents subset and total scores. A summary table includes the subset title, the number of possible points, the median score for the item, and a space for the family score. A short description of each scoring subset is below.

1. *Responsivity* includes parent interactions with the visitor as well as with the child. It relates to ease and clarity of verbal language and encouragement for the child.

2. *Acceptance* is primarily a response to misbehaviors and the use of positive behavior guidance rather than punishment.

3. *Organization* involves routines, safety, and use of community services.

4. *Learning materials* describes the presence of developmentally appropriate toys to support development and refinement of needed skills.

5. *Involvement* is the level to which the parent plans for the child's play and learning.

6. *Variety* includes father involvement and parent-child engagement in activities such as meals, shared-reading, and family visits to friends or relatives.

I created a composite table for subscale totals on the IT-HOME. Included were the name of the subscale, the possible number of points that could be earned in that category, the median score for the item provided in the Home Inventory Administration

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Manual (Caldwell & Bradley, n.d.), and the scores tabulated for each participant family.

Authenticity of Results

There is a sound research basis for the approach to designing this study, the collection of data, and my means of analyzing and interpreting data. In describing validity for a qualitative study, Creswell (2003) states that it is "…used to suggest determining whether the findings are accurate from the standpoint of the researcher…" (p. 195). Of the eight strategies Creswell names as measures of validity in qualitative studies, I believe the following four apply to my interpretation.

1. "Use *rich, thick description* to convey the findings. This may transport readers to the setting and give the discussion an element of shared experiences" (Creswell, 2003, p. 196).

I describe the data in a narrative format that includes details as well as quotes from the participants to support the descriptive details, thus representing a full picture of the parent conversation for the reader to refer to in assessing my conclusions.

2. "Clarify the *bias* the researcher brings to the study. This self-reflection creates an open and honest narrative that will resonate well with readers" (Creswell, 2003, p. 196).

Chapter One is my story and it identifies the multiple experiences I brought to this work. Chapter Two again acknowledges my perspectives, and the current chapter states the recognition of personal perspective and bias as needed before commencing analysis. In Chapter Five I explicitly state the expectations I had and whether data confirmed or challenged those expectations.

3. "Also, present *negative* or *discrepant information* that runs counter to the

themes. Because real life is composed of different perspectives that do not always coalesce, discussing contrary information adds to the credibility of an account for a reader" (Creswell, 2003, p. 196).

While I did not present information that was particularly "negative or discrepant," I have not generalized all parental views into neat categories. My interpretations include the multiple viewpoints of families.

4. "Use member-checking to determine the accuracy of the qualitative findings through taking the final report or specific descriptions or these back to participants and determining whether these participants feel that they are accurate" (Creswell, 2003, p. 196).

Three of the five families agreed to read my descriptive account of our conversation and verify that it was an accurate representation. "Yes I read it and looked over it. It seems accurate to me." (Becky Mother, personal communication, December, 2017). "I read it and it sounds about right I don't see anything wrong or untrue about it!" (Roberts Mother, personal communication, December, 2017). "I would say your paper is accurate all but the last name. Other than that it was spot on!" (Douglas Mother, personal communication, December 2017). The last name had been changed to maintain the family anonymity.

Merriam (1988) refers to approaching validity through "…the way in which the data were collected, analyzed, and interpreted" (p. 165). I audio-taped and transcribed the conversations with participants, thus I was not simply relying on memory and field notes but had participants' words to fall back on. I analyzed data through an immersive and reflective process that included multiple times of going back to the conversation text to

verify that my interpretation was consistent with the parent's voice. As noted above, three of five participant families read my narrative account as another means of checking the accuracy of my description of our conversation. This document includes a sample of the text analysis of the collective viewpoints of all five families an as Appendix B; a sample of the analysis of individual parent is Appendix C. In the interpretive phase of this dissertation, I outline how the data fit with or challenge my stated expectations.

Further, as a naturalistic inquiry study I intended to come to a personal interpretation of the data as represented in order to inform my teaching practices with college students studying early childhood education thus data analysis and interpretation was an independent effort. I do not claim that my interpretation is the only one, rather that it is my understanding of the data after a disciplined process of immersion and reflection. It is shared with others with the intention of making my findings known for others to expand upon.

In the next chapter I describe the demographics of my participant families and describe the data collected from the conversations I had with parents. I also share a summary of the IT-HOME results.

Chapter Four: Data Collected from Participant Families

In this chapter, after describing the demographics of the five participant families, I present the data collected through conversations and home visits with parents about their family microsystem. My definition of family was parent(s) and child(ren) living together. Conversations were with one or both parents and included information about their child(ren), family activities, toys found in the home, their childhood experiences related to literacy, and their perspective as parents about what literacy is as well as practices and resources to support that development.

I organized this chapter to present the data in two ways. First I present data received from each individual participant family. This information includes a narrative of my conversation with the parent(s), a description of the family toys and play spaces, and data from the Infant Toddler Home Observation and Measurement of the Environment (IT-HOME) survey. One purpose of this study was to hear what parents had to say about emergent literacy. Another was to discover family strengths that might foster developing skills. By considering the unique story of each family, I sought to understand the parental perspective of their family's emergent literacy microsystem. I also believed this consideration of an individual family would assist me in recognizing that family's strengths as relevant to their family rather than coming to a generalized assertion about all participant families.

After sharing the stories of individual families, I present the data as the integrated responses to conversation questions from all five participant families. This section of the narrative chronicles the answers and describes similar answers as well as points of differentiation. As I did with the data from individual families, this integrated section first

addresses the conversation about family interactions and activities as well as parental

beliefs and experiences, followed by an overall description of children's playthings and

spaces, including the approaches to decision-making and procurement of children's toys.

Finally, I present the collective data from the IT-HOME survey. Through the integrated

perspective I look for common themes as well as divergent ideas to consider in light of

the literature on emergent literacy. I hope to discover ways that family microsystems may

be similar and dissimilar. These discoveries will inform emergent literacy teaching

practices both with teachers currently working with young children and families as well

as faculty educating future early childhood professionals.

Demographics

I assigned pseudonyms to each family to assist in clarity of the data throughout

the results and discussion. Participant family demographics are included in Table 1. A

short narrative summary of information not included in in the table follows the graphic.

Table 1
Participant Family Demographics

Family	Conversation – Location	Family Composition	Dwelling	Education	Race
Andrews	Mother and Father in family home	3 children age 1.0 yr	House with mother, father, and 3 children	Mother – some college Father – some college	White
Douglas	Mother in my office	1 child age 0.8 yr	House. Mother, father, and child live with maternal grandparents	Mother – some college Father – High School	Mother – Caucasian Father – Mexican
Roberts	Mother in family home	Two children ages 2.1 yr; and 0.11 yr	Apartment with mother, father, 2 children and a roommate	Mother – some college Father – some college	Mom – White Dad – African American
Beck	Mother in family home	2 children ages 1.9 yr and 0.3 yr	Apartment with mother and 2 children	Mother – some college Father – unknown	African American
Leon	Mother in family home	1 child age 1.11 yrs	Apartment with mother, father, and child.	Mother – some college Father –some college	Black

Individual Family Stories

In this section I provide a narrative summary of my conversation with each

participant family. Each meeting commenced with general conversation and questions

about family demographics. After obtaining family information, I asked questions from

my interview guide as described in my methodology. At times follow-up questions varied

from my guide in order to maintain a conversational approach. What follows is a

narrative of my conversations; embedded in the narrative are the parental answers to my

questions, as well as any related information the participant offered.

The Andrews Family

I spoke with both the mother and the father of the Andrews family in March, 2014. They had three children under the age of three as well as a dog and cat for pets. An aunt and her two dogs were there the day I visited. Both the mother and the father met with me in their home. They told me all the children were sick but hoped that we could still have our conversation.

Conversation. My first question was an inquiry of what they thought I meant when I said "children's literacy skills or developing literacy skills". Each parent held a different understanding for the meaning of the phrase. The father believed that literacy included multiple elements of reading, comprehension, and making decisions about how to respond to the information read. He stated literacy was, "The ability to read …the written word and to comprehend …the meaning behind the written word and make judgements based off of what they have read." The other parent said that for a definition of literacy, reading was "pretty typical" but literacy was more about a type of communication, and commented that "…babies this little don't read" but they could still be considered as developing literacy skills. For her, communication included "…reading, writing, talking, all that."

When asked what sorts of things they thought their children engaged in, or that they as parents did with them that supported emergent literacy skills, both parents indicated they often spoke to their children and did not use "baby language". They attempted to respond to each child's approximation of speech. "If they say something and it sounds like it might be something else, even if it might not have been, we respond to

it." The mother gave an example of a time when she thought a child said, "I want daddy." When dad appeared and the child reached toward him, the mother said, "…your daughter…just said she wants you." They agreed that one parent did this more often than the other. I also observed an example of the mother's attempt to understand what one child needed when she crawled to her, "What's the matter? I don't understand you. What? You okay? You're not? What's wrong? You're tired? Yeah?" At another point in the conversation the mother encouraged a child to speak, "We have the little dog. Yeah, you like the puppy. Say hi puppy! That's your puppy now. Is that your puppy?" The mother also stated her belief that the children playing together supported emergent literacy.

I asked if they had started reading to their children yet. The mother stated no and the father said "I think we are going to start doing that." He went on to say that at times when alone with the children he read his textbooks to them and then asked what the text meant. He also described how he put the history or science channel on television and activated the closed captioning to expose them to print. The mother interjected, "I know TV isn't the best thing for kids, but… ." During our conversation, one child picked up a book and both parents responded to that action. One asked, "Are you reading it? Are you reading?" The other parent stated the name of the book and reminded the child of a toy related to that theme in the house.

I asked if they sang to the children and the father said they had "since day one." The mother said she sang along with the radio and danced in front of the children. The children danced with her at times. The father said he often sang to the children at bedtime. The children had a favorite song, *The Happy Song*, that changed their mood

from bored or restless to happy and active when they heard it. They said it was not a singing song, but hearing it always led to dancing with everyone in the room. When I listened to this song , I found it had a strong rhythmic beat with a repetitive refrain and clapping. Parental singing in the family included traditional children's songs as well as selections based on the parents' preferences. For example, the father sang Elvis songs because he remembered his mother and godmother sang those to him.

Dad often referred to childhood memories that he thought influenced his literacy and learning beliefs and practices. When asked whether he recalled reading or literacy experiences in childhood, he told of his recollections of shared reading where he primarily sat on his father's lap and listened to technical manuals being read to him. He also remembered his grandparents read to him and his grandmother read "older Italian books." The mother had no recollections of anyone reading to her.

I asked if household tasks such as cooking, cleaning, or laundry took place when the children were awake, and whether they were involved at all. The father responded that they were not currently involved although he held one at times while he cooked. He stated a desire to have them participate in some household tasks when they stood independently and had a greater attention span. I asked about meal times and the mother told me the parents generally ate after they assisted the children with their meal. On occasion the parents and children all ate a meal at the same time.

When asked if they go many places with one or more of the children, they said going to church on Sundays was about the only trip they made out of the house. The mother added they went to the children's museum for the children's birthday. The parents disagreed about taking children to activities outside the home. The mother would like to

take them on more outings but the father disagreed and described the challenge of having three little ones to take out in the Minnesota cold. A lack of money for gas also contributed to the family's staying indoors. They looked forward to the possibility of accessing a new train route and making trips to zoos and the farmer's market in the warmer season.

I followed up by asking what sorts of places or activities they would like to do with them outside their home. The father said "take them back to the children's museum as often as possible." This evoked a childhood memory he shared of many days spent at the Peabody Children's Museum. He described it as a hands-on interactive museum that he credited for his "…intelligence and understanding of the world." He wanted the same for his children and planned to take them to places such as the children's museum, the science museum, and the history museum where he could tell them "… there's a museum, mom and dad are going to sit down here and have some coffee. Yell if you need something." The father stated a desire to take them to the "actual science museum" as well as the history center "when they are older." He added, "I love learning new things and …my biggest thing is telling them to question everything… ." The mother said she wanted to take the children to zoos. The Como Zoo was one named because it was free, but she also said the Minnesota Zoo because it was bigger and had different animals. Because the father shared several childhood memories that influenced the activities he engaged in as a parent, I asked if the mother had any other memories of childhood she thought influenced her parenting or interactions with the children. She said no, but then added a desire to take the children out into nature and go for walks because she remembered going on walks around the lake in her childhood and biking and

rollerblading as she got older. She wanted to stay active, see nature, and be in nature while "…explaining different things" because she remembered doing these as a child. I followed up by asking if there were things she wanted to be different for her children. She answered that was more socialization with others in the world. They had limited contact with other families and while there were three children within the family for some socialization, she wanted the children to experience more socially.

I asked how they made decisions about the number and types of toys for the children. That discussion centered on affordability. They told me most toys the children used in their first year were hand-me-downs from friends or family. The mother said a public health nurse visited them and made some homemade toys that included elements of color, sound, and texture. The mother followed up on this and made homemade rattles. The mother said that the maternal grandmother shopped at thrift stores for toys. The father said the children received high tech toys as gifts from others for their recent birthday. The father added that toys needed to be age appropriate, interactive, and educational. The mother described toy purchases they made for the children's birthday.

> And their birthday came along and we were finally able to get them stuff and we stuck with things like Vtech that it sings, it talks, it teaches the them alphabet, and it actually …helps them learn kind of…'cause obviously if it is three of them we can't always be right next to them you know. We gotta take care of the house and stuff too, so I figure if we aren't in a room interacting with them at least they'll have something to interact with them and teach them something. I LOVE educational toys.

I asked about the children's play spaces and playmates. The mother said the

children typically played in their cribs, playroom, or living room. She added that they often played with each other or adults. When I asked if the children chose what to play with the mother responded that the parents tended to put out some toys for the children to choose from while playing.

I asked about things to read in the home, the parents answered there were little age appropriate books, alphabet tiles on the playroom floor, and pictures on the walls with words. The father added, "We have a mom's calendar up here and we use white boards that are on the walls so that they are always changing; they can constantly see how words are used." I asked if there were types of books other than textbooks and children's books such as poetry. The mother said no and the father added that the mother used to read and write poetry but had not in some time. She then recalled that at times she talked with the children in rhymes. I followed up by asking if there were other things in the home with print or pictures they had not thought of when I asked about things to read. The mother responded, "Food containers, like we have Graduates (baby food) and stuff, boxes from boxed foods, all that stuff has print."

Both parents exhibited several episodes of being responsive to their children during our conversation. In addition to noticing reading behavior, each parent noticed signs of the children not feeling well and needing sleep or comfort. The father appeared to be more protective, and wanted to put a child back in her chair when she got out and started to move toward the dog's water dish. The mother allowed for more exploration and monitored for the children's safety. There were hugs from children for both parents and at least one child got a kiss as we conversed. The mother told a child "I love you." Their tones were warm and patient; they appeared relaxed in their interactions with the

children. This was particularly noticeable since the children's illness and multiple interruptions during the conversation likely caused potential stress and fatigue.

Children's toys in the Andrews household. Toys were evident throughout the home, although most were in a playroom. Furnishings for the children included three cribs, two of which were in the playroom. Large toys included a Rainforest bouncer, an Evenflow Exersaucer, a Leapfrog Learn and Groove Musical table, Flutterbye Dream Swing, a Sit to Stand Learning Walker and Fisher Price Deluxe Jumperoo. In the playroom, smaller toys were on the floor and in boxes or bins. The bedroom and living room had toys on the floor as if abandoned during play, or stored in a laundry basket. Some toys were still in bags from the children's birthday party the previous day.

Types of toys included balls, blocks, push toys, musical toys with songs or instruments, stuffed animals, and some technology toys from Vtech and Leapfrog. The toys present supported multiple developmental domains. For example, the exersaucer and bouncer encouraged large muscle development when the child used their legs to create movement or to stand; the same items facilitated growth of fine motor skills and eye hand coordination as the child learned to move a hand toward an attached object. Toys to push or carry also fostered physical motor skills. Soft items such as the stuffed animals supported emotional regulation. Several toys stimulated the senses. The toys with sounds, music, lights, and spoken words engaged vision and hearing. There were items with varying textures to touch. Dolls and stuffed toys assisted in the development of imaginative play, language, and social skills as the children played together. The variety of books and toys with words, colors, and shapes support cognitive development.

IT-HOME results for the Andrews family. This family scored a total on the IT-

HOME of 36; that was above the median score of 32 reported in the HOME Inventory Administration Manual (Caldwell & Bradley, n.d.). Their lowest scoring sub scale score was Organization with a score of 3, 2 points below the median score of 5. Organization included trips outside the home. Perhaps because the family included triplets and the Minnesota winter weather was bitter, such trips were uncommon. Their Responsivity score was below the median by one point. Scores on Acceptance, Learning Materials, Involvement, and Variety were either equal to or higher than median scores as reported in the IT-HOME manual (Caldwell & Bradley, n.d).

The Douglas Family

The Douglas family had one child age eight months. I spoke with the mother of this family in April, 2014. She told me my research topic piqued her interest because she recently took a reading class that influenced her thinking about literacy both personally and for her then unborn child. We met in my office. As we started, I realized my office arrangement with my desk being between us made me feel as if there were a power dynamic favoring me in the room and made me uncomfortable. I told the mother this and she agreed with me. We re-arranged seating so that there was not a desk between us and the aura was collaborative. I did not visit the family home thus did not see children's toys or play spaces.

Conversation. My first question to this mother was what it meant to her when I said I was interested in the literacy practices in their family. She responded, "I'm thinking about reading; that's the first thing that pops into my head." I followed up by asking what her childhood experiences were with reading. She had few memories of anyone reading to her consistently as a child, "I mean I have books in my head that I remember reading

as a little kid but I don't feel like we did it – it wasn't like a night time thing." Her mother read to her when asked, but not on a regular basis. I asked if she remembered when she became interested in books or read by herself. She recalled becoming engaged with reading when she was in kindergarten and began to not only to read by herself but acted out stories in school. The dramatization carried over to her home where she imagined her brothers engaged in the play with her. A favorite story she acted out as a child was *Caps for Sale.* She recalled lines from the book along with her actions, "I would stand on the couch and throw hats and then the monkeys and I'd make them get sit on the couch and pretend they were sleeping so that I could be the monkeys throwing the caps for sale."

When I asked the mother if she had begun reading to her child, she responded "Yes,…in the womb." She explained that she read an article for her college reading class that influenced her understanding of the importance of daily reading. The article described the reading process as one needed daily in order to improve the skill. She explained that article prompted a conversation with the child's father at home that included "…we have got to read to him because we weren't readers." She added "…so I started reading to him then." She told me that since she was pregnant at the time, some of the reading aloud she did was with the texts assigned for her class. The first baby books she read included the favorites of both parents when they were children "because it's always fun to open one of those up." The mother was the one who read most often, and she incorporated multiple voices while reading the stories. The father also read childhood favorites to his son.

I asked if there were a particular time of day for reading. She replied that it was part of their night routine to wind down before bed. I followed up with a question about

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what the routine was like. The mother said that she usually sat her son on her lap to read because he liked to turn the pages and "I want him to see what I'm reading and hear it too." She noticed that he listened more when he saw the color of illustrations rather than simply heard the words. She was careful to ensure the television was off when they read so that lights and sounds did not distract his attention. He had a couple of favorite books, a Mickey Mouse book with buttons and sounds and *If You Give a Mouse a Cookie*. Their reading routine included at least one story every night at bedtime, and usually more. At the time of our conversation, she was the one initiating shared book reading because books were on a high shelf and limited the child's ability to self-select a book. She described herself as a graphic storyteller and I asked if she would read me a story. She agreed to read *Napping House* although it was unfamiliar to her. She pretended I was her child and read with lots of voice inflection and added in sound effects such as snoring for the sleeping granny, a meow for the cat, a squeak for the mouse, and whispered to me to look at them sleeping in the bed.

I asked if she had expectations for her child related to reading or literacy. She replied,

> Like I want him to read every day now. Because, for me, I am
> good at reading but it's kind of a chore and I want him to enjoy it
> and so I guess I'm planning on reading to him until he can start
> doing it himself. Then I still want him to at least read like a book a
> day – not like a chapter book obviously, but a short story a day or
> get a book that he's interested in to read.

She planned to continue to read to him also, "One, because I didn't get read to

very often and two, just because I want him to like it and if I'm not going to do it I'm not setting a good example… ."

I asked if she thought any other activities were important to develop literacy. She responded, "… I guess I really haven't thought about it. There is nothing I have that thought…like okay we got to do this to help that." I followed up by asking if there were places she took the child outside their home. She responded the parents and child usually engaged in activities together. The did errands, shopped, went to the gas station, had family outings to the zoo or other places, and completed household tasks such as laundry and cooking. The mother described her and her child as being "attached at the hip." He went with her to the laundry room and was usually in a bouncy chair close to her when she was cooked or did dishes. I asked if she thought the trips outside their home supported literacy skills. She thought a moment and replied, "I guess that could help him. I mean, he's getting out and seeing things and experiencing things which I am sure help." She spoke of potential outside experiences in the future and pointed out that naming items seen on a walk would be a literacy practice as well as learning games such as *tag* and *hide and seek*.

When asked about available toys that helped develop literacy skills, she identified the Leap Frog Scout as well as a baby laptop that said colors and numbers, a bus that taught letters, and a ball that said color names in multiple languages. She planned to continue to purchase additional items to go with Scout dog in the future because it would "grow up with him." I asked how children's toys were added to their home and learned the toys available included a balance of items given to them by other relatives whose children had outgrown them and those purchased by parents. I followed up by asking

where they purchased toys and how they decided what to buy. She replied the sources for toys were the Goodwill store and thrift shops as well as online shopping bargains and some in store purchases. When the mother bought toys, she involved her son in the decision. She took things off the shelf that she thought he might like, usually something that had buttons, bright colors, lights, and sounds, and let him interact with them a bit to determine his preference. Sometimes she purchased things on impulse. Remembering their limited budget, she said on those occasions either she talked herself out of buying the toy, or she eliminated some other purchase that she planned for herself. Her rationale for purchases was what she thought he liked, rather than for any particular educational value.

I asked where they kept toys at home and she replied they were in a toy box in a bedroom closet due to limited space. The parents selected toys for their child to play with when they were home; the grandmother who cared for him during the day had a toy box that he could access all day and made his own choices. She stated that she might want to re-arrange their living space to give her child more access than he currently had to toys and books. I asked who played with him. She told me his playmates tended to be adults; grandparents and parents interacted with him the most. He had cousins rather close in age he played with at times. The mother said she has friends with babies of similar ages and she hoped to spend time with them outside when the weather turned nice.

I asked her to tell me about the ways the family communicated. She replied she told her son about her day and responded to his babbling in a conversational way to encourage his speaking, "…most of the time it is like him talking and I'm like 'oh yeah, who told you that? Uh huh. Oh really!' " She included conversation in play times by

asking questions and then answering them. That practice provided a model for vocabulary and demonstrated how a conversation worked. The parents tried not to use baby talk but spoke in regular voices and described what was happening as advised in a pregnancy book she read. She expressed the belief that this habit helped her son learn the routines they went through when traveling somewhere such as, "Okay I'm going to put you in your car seat now, we're putting you in your car seat and we're going to Target." She stated their child was present for most parental communication because of the close living arrangements. While conversations included debate, there was no yelling or screaming. She believed that their child experienced more communication when they, as parents, were around than during the day when grandparents cared for him. The grandparents allowed more television watching than she liked. She hoped that when the weather was nicer they would spend more time outside. I asked if she sang or chanted with him. She said she did not chant, but sang as a regular occurrence. "My life motto is everything can be a song I guess? Anything you say you can sing it…So, I'm constantly singing. Maybe not a regular song but 'I'm going downstairs'…. ."

I asked if the child had any words yet. She said he was primarily babbling "ma ma ma…da da da." He appeared to recognize family members and objects. The mother believed this was due to repetition. She said things like "Okay, you are going to dad now" and "Oh, you're seeing momma" when he came back to her. She believed future vocabulary learning was through the interactions parents provided. She connected stories read to real life such as "Oh, Papa Bear went to go pick up the groceries and there is a bag of groceries. See, there he is grabbing them."

Because paternal grandparents cared for the child most days, I asked if she

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believed there were similar or different styles of communication used. At first she said similar, but went on to say that the grandparents interacted with him more like a baby. She thought a bit more and then said "Yes, there are way different interactions. They're not very interactive."

I asked what sorts of items were available in the house for reading. The parents' space had the mother's textbooks and children's books; she also read poetry on line. Other books in the home included novels, information books related to history or combat, and wrestling memoirs. I asked if there were items in the home with words that she had not considered as related to reading. She then identified multiple other items: picture frames with words, a sign with the family name, a recipe hanging on the kitchen wall, mail, bills, newspapers, and an outdoor weekly magazine. When I asked about words on food containers, she replied, "You're blowing my mind here." and named soup cans, backs of movies, instructions, and stickers with quotes on musical instruments.

My next question was about materials for writing. The mother told me there are multiple types of writing utensils and surfaces to write on in this home. The grandmother was a crafter and so there was a supply of markers, pens, paint, sharpies, puff paint, glitter glue, and crayons. Media for writing on included materials such as seasonal cutouts, wooden cutouts, and paper. The mother gave her son access to windows and mirrors with special types of markers appropriate for those surfaces. Use of writing implements occurred with a parent and would continue under supervision until the child could use them without writing on inappropriate surfaces such as walls.

The mother had done some thinking about behavior guidance. I asked how she responded when the child did something that she did not want him to do. She stated she

used the word "no" at times when he pulled her hair. I followed up by asking if she thought about future behavior guidance. She responded, "I've thought about it … but I feel like it is one of those kind of things where I'm just going to have to learn it as he does it." She stated she did not want to correct a misbehavior by doing something bad to him such as spanking. She described one alternative to a traditional time out she learned of having a bottle filled with glitter that the parent shook up and gave to the child to focus on. When the glitter settled, the child was finished; she described it as a "…less aggressive but calming way…." To address misbehaviors.

I wondered if she had considered how she went about finding the sorts of experiences she wanted her child to have. She responded there was a school district paper that came out with ideas, "…like there is a mommy and me class." She also said she wanted him to get out and socialized more, but that required more money.

I asked if there were anything else related to literacy that she wanted to share before we ended our conversation. She said:

> I'm recognizing…that it's not just reading. I mean when you hear
>
> the word literacy that is what you think of but I get it's not. You
>
> don't have to read constantly to learn how to read or write stuff.
>
> Like world experiences, laugh, seeing and doing.

About the contribution of activities and conversations to the development of literacy, she said "Yeah, and I guess I always knew that but when you're asked that, that's not where my mind goes to" and "I guess I never even though of listening as a literacy skill. …reading and writing … but I didn't think of listening or speaking."

Children's toys in the Douglas household. I did not visit this family home, thus

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the information about the child's toys was limited to what the mother shared during our conversation. Toys specifically named by the parent included children's books, Leap Frog dog Scout, a baby laptop, a bus with letters, a ball with colors in multiple languages, a Mickey Mouse toy, and a plethora of media for drawing or writing.

The toys mentioned supported multiple developmental domains. Toys with music, color, lights, and words supported visual and auditory sensory development. When the mother said "If it has a button that he can push and it will make a sound… ." I inferred the child had such toys to support fine motor development including hand movements, and eye-hand coordination in order to locate and push a button. Toys of this type also supported cognitive development as did the multiple toys with colors, words, and multiple languages, and animal noises. The Leapfrog Scout toys were programmable and personalized to include the child's name in conversational utterances, and favorite items in songs. Media for drawing also supported fine motor skills.

IT-HOME results for the Douglas family. Because I held my conversation with the Douglas Family outside of the home, I did not gather complete data for the IT-HOME inventory. Considering the items that I scored through the conversation, most elements were present in the family. Even with incomplete data, the subscale scores in Organization, Involvement, and Variety were at or above the median scores reported in the IT-HOME Inventory Administration Manual (Caldwell & Bradley, n.d.).

The Roberts Family

The Roberts family had two children; one child was two and the other eleven months. This family lived in an apartment in a large complex. In addition to the parents and children, an adult roommate resided with them. I spoke with the mother in the Roberts

family twice in their family home in April, 2014.

Conversation. In our first conversation, when asked what she thought I meant by the literacy practices in their family, the mother described communication elements such as talking with their children and expanded it to include anything to do with words such as reading stories and potentially even including television. In our second conversation, her focus was more on the written word but added she considered it in many ways such as books, music, television, words, and pictures.

I asked about her experiences growing up related to reading. She was sure her mother must have read to her on occasion, but she did not think it was a regular thing to sit down and read together. Her early memories were of looking at books such as Little Golden Books, Dr. Seuss, Amelia Bedelia and Berenstein Bears, but as a visual experience only not actually reading. She was not particularly interested in someone reading to her in first or second grade. She told me she believed it was in second grade that the school recognized she had some problems related to reading and comprehension. She recalled going to speech classes and having tutors read to her; they took her to the hall for her to read to them. I asked if she remembered how that felt, "It was disheartening; I got teased a lot and it made me want to give up and I didn't have any motivation." As she got older, she recalled being in a movie theater and watching the trivia game on the screen. She could never read fast enough to finish the questions, let alone be able to figure out the answers. Her first positive independent reading memory was in sixth grade when a teacher got her interested in the Harry Potter series.

My follow up question was whether she had begun reading to her children. In contrast to her childhood experience, she read with her first child from day one "I pick up

a book or something or he will pick up a book pretty much every day and we'll read a story." She usually read the words of the book although at times she made up the story from the pictures when she did not want to read all the words. She said she had made up stories for children she had cared for in the past, although she had not yet started that with her children because she did not feel they were developmentally ready for it yet. She expected that in time she would tell stories to her children also. Since her oldest child turned two, she said she had a little group time with him. They talked about the calendar and sang songs because "…he is getting to the age where he needs to learn these things." (personal communication, April, 2014). Since she was not working outside their home, she saw it as her responsibility to teach him. The songs that they sang tended to be the more traditional children's songs such as *Twinkle Twinkle Little Star, Wheels on the Bus*, and *Itsy Bitsy Spider.* At times they watched Nick Junior and really enjoyed it when they danced and sang along with the *DJ Shuffle*.

I asked what else she could tell me about their reading times. The mother was the one who most often read to the children. She said the pattern changed from her suggesting a book, to her child choosing one from a box of books in his room and bringing it to her to read. They often read, played for a while, and then went back for another story. I asked if the younger child joined them for a story, and was told that she did at times but tended to be more interested in chewing on the book. The mother noticed that her daughter at times paid attention and maintained eye contact with her in play and reading times.

I asked about the types of play they engaged in and she replied that she engaged in imaginative play with the children. Her son had a circus tent in the living room, and there were costumes and props to play pirates, ninja turtles, and Peter Pan. She described lots of

role-play and imagination play. There were family cousins who came over regularly who played with him.

I asked what her expectations were for her children related to literacy and reading. She described it differently on the two occasions we spoke. The first time she said she had no expectations; the second time she said she had high expectations. We spent a bit of time talking about that to see if it were really two different viewpoints or just a different focus on the same idea.

Her high expectations came with the caveat "…I don't want to set the bar too high to where they are going to feel like too much pressure…." She stated a desire for them to come to reading "…naturally, because if you want to do it you end up doing with more focus…." She made comparisons to her life experiences where the reading she did for classes was still hard, but she persisted because it was something she was interested in. She wanted her children to develop strong reading skills when they were young so that they would not have to work as hard as she did in educational reading. She believed that starting foundational work with them in learning words and sounds would help them just grow into reading. She described a natural flow as really following her child's interest, so when he brought a book and they read and sang together, he enjoyed it because he had initiated it.

Her high expectations for them were actually that they would not give up as she did. She described her experience as putting up a wall to keep reading and others out. As a mother, she wanted to find a way to help her children not build that wall but to enjoy experiences from the beginning. Her goal was that they would read; they would work on it. She knew she might need to find a balance between the commitment to work on it and

not creating the situation where reading was a chore.

I said this brought us back to the difference between high expectations and no expectations. As we talked about that, it appeared that she really was describing essentially the same viewpoint but from different perspectives. She understood from her personal experience that it was important to master the skill of reading and knew that it was a much more pleasant task when self-motivated. She knew that if one struggled at any point it could be easy to give up. This was where her life experience came into her desires for her children. She did not want them to experience the teasing and the struggles she faced, nor did she want to allow them to give up the way she did when it was difficult. She sought to use her experiences to help her children develop reading skills in ways that felt natural and fun; she wanted to firmly support rather than push too hard.

I asked what sorts of activities she thought were important to develop emergent literacy skills. She answered: playing different types of games; group activities including physical games such as Four Square; flash cards; creating categories; being outside and looking at clouds; watching sailboats sail; looking at pictures; and outings such as shopping for opportunities to name items on the shelves. She described emergent literacy in experiences such as recognizing the Target sign as they drove down the street and the children recognizing that sign indicated where they often purchased pizza. She recollected a time when she commented to the father about a garment tag that said flammable and had a picture of a fire on it. The next day, her son picked up the piece of clothing, pointed to the picture, and said "fire, fire."

I asked what activities she wanted to see her child do to develop literacy skills in the future. She responded that there wasn't anything else at that time, but in the future

reading every day was the first thing that came to mind. I followed up by asking if there were particular toys that were important to developing literacy skills, and she named several. One was shape sorters she considered important because they helped with fine motor skills as well as provided the opportunity to name shapes and colors, and learn to match the shape to the opening for them. She also named a school bus that had letters, colors, and music as well as a piano, tambourines and a memory game. Their play telephone encouraged speaking and pretending to have conversations. This child was proficient with his mother's phone and could quickly find youtube videos that he liked. *Diego's Eggs* and the Mulan song were a couple of his favorites. She recalled learning that black, white and red colors were good for babies and kept that in mind when she purchased toys for her children as infants. She continued to focus on colorful toys to reinforce the color name and concept with her children. I asked if she had writing materials in their home. She said yes but they used them with supervision. Her older child scribbled and said things like circle and triangle, although what he drew was a line. His younger sister tended to eat the crayons rather than putting them to paper.

I asked why she thought those items were important to literacy and she replied that she saw a literacy connection between these play experiences and real life situations. She believed videos allowed him to hear other people use words and give explanations.

I asked what she wanted to get them in the future. She said,

Right now what I would like to get him, that I don't have much of, is arts and crafts stuff. And I'd like to get more like toddler friendly appropriate stuff. ….I want something he can hold, he can grasp, he can really work with it. …. And lined paper…, because I'm like let's just start writing! Let's just start writing on

the lines and figure out the lines and how to write in between the lines, and just do a line. … and I'm thinking ahead like we're not quite there yet but we can try, who knows? I didn't have any money to buy it, but you know one of these days I might have some money to get this paper. I could draw it on my own paper and then I'm good too, but…

Since she spoke of wanting something and not having the money for it, I asked how she decided what to buy. She replied at times, if there were something she really wanted for her children she told other family members about it in hopes they would get it as a gift. I followed up by asking if there were other sources for obtaining toys. She told me they received several toys from friends or family whose children had outgrown them. Other sources for toy acquisition included Goodwill, garage sales, and dumpster diving. She said she discovered neighborhoods where she could find really good things on trash days.

She appeared to be resourceful so I asked if she had advice for others who didn't have many resources. Her reply was "You just have to ask, and I think educating people just asking questions – don't be afraid to ask those questions." She went on to state it was something she planned to encourage in her child. When the "why?" questions started, she planned to "…answer each question until I am at the dead end. We've come back full circle…"

I asked her when she did household tasks and whether the children participated in those. She told me that while the children did not currently help with general household tasks, her son was aware of the cooking and cleaning activities and observed from a safe distance. The mother said she was concerned about the safety of him around cooking so

did not let him get very close. She also found that in some tasks such as doing dishes he was more of a distraction and while she knew it might be appropriate for him to help, she was aware that her emotional state would not handle it well. He imitated cleaning activities such as sweeping. She wanted to get him a play kitchen set so that he could imitate the other cooking and cleaning tasks but the child's father was concerned about a potential influence on gender identity.

I asked about the children's communication skills. The mother told me the older child's verbal skills were increasing; he used many of the words that he heard his parents use. She believed he had learned many Spanish words because he regularly watched or listened to a Diego show on television. She also played a Diego video at night while he slept with the belief that subliminal learning took place. He verbalized what he wanted or needed. The younger child cried, whined, or grunted to make her needs known. I asked how she thought the children learned new words. The mother said she believed that most of the words her son learned came from hearing them either from parental conversations or from television shows. There were also times when she intentionally taught a word for something he wanted. She said the word multiple times and on occasion broke it down into sounds and asked him to watch her mouth, tongue and lips. She told me she did that less with her younger child. In general, she said she talked more with her older child than with the younger one. She thought this was because the older child had a more demanding nature. The younger child interacted more independently and as a result was not involved in as many communications.

The mother went on and described the toll on parent-child conversations due to the stress of working, being a student, trying to keep up with household chores and being a

parent. She described herself as being tired in the evening and said she just wanted to relax rather than interact with the children in conversations. However, she was aware of the importance of interactions with them and roused herself to sing songs. She also spoke with them to be sure they knew they were important also. Other people in the children's lives who communicated with them were dad, aunt, sister, grandma and family roommate. All actively interacted with the children but their different personalities resulted in different approaches to interactions. Contact with grandma was often on the phone; the children asked to call her a couple of times a week.

I asked about regular family practices. The mother told me there were typical routines around meal times and going to bed. Parents asked the children if they were hungry both verbally and in sign language, although the children did not sign in response. The children did not usually eat with parents although the mother helped them as needed. Bedtime involved baths, bottles, kisses for those in the home, blankets and going to bed. Bath times included allowing time for water play with number and letter toys as well as bathtub crayons. She sang and conversed with them during diaper changes. Day to day activities also involved a lot of naming and explanations about what was happening. A daily habit was to get out of the house. Shopping trips were limited due to frustrations about not having money to purchase desired items. The children accompanied the mother to purchase groceries about once a month. The family had memberships for the Minnesota Zoo and the YMCA.

When I asked the mother about how she corrected inappropriate behaviors, she responded that at times she used a sharp tone but most often used a conversational tone. A short time out for a couple of minutes was a typical response followed by an explanation

of why the child received that consequence. She said her intent for the explanation was to lay the foundation for using words to talk about what you needed rather than taking aggressive actions. Yelling was not a communication style and typically there was no negative talk in the household.

When asked about things to read in the home, she answered with books, words on the television screen, tags, diapers, and pictures on toys. The types of books in the home included children's books, chapter books, and maps; other items with words included magnets, photos, and food containers.

Children's toys in the Roberts household. I found toys in several rooms in this home. Large toys included a child-sized slide, a circus tent, a double-sided easel, small chairs, one preschool and two toddler riding toys, a push toy, an activity table, a bouncer chair and a very large stuffed dog. A playroom contained shelving, drawers, and baskets to hold toys of various sizes. Toys were appropriate for the ages of both children and included materials to support multiple domains of learning. Items for large motor development included the push and riding toys as well as the slide. Many toys supported fine motor skill and eye-hand coordination such as shape sorters, small blocks, dial toy telephone and a xylophone. Soft cuddling items supported emotional regulation. Dolls, small cars and trucks, pirate props, and the circus tent were among the items to support imaginative play and language development. Items to support cognitive development, language, and literacy, included an alphabet poster on a playroom door, a large bin of children's books as well as a bin of letters, words, and picture cards. Multiple items had colors, shapes, and numerals. There were several items with musical and voice components as well as lights or sounds for auditory and visual stimulation. There were

also games stored in a closet that were appropriate for the children to play with when they were older. Considering our conversation about shopping and limited funds, there were many, high quality items available for the children. The mother had said that she had found some good neighborhoods to do some 'dumpster diving' for these items.

IT-HOME results for the Roberts family. The Roberts family scored 42 of 45 on the IT-HOME, 10 points above the median score for the HOME Inventory (Caldwell & Bradley, n.d.) and exceeded the median on each subscale. Their home was particularly organized and neat; messy play was not something the children typically engaged in. The mother spoke of needing to get household tasks completed without distractions and that may explain the lack of messy activities by the children. The IT-HOME inventory specifically asks about going to the grocery store weekly, and while the children did get out of the home often with one or both parents, they went places other than shopping. Lack of discretionary income influenced the mother's decision to not shop because it was a frustrating experience for the family.

The Beck Family

The Beck family had two children, one was 21 months and the other was 3 months. Both parents were involved with the children on a regular basis, however the children lived with their mother in an apartment. I visited the mother in the family home in June, 2014 on a very hot summer evening in the week following their move to this location. The television was on and the two children were near it with a young aunt. Most of their attention was on the screen during my conversation with the mother.

Conversation. Our conversation started with me asking what she thought I was primarily interested in when I said literacy practices in their family. She responded that

she believed I wanted to hear about what they did in their household. I followed up by asking which elements in the household she thought related to literacy and she answered the learning environment. I asked if there were anything else and she said no.

I then asked her about her reading experiences as a child, such as whether she remembered someone reading to her, or when she began reading herself. The mother had no recollection of anyone reading to her when she was young and was unsure when she started reading independently. When I asked if she liked reading as a child, she replied no. She did not know why she did not enjoy it as a child and told me she still did not like reading as an adult. I asked if reading were easy or difficult and she replied, "It's just like, too much to read. Like I'll fall asleep because I read too much…. But when I do read is when I read to my kids. But I read their stories, their books."

I asked when she began reading books to her children and she said when her oldest child was about three months old. I asked how those experiences were, if her child seemed to enjoy them. She replied her child appeared to enjoy the reading time. I asked her to tell me more about the reading experience with her children. She told me that before her daughter was able to initiate book reading, the mother selected a book to read to her; now the child selected a book and brought it to her mother to read. They did not have a particular time of day or routine for reading times. They would simply find a place to sit and the mother held her child in her lap while reading. She generally read the words to the story while her child listened. They did not typically talk about the pictures. Story reading was usually once a day and remained that way once the child initiated it. The mother told me that her children were occasionally in daycare but she still read to them when they got home. The children's niece also read to the older child. I asked if she told

stories or sang with the children. Storytelling was not an activity in the home, but they sang traditional children's songs such as *Itsy, Bitsy Spider* and the *ABC* song.

I asked if she had expectations for her children related to reading and she replied, "No." I asked her, "If I say literacy skills, what skills do you think I am talking about?". To that she replied, "Reading and writing." I followed up and asked if there were activities she thought were important to help the children learn to read or write. To this question she replied, "…when they color, draw, when she picks up a book and looks at it." I asked if there were places or activities outside their family home that helped develop these skills and she replied, "No." I followed up and asked about toys that supported learning literacy skills. In addition to the coloring and books she mentioned earlier, she answered they had a phone that sang and said the alphabet and some words and a toy that said the names of different shapes. Those were the only toys specifically described as relating to literacy skills.

I asked about how she decided which toys to buy and she said she just got learning toys so they could learn and play at the same time. I asked where she shopped for toys and she replied that she tended to shop at Walmart, Kmart, and Target. I asked where she kept the toys and she responded they were in a crate in the children's room. I followed up by asking if the children could access them as desired and she replied the children selected whatever they wanted to play with. I asked about playmates and she said when the children were at daycare they played with other children; at home there were no child playmates.

I asked if the older child had access to writing materials and the answer was yes but with supervision. The mother said that the child colored on her television once so she

gave her a book and told her she could color on that.

I asked what she had in the house to read. When she answered stories, I asked if that meant children's book and she said yes. I asked if she had books to read herself and she replied, "No, I don't read." When asked what other items in the home had words on them other than books, she replied, "Nothing."

I asked when she did regular household tasks such as dishes and laundry and she told me that was typically in the evening. I asked if the children were awake when she completed these tasks and she said yes, and that the older child helped with some of the tasks. The child put clothes in the laundry and dishes in the sink when finished eating. She also threw trash in the garbage after meals.

I asked whether the children went with her to buy groceries and the mother stated they did, but stayed in the buggy rather than actively participate in the shopping. I asked if there were other places they went outside their home and she responded that they also went to the park. I asked if these trips outside the home helped with literacy skills and she responded, "I'm not even sure. I don't pay attention to it."

I asked the mother how she communicated with her children. She replied that she talked and played with them. She said the older child used a number of words such as "ee ee, stop it, family names, hi, bye, come on, and bathroom." I asked how she thought the child learned new words and she replied that it was from, "Everybody. Daycare, me, her dad, family members." She added that the child learned some words when she listened to others, and at times the mother taught words directly. She described talking with the children about their day even though she did not believe they understood her. I asked for some examples of things she said to them. Those examples included, "How was your day

at daycare? What did you learn? Did you have fun? You want to ee ee? You got to use the bathroom?" When speaking with the younger child, she asked "whatcha doing? Or whatcha looking at?" I asked if she described things during the daily routines. She answered that she talked to them while she changed diapers but while dressing them did not talk about what they wore or describe the clothing. I asked how the children let her know what they wanted. She replied the older child made her needs known verbally and the younger child had varying cries that the mother recognized for different needs such as being hungry, needing to be changed, being tired, or wanting to be held. I asked for her response if they did something she did not want them to. She replied, "I tell them no, that is not okay."

I asked about their social connections and she told me there was little contact with others in the family home. Occasionally her sister came to visit, otherwise extended family members were not typically present. The mother or father provided most daily care; they went to daycare on days the mother worked outside their home. She believed that the father had a similar communication and interaction style with the children.

I wrapped up the conversation by asking if she had anything else she thought of related to literacy. There were no other ideas or thoughts related to their family literacy that she had to share.

Children's toys in the Beck household. Most of the toys in this home were in the children's room and stored in large bins when I visited. The family just moved to this place and there were several bins stacked in the room as well as throughout the home. It was not clear if the bins were the regular storage containers for toys or if they were from the move. The playroom had a flip open sofa for a soft cozy play surface.

Of the toys I saw, there was evidence of toys appropriate for both young children. Toys supporting large motor development included a rocking horse and push toys such as the Sit to Stand Walker and a helicopter toy that had a pull string. Toys for fine motor skills included a bead maze, an activity center, stencils and colored pencils. Support for sensory development was through musical and speaking toys that played songs and said word phrases, toys with lights, and a variety of textures throughout the room. Additional items to support cognitive development included a large bin filled with children's books including multiple board books with first concepts such as words, toys, animals and other books with paper pages. Multiple toys had letters, numbers, and musical elements to them. Toys for social emotional development and imaginative play included dolls with accessories and soft cuddle toys. A few games for the children to play as they got older were stored in a closet.

IT-HOME results for the Beck family. The Beck family scored below the median on three of the subscales. The children's aunt was present and had both children close to her while I was present and that may have influenced the mother's interactions resulting in a lower core on the Responsivity subscale. The learning materials in the home scored higher than the median. The overall score of 25 was seven points below the median.

The Leon Family

Mother, father, and child lived together in an apartment. The child was nearly two years old at the time of my visit in July, 2014. I spoke with the mother in this family. The child was present and active.

Conversation. My first question for the mother was what she thought I meant

when I said I was interested in the literacy practices in their family. Her response was that it meant a way to help a child develop. She continued with a description of an occupational therapist who assisted her premature infant develop the skills to maintain eye contact, roll over, and sit up. She ended with, "So, when you say literacy I think of how you, how you be able to help children in that same way." I followed up by asking what her beliefs were about literacy. She told me literacy was reading and writing. She also spoke of the importance of literacy to her and the work she had done in a high school arts in literacy program with teachers and students.

I followed up with a question about activities the parents thought were important to support learning reading and writing. She replied that included providing toys that support those skills, being a role model of reading and writing, and interacting with their child with books and writing materials. She said they planned to get him a computer program used in schools to improve reading and writing levels of children. She added that he was currently,

> … pretty good. He'll open books and kinda mumble through it. He doesn't know the words of course, but he'll read it as if he knows what he's talking about. He knows how to close the books. He knows how to draw on papers as if he was writing, so, we make sure to keep him in that mind… we just feel like literacy is that important. Especially since I'm in school, I know that, you know, if he sees me doing it that I need to be teaching him to do it as well.

I asked if there were other important activities and she listed: interacting with other children, sharing with them, learning from others in addition to the mother, learning for the world and for religion. Some places such as children's museum and science

museum were important to go to, as well as other museums here or in places they might visit. While she listed these sorts of experiences as being important to developing literacy now, she later stated, "Usually I see more literacy as he grows older." She believed literacy intertwined with learning in general.

When I asked about her memories of early reading experiences with her parents, her reply was of few conversations with parents due to a lack of time. She stated her parents read to her, but she attributed her developing literacy interests to her personal interest in reading and writing poetry as a young child.

I asked if she started reading to her child. She responded that she began reading to him when he was four to five months old. She shared with me that he was a premature infant who did not come home from the hospital until he was three months old. She said in the weeks before she started reading to him she recalled holding and talking to him while they danced or walked. She said, "…I used to …read him little books or dance around, so I always kinda kept … his mind going so he could kinda get the movement with the words." I asked her to tell me more about the shared reading experiences she had with her son. The mother replied that his interest typically lasted for two or three books. They sat to read, at times he sat in a chair or on the couch, at others he sat in her lap on the floor. She described it as "…with our legs crossed, kinda like in school." She said he had a favorite book, *Five Little Monkeys.* After she read that book to him he took it, flipped through the pages and said some of the words. I asked if he enjoyed the reading times. She said he was always engaged in the reading process. She told me he initiated book reading by bringing one to her. If he wanted it read again he took it from her, opened and closed the cover, and then handed it to her again. He typically indicated the

desire to finish by taking the book and closing the cover. I asked if she typically read the words or talked about the pictures. She said, "I usually read the words … he finds a place in my lap so he's … right in the middle so I usually read the words and if it's hard for him to understand I will … help him understand the pictures." She said he was engaged in the activity even though she was not sure he understood what she was saying, I asked if others also read to him. She responded that multiple people read to the child including father, mother, and grandparents. I followed up by asking if the reading happened several times a day with different people and she said yes. I asked how the reading experiences changed over time. She responded that the greatest difference she observed was that now he selected a book and read it independently. He sat and turned pages one by one and vocalized as if reading it aloud, even when it was upside down.

After telling me about who read to her child, the mother told me how reading increased in importance in her family of origin over time as the result of increased writing. Her brother recently wrote a book and she wrote a lot of poetry in her high school days. Although there were several years she did not write, she was writing again. Both she and her brother wrote plays. She intended to write a book in the next five years. She described the reason for writing as "I guess by poems and story telling that we have a story that we want to be told so we kind of just write it to express ourselves if that makes any sense." I asked if the writing experiences influenced her parenting. She responded,

> Most definitely because as you get older, you know, for a child to say 'my uncle wrote this book.' 'My mom wrote a book. It's pretty big because …the more we write and the more we have to express ourselves it will help us to express how important writing is to him.

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Later in our conversation she told me that the child's father wrote poetry and song lyrics.

I asked if she had expectations for her child related to reading and she told me her expectation was that he would continue to read as he got older. "I think one of the things he would have to do – I don't want to make it seem like a chore – but it would be a requirement is that he would have to read two to three books a day." She wanted to ensure that he watched television less and engaged in learning activities more.

Because of her interest in writing stories, I asked if she continued that as an oral tradition also and told stories. She said she did tell many stories and spoke of a lot of talking in the family. As an example she told me that she counted stairs aloud as they went down them. In general, she described their days as "very talkative" and her son verbalized a lot in these conversations. I followed up by inquiring about the verbal communication in the family. She said it tended to be primarily conversational. The mother said that at times she used "baby talk" but noticed that her son responded better to regular conversational tones. The mother told me there were more directives in the evening such as "Come here" or "Don't do that", primarily due to bedtime routines. She discovered that if she added a sound to directives when he was not responding, it tended to get his attention and a positive response. Examples were the click of the lock on the door indicated they were leaving; the sound of the bathroom door and water running was a cue that it was bath time. Other than when she really needed him to do something, she was not very directive. She preferred to be more lenient due to limited time with him. A spanking had happened on occasion, but not often because she did not want to create potential anger issues for him in the future.

I asked how many words he had in his vocabulary. She stated he had ten or eleven words including mother, dad, hi, bye, no, yeah, whoa, whoopsie, and a couple of family names. I asked how she thought he learned new words. Her answer was the parents specifically taught some words such as whoa and whoopsie when he fell, others she knew he learned by listening to people around him. She observed that he looked at someone's face intently when they talked about something of interest to him. Not all words were intelligible but parents understood meaning. I asked how she knew what he wanted. She said he used visual cues such as bringing a wrapper of something to her to indicate he was hungry, or gestures such as reaching for something he wanted. He was also rather proficient at getting things he wanted by pushing a chair close and climbing to reach it.

I asked her what toys the child had and where they kept them. She said the child had multiple toys available to play with. Many toys were at his grandmother's house because he spent a lot of time there. Some toys stayed where he lived, and they took others back and forth. In general, larger toys and books stayed at home. He had many toys that made noise such as music toys, guitars, and piano and those stayed at home. Music was a favorite of his and he ignored anything else to engage in music or dancing. I asked if he made choices about what to play with or if adults decided. She responded that he was typically free to choose what to play with. She added that at times she selected something for him to do "…if I want him to like pay attention to something that he probably hasn't selected, probably like if I want him to work on his ABCs or something like that." She said that she often twirled him around and sang. At times, parents played movies at night when he went to sleep because he liked the music and colors. They did not do this too often because they did not want going to sleep with a movie to become a

habit. Singing and dancing together were the most common play practices.

When asked about making choices regarding what toys to purchase the she said that thus far they had not needed to make purchases; toys had been gifts from others. She assumed that when they got to the point of buying toys she would consider his developmental level and his interests. She suspected it would have lights and sound. She described him as not being much of a "toy kid"; he enjoyed being around people more than toys. Both parents agreed he would not have guns or violent video games. She went on to state their concern that violent video games would have a negative influence on him. She also shared their fears of gun violence and a need to assure the child did not attract unsavory people.

It appeared to me that when we talked about literacy she connected it to learning, but when we talked about toys, she spoke of following his interests. I asked if she saw toys as more of an entertainment source rather than being helpful in developing literacy skills. She responded, "I guess it depends on the toy? You know, there are some toys that are helping in that way; there are some you know he won't learn anything from. But when it comes to toys that have like the ABCs and counting, I think those are good." When asked for more information about toys or other items important to develop literacy she stated, "Certain activities go with literacy." Leap Frog game was one toy she mentioned specifically, and described it as one that read to him, spoke in a digital voice, and had some interactive touch elements. "I think that enhances literacy because then it's working with more than one side of the brain. It starts interacting not only his speaking, but he movement as well." She believed activities or toys that developed all the senses were good.

I asked about the child's access to writing materials and she said they were of interest to the child. The mother said she was a bit concerned that he might take the pen out of my hand since that was something he did at times when she was writing "…he'll grab the pen out of my hand and start going at it. He likes to scribble. I think in his mind that is helping develop something you know, because usually that would turn in to letters and then into words, so we just let him scribble away." When I asked if he typically wrote on paper she said they were working on that because he was still inclined to scribble on her binders or the table.

When asked about things to read in the home she thought first of "…baby books. I have a box full of baby books", then books she read for classes or bible study and "…all different kinds of books." She named *Harry Potter, Julie B Jones* series, poetry, *A Light in the Attic,* and Tu Pac book of poems. She shared that reading textbooks or other information books was very difficult for her because she tended to lose focus. "It is very hard for me to stay in to that. I am more of a flow, story…that's the way I read, and actually when I write that's the way I write and somehow it becomes a poem, or it has a poem flow." E-books were in the mother's experience for textbooks, but so far they had not had any e-books for children. She considered doing that on her phone. She described other books that she read as having a "deep story" to them, such as *Bang!* Even though the books were fiction, they influenced her parenting because they got her to think of things that happened in real life. Other items in the house with print other than books included words on her computer, the calendar, and bible verses she posted on the refrigerator and other places in the home.

The mother typically did household tasks with her child watching nearby. At

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some point in the future, she expected he would help her, but it would be as a job where he could learn responsibility and receive pay for the work he did. He currently went with her to do laundry and grocery shopping. I followed up and asked if the child imitated any of the actions of the parents. She told me that she recognized some of the play activities he engaged in were similar to hers "…he'll grab something and he'll be walking around the house talking on it as if it's a phone and the way he conversates, I like instantly realize that he's mimicking me." She said writing was another behavior he imitated; she described him as banging on the computer because he saw her work on it and believed he read because he saw her read. Other imitative behaviors she mentioned included: playing with game controller, or pretending to have a game controller, using the television remote to try to turn on the tv, cooking on his toy kitchen, dressing himself, and combing or fixing his hair as parents did theirs.

She extended her answer to this question when she spoke of how the imitating behaviors reminded her of the need to be a good role model. The importance of being a good role model came up several times throughout our conversation. She spoke of a need to model driving behaviors such as not texting while driving and paying attention to music selections on the radio when he was with her. She also said that because her son repeated her words, she needed to be careful of her language; she was concerned that in all things she was a good role model for him.

I asked about their social contacts and playmates for the child. She said the child's play partners were typically adults, but he also played with a couple of boys at church and his cousins who lived downstairs from them. She said they visited the maternal grandmother where her son played and interacted with both his grandmother and his

cousins. The family regularly visited and cared for the paternal grandmother as well. She said they would like to have him in a daycare for more interaction with children but the cost was prohibitive for them. The parents planned to have him go to Head Start. Socialization as well as learning with other children were important to them. Activities outside their home were primarily church and Sunday school as well as outside to play. His outside play areas were in the back of their apartment building and a couple of parks he went to with parents or grandparents. The grandmother also walked him around the block regularly.

Children's toys in the Leon household. I observed toys primarily in the living room and bedroom in this home. The living room toys were stored in stacking drawers as well as on top of, and next to, those drawers. There was not a particular storage arrangement for toys in the bedroom. The bedroom environment included a set of alphabet letter cards and pictures that hung in a clothesline fashion on the child's bedroom wall, and calendars with events handwritten on them. One wall in the bedroom had the child's name and information about events in his life and included pictures and written descriptions. The toys seemed relevant to a range of skill levels and a variety of developmental domains were supported by the play items. Large active play items were outside in a grassy area behind the apartment building.

Toys present supported development in multiple developmental domains. Large motor skills items included a Sit to Stand Walker, push toys and riding toys. Toys supporting fine motor skills included: a bead maze, flip a block alphabet, a ball drop, school bus with a carrying handle, a guitar, activity table and several drawing and writing utensils. Cognitive skill support items included an activity center and activity table where

elements lit up or played music when touched (cause and effect) and multiple toys with letters, colors, shapes, and numbers. Sensory play items included toys with different textures to develop sense of touch, a number of toys that made music and sounds that supported auditory development; stuffed animals, blankets, and dolls to support emotional regulation, and toys to support language and imaginative play included soft stuffed animals and characters, and preschool kitchen set.

IT-HOME results for the Leon family. The Leon family scored 36, four points above the median on the IT-HOME Inventory (Caldwell & Bradley, n.d.). The one subscale where the score was below the median was Involvement. The mother allowed the child to play independently most of the time and purchased toys primarily to meet the child's interest, rather than specifically to challenge him to learn new skills.

Integrated Data from the Conversations with the Five Families

In the following section I present the data as the combined responses received from all five participant families. First is a narrative of the answers I received to similar questions posed to participants; it includes points of similarity and difference. Following that is the collective data from the IT-HOME.

Parent Views of Literacy Practices

I began each conversation by asking parents what they thought I meant when I said I was interested in children's developing literacy skills or the literacy practices of their family. There was not a consistent view offered in participant conversations. Most families included some aspect of word use. Reading, writing, and communication were the words used most often. Five of six parents referred to the written word. Two parents included oral language and communication as part of literacy. The mother in the Roberts

family included "practice talking…with the babies." (personal communication, April, 2014). The parents in the Andrews family had differing views. The father gave a response that included multiple facets of the reading process, "the ability … to read the written word and to comprehend … the meaning behind the written word and make judgments based off of what they have read." (personal communication, March, 2014). In response to his answer, the mother said, "except babies this little don't read so I guess I look at it more as a communication type. The read part is pretty typical, but to me it really is mostly about communication." (personal communication, March, 2014). One parent attributed my interest to the learning environment of the home.

Family Reading Experiences

I asked parents if they had memories of someone reading to them in childhood. Their memories varied. Two mothers stated they did not know if someone read to them as a child; the Roberts mother said childhood reading was "nonexistent" (personal communication, April, 2014). The Douglas mother said a parent read to her if she brought a story and asked; mother in the Leon family recalled her parents talked to her as often as possible but said there really wasn't much time for them to read to her. The Andrews father recalled shared reading experiences with his mother, father, and grandparents. He also remembered that his father read technical manuals to him while he sat in his lap; his grandmother read Italian books.

When I asked if parents had begun reading to their children, five of six parents told me they read to them but started at different ages of the children. The Douglas parent started reading to the baby in utero after learning about the importance of daily reading in her college reading class. Because she was a college student her book choices were often

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the novels assigned for her class but she shared that she went out and bought books that she remembered from her childhood to share with her child after he was born. She encouraged the child's father to begin to read his favorites to their son and he was doing that. The Andrews parents at first said they had not yet started to read to their one-year-old children but thought they would soon. The father then recalled that at times he read his homework to the children when mother was not present. The Roberts mother started reading to her children immediately following their birth, the Beck mother began around three months of age and the Leon mother said it was at four or five months of age. Parents in the Douglas, Roberts, and Leon families read to their children multiple times a day; the Douglas and Leon children had several people who read to them regularly including both parents and grandparents. Three parents recalled specific books they enjoyed as a child.

I asked parents to tell me more about the reading experiences they had with their children. Four of five families engaged regularly in this activity. Although one parent described herself as someone who did not read and had never found reading enjoyable, she engaged in reading with her child at least daily. The four mothers who read regularly to their children said they typically held their child in their lap. The Douglas mother observed that her child was more attentive in this position because he saw the color of the illustrations. All of the mothers who read to their children tended to focus on the words in the books. Illustrations were used by one mother to assist her child in meaning-making if she sensed he did not understand the words. One parent who had trouble with reading told me that at times she simply told the story from the pictures when she did not want to read all the words. Only one of the five families included book reading as part of a daily

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routine, for them it was between bath and bedtime. All parents who read to their children indicated they were interested and engaged in the process. Parents interpreted the child's physical cues to continue or be finished with the reading session. The Leon mother said her child took a book, opened and closed it, and handed it back to her if he wanted her to continue. He took the book and closed it if he were finished. Two parents believed their child had one or more favorite books. Children in three of the families initiated the reading process by bringing a book to the parent. The reading pattern in the Roberts family was to play for a while, read a book, and go back to playing. This cycle repeated throughout the day with the older child initiating the reading by selecting a book to bring to his mother. The younger child appeared attentive at times, but her mother thought she was more interested in chewing on the book. The Douglas child was just crawling and did not have independent access to books yet, although his mother said he appeared to anticipate the story reading as part of his evening routine.

Parental Expectations for Children's Future Reading

I asked four of the families if they had expectations for their children related to future reading. The Douglas, Roberts, and Leon mothers strongly stated their child(ren) would need to read daily. The Leon mother stated,

I will want him to continue reading. I think one of the things he would have to do, I don't want to make it seem like a chore, but it would be a requirement is that he would have to read two to three books a day. Regardless what kind of books they are, he would have to read something... (personal communication, July, 2014)

The Douglas mother's words included,

Well, honestly I never even thought about it until I took (her college reading)

class and then … this one of the main things in my plans for him to grow up. Like

I want him to read every day now. Because, for me, I am good at reading but it's

kind of a chore and I want him to enjoy it and so I guess I'm planning on reading

to him until he can start doing it himself, and then I still want him to at least read

like a book a day. Not like a chapter book obviously, but a short story a day or get

a book that he's interested in to read … I want him to read something at least once

a day. (personal communication, April, 2014)

The Roberts family mother experienced reading difficulties as a child and still

found reading difficult. She spoke of her childhood experiences

I had a struggle with reading. It was biggest struggle I've had thus far….I gave up

easy. Oh, that's too hard. I don't care; I'm done…. It was disheartening. I got

teased a lot. And it made me want to give up and I didn't have any motivation

…so I just left it. (personal communication, April, 2014)

As a result, she expressed the need to be supportive of her children's efforts while

being firm and encouraging about overcoming any potential problems in the future, "the

expectation that we are going to work on it. We are going to sit here; we are going to do

this." (personal communication, April, 2014). She wanted their reading skills to emerge

from a naturalistic approach rather than a directive experience. She did not want her

children to have unpleasant experiences such as hers. She said,

I have higher expectations than I did for myself. But with that I don't want to set

the bar too high to where they are going to feel like too much pressure. I want

them to come to it naturally, because if you want to do it you end up doing it with

more focus, more… I want to say precision. …If they start now, at least in my

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mind, we start now with the foundations of reading and words, sounds, things like

that they'll grow and it will like all fall into place. (personal communication,

April, 2014)

The mother of the Beck children said she had no expectations for their future

reading experiences.

People with whom the Children Interact

I asked parents a variety of questions about their socialization practices such as

family or friends they see, who their child plays with, and who cares for the children.

Four of five families told me they were the primary caregivers for their children. If

parents were unable to provide care, three of the five families had other family members

who did so. Family caregivers included grandparents, aunts, sister to a parent, and even a

great grandparent. The paternal grandmother provided childcare for the Douglas family

while parents worked. The Roberts and Beck children were in childcare when parents

occasionally worked.

All parents said they actively engaged in playing with their children. Three of five

families had play partners outside of related family members. Children in three families

regularly played with cousins and grandparents. Two of the families had other children to

play with while in childcare; one child played with others while at church. The Andrews

and Roberts children primarily played with their siblings and parents. The Andrews

mother stated a desire to find opportunities for more socialization for their children. They

had the benefit of each other, being triplets, but she wanted a broader social context for

them. The Douglas family mother had friends with children of a similar age to her son;

she hoped that with summer ahead they would get together more often.

Three of the five families had regular contact with others outside their family home. The Andrews family had regular contact with a sibling of the mother, but seldom visited with other family members or friends. The Beck family mother consistently said no to questions about possible family or friends to visit.

Parent View of Activities Supporting Emergent Literacy

I asked parents what sorts of activities they thought were important to develop literacy skills, whether in their family home or outside of it. They varied in the ideas of activities that support these skills. Two parents had not considered any connections between literacy development and activities other than reading. The Douglas mother said, "I mean I guess I really haven't thought about it. There is nothing I have that thought like, okay we got to do this to help that." (personal communication, April, 2014). Mother Beck had a fairly traditional view, "when they color, draw, when she picks up a book and looks at it." (personal communication, June, 2014). Mothers from the Roberts and Leon family said that some sort of social interaction played a part. "…interact with kids, all different levels in some sort of daycare most definitely so he will be able to learn how to share. And then learn from somebody else." (Leon family, personal communication, July, 2014). The Roberts family mother added a list of activities to the social interactions,

> …reading stories' game playing. Group activities play if there are other kids to play with. What's that game, four square…you bounce the ball and you name colors and you have to do it fast in a circle? That's a game with literacy. Flashcards and words out there, …categories and stuff like that. …there's lots of options out there. TV, looking at pictures even. Just sit outside and look at the clouds, you know, and that's literacy. Watch the sailboats sail. (personal

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communication, April, 2014)

Several parents mentioned the use of television. The television was on during my visit with two families. One family saw it as related to literacy because they used it primarily for the science or history channel and used closed captioning as a visual cue. One mother considered it a source of language development for her child and believed her child learned Spanish by watching it; they often played videos while the child slept so he could learn subliminally. She considered television supportive of literacy development, "…on the TV we watch a lot of like Superwhy… and that's where you have words… flying out words.. and I'll read the words out loud to him as they are spelling them out with the TV show." (Roberts Mother, personal communication, April, 2014). Another said her child was attracted to the music and colors on television and they occasionally played a movie as the child slept although they took care not to watch television too often. The Douglas family mother stated that she turned off the television when reading to her child because it distracted his attention.

Trips Outside the Family Home

When asked what places families went to with their child(ren), I found that most children went places outside their home with parents. Two families said they went to church together. The Andrews family said they did not go many places other than church. The mother wanted to go out more, but the father disagreed due to having three children to prepare to go out in the winter and a lack of money for gas or train fare. Most families stated they took trips to see family members including grandparents, did shopping of all sorts, and went to the park. One mother stated that while she shopped with her children, they did not do it often due to lack of financial resources. However, she did go out with

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her children every day. Two parents said they went to the zoo. I followed up by asking if there were other places they wanted to go with their children in the future. Two families said museums; the children's museum, science museum, and history center as well as museums in other cities if they traveled were the ones stated. The farmer's market was another place the Andrews family wanted to go.

Access to Writing Materials

The parents I asked about their child(ren)'s access to writing materials all stated their children used some sort of writing materials with supervision. Three of four stated independent use would come when the children were mature enough to manage this activity and keep their writing and drawing on the paper. One parent described how her child colored on her television on one occasion so she provided coloring books after that. Two families described their children's use of the writing materials as scribbling The Roberts mother went on to state that the child named shapes in the scribbles and was excited to offer the opportunity for him to write on lined paper,

> …the lines and the dots in the middle? Whatever lined paper is what they call it, and I wanted to buy some, 'cause I'm like let's just start writing! Let's just start writing on the lines and figure out the lines and how to write in between the lines, and just do a line. … and I'm thinking ahead like we're not quite there yet but we can try, who knows? (personal communication, April, 2014)

The Leon mother stated, "He likes to scribble. I think in his mind that is helping to develop something. You know because usually that would turn into letters and then into words, so we just let him scribble away." (personal communication, July, 2014).

His use of writing materials appeared to be unrestricted; this was a family where

mother and uncle had written books. The grandmother of the Douglas child did a lot of crafting and the household contained numerous supplies for both writing and materials to use them on.

Reading in the Home

I asked families what they had to read in their family home. All families mentioned children's books and four of five also had reading materials for the adults. One parent stated that she personally did not read and had nothing other than children's books in the home. The genres of books in family homes included informational books, poetry, novels, memoirs, history books, textbooks, magazines, cookbooks, and a type of atlas. I followed up by asking if there were other items in the house with words other than books. Items named included signs, quotations, picture frames, food containers, computers and tablets, calendars, magnets, bills in the mail, and stickers on containers. Four of five listed multiple items; one parent could not think of anything in the home that had letters or words other than those in books. In follow up questions, I asked one parent about words on food labels and she stopped to exclaim, "You're blowing my mind here!"

Verbal Communication

I divided the data on verbal communication in the family into two subsections. One is the parents' descriptions of the oral communication of the parents in the home with each other as well as with their child(ren). It also includes lists the types of verbal interactions between child and parent. The second subsection describes the oral language use of the child(ren), including their expressive vocabulary.

Parents. I asked parents a variety of questions related to oral language. All parents said they had verbal interactions with their children. Three families specifically

stated that they do not use baby talk; one parent said she used "regular words" All five

families sang traditional early childhood songs with their children; one family also sang

tunes the parents enjoyed. Three of five families added dancing to their singing at times.

Four of the families described parent-child communication as conversational and

responsive. Examples of the types of things parents said to children were when they:

- Described the activity of the moment, for example, "Okay I'm going to put you in your car seat now. We're putting you in your car seat and we are going to Target." (Douglas Mother, personal communication, April, 2014).

- Named items in response to the child's questions about the world such as, 'What's that?'

- Responded to their pre-verbal child's vocalizations

- Sang songs

One family used some sign language to communicate with their children as well

as oral language. The mother in the Leon family described what she did as "we tell him

stories all the time" (personal communication, July, 2014), however her example was "As

we walk up and down the stairs we'll count, or we'll just.. I don't know we are very

talkative." (personal communication, July, 2014)

The Douglas family mother said she told her child about her day as if it were a

story. The mother in the Roberts family told stories to other children in the past but had

not yet started with her own children. She did not believe they were developmentally

ready for them.

All of the parents described verbal communication in the home as typically being

conversational in tone; at times there were disagreements between the adults that

involved raised voices, but there were typically no verbal arguments in the home. Directive statements occurred more at times such as bedtime. When children behaved contrary to parental directions, all parents indicated they told the child "no" in a firmer tone. One parent sat a child down and had a conversation about what was wrong with the behavior. One parent said the child might get a spanking, but also told me she used sounds to reinforce messages when the child did not immediately obey the directive, such as turning on the water as a sound reinforcement of the words stating that it was bath time.

All families believed there were consistent communication patterns between children and the adults in their world. There were different personalities within families, and conversations themselves varied by the individuals involved. All adults regularly communicated with their children.

Children. I asked parents how many words their child(ren) had, how they learned new words, and how they communicated their needs to parents. All five families had children with limited vocabulary. All five told me they understood their child's communication by sound, such as different types of cries, or by the context of the communication such when they gestured, pointed or reached for an item. Three families responded to approximations of words as their child developed a vocabulary. Only one family had a child who communicated well enough verbally to make his needs known or ask questions. She gave an example of a verbal exchange between her and the child on a car ride.

> It's all exploratory stuff, like 'What's this?' 'What's that mom?' … 'What's
> that?' – Tree – 'Oh tree'. He does this face, 'What's that?' That's traffic.

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'Traffic?' Yeah, traffic. Lots of cars are on the road. That's what traffic is. So I

will explain to him. Like the other day we were driving down the road and he was

like 'Lots of cars, traffic'. Wow! I'm like yeah, lots of cars that's traffic (Roberts

Mother, personal communication, April, 2014).

All families displayed an awareness of modeling language for their children and

stated that their child learned language by listening and imitating parental vocalization as

well as those of other adults with whom they were in regular contact.The Leon mother

told me she noticed her son looking at people's mouths when they spoke to him; she

believed that was part of how he learned new words. The Roberts family mother told me

that at times she taught her child words by isolating sounds and asked him to watch her

mouth and repeat them.

Household Tasks and Imitation

I inquired whether children participated in daily household tasks and whether the

children imitated any of these actions in their play. The children in these families were all

young and only the Beck mother said her child participated actively in household tasks.

Three parents said their child accompanied them to do laundry and watched while parents

washed dishes. The Roberts mother stated she had a concern for safety and that was why

he was not included in helping with tasks. All parents expressed a willingness to have

children assist them in the future. Three parents indicated that their child was too young

to imitate any parent behaviors in their play. The Roberts and Leon mothers said they

observed their children imitating parent actions. For example, the Roberts child wanted to

use the broom to sweep and the Leon parent observed multiple imitation behaviors such

as reading, writing, cooking, dressing, playing with the game controller, talking on a

phone, using the television remote, or combing hair.

Selecting Family Toys

I asked parents where they obtained toys and the criteria used to decide which toys to procure. All five families told me they looked for toys that had learning elements to them. Three families included looking for items developmentally appropriate for their child(ren) and two families stated they tried to match toys to their child's interests. Four of five families said that many of their children's toys were hand-me-downs from either friends or family members, or gifts to the children. The Roberts mother told me that when there was something in particular that she wanted for a child she mentioned it to family members and then generally received it as a gift. One family said they planned future purchases to save for them and another said most purchases were impulse buys and she gave up something she wanted in order to buy it. Parents procured toys from several places. One family had learned to make homemade toys from a public health nurse who visited. The mother in the Roberts family told me she discovered a more affluent neighborhood where good toys tended to be put out in the trash; going there on trash day resulted in several good 'finds'. Other places mentioned included discount stores, thrift stores, garage sales, and online sales.

Toys Parents Believed Support Literacy

I asked parents which toys they believed supported developing literacy skills. All five families named toys that had letters or the alphabet. All parents also named toys with musical elements including singing, and those that talk. Four families described toys that interacted in some way with the child. Other toys named by parents included those with numbers, colors, shapes, sensory development, memory, animal sounds, and those that

encouraged the child to speak such as the toy telephone. One parent included a toy that taught color names in multiple languages. One parent saw literacy connections in almost all activities and toys, primarily through the verbal language heard and spoken. Table 2 lists some of the aspects of toys that parents believed supported literacy and which families had them.

Table 2
Aspects of toys parents believe support literacy

	Andrews	Douglas	Roberts	Beck	Leon
Alphabet	x	x	x	x	x
Music	x	x	x	x	x
Toy Talks	x	x	x	x	x
Interactive	x	x	x		x
Numbers		x	x		x
Colors		x	x		
Shapes			x	x	
Encourages speaking			x		x
Memory			x		
Sensory					x
Animal Sounds		x			
Multiple languages		x			

As a follow up question to the Roberts mother, I asked why she thought the toys she named supported literacy. Her response was,

Well, everything that is being thrown at you is being applied to daily life and activities. So like him watching the Diego video, he's learning words, hearing someone else talk to him, explaining while they're opening you know the process of what they are doing. So I just feel like literacy doesn't necessarily have to be

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written down. It can be verbal, it can be in pictures and so he's watching, and he's listening, and he's looking at the words at the same time. It's all being thrown at him. Scattering in his mind, you know, however the brain works in processing all that stuff. (personal communication, April, 2014)

Toy Storage and Play

I asked parents where they kept the child(ren)'s toys and who decided what was used for play. Two families told me that toys were in toy boxes; two families kept some toys in the child's bedroom and in the living room and one family stored toys primarily on shelves in the bedroom. Children from all five families chose what to play with most of the time. The Andrews family took out some toys and then allowed children choices. The Douglas family child chose himself while being cared for by grandparents during the day; when at home, the parents decided due to lack of space for toy play and storage. As stated earlier, playmates tended to be cousins, siblings, or adult relatives.

<div align="center">

My Observation of Toys

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All of the families I visited had multiple toys available for children to play with. The toys were age appropriate and supported all domains of child development. Toys to support large motor development included push and riding items. Fine motor development support materials included shape sorters, bead maze, activity centers and toys with buttons to push. Cognitive concepts of color, texture, sound, music, and vocabulary development were an element in multiple items. Toys that encouraged imaginative play included items such as dolls, kitchen sets, a tent and props. Comfort toys to assist in emotional regulation included a number of soft, stuffed toys. All five families had multiple children's books, at least one electronic learning toy, and several

open ended items. Materials in all five homes were numerous and of high quality. Items

that were in at least three of the four of the homes I visited are in noted in Table 3.

Table 3
Similar Toys in Participant Families

Andrews Family	Roberts Family	Beck Family	Leon Family
Balls (multiple sizes and colors)	Balls (multiple sizes, colors, and themed) includes 2 different sized basketballs	Basketball	
Books: board, cloth, paper. Some with multiple languages	Books (basket and bin full; multiple types- cloth, board, paper)	Books (stored in bins; multiple types: board, cloth, multiple genre)	Books (multiple)
Stuffed Animals: 2 snakes, 2 bears, multiple unidentifiable	Stuffed animals (multiple)	Stuffed toys (multiple)	Stuffed animals/dolls on bed
Toys with technology: Sit to Stand Learning Walker; flashlight	Toys with technology: Crazy Legs Learning Bugs™; 3-in-1 Smart Wheels	Toys with technology: Sit-to-Stand Learning Walker; Explore and Learn Helicopter™; Catch-Me-Kitty®	Toys with technology: Sit-to-Stand Learning Walker
Alphabet floor tiles and alphabet/word cards in container	Alphabet poster	Clothesline of alphabet cards	
Assorted unidentified toys stored in containers	Assorted unidentified toys stored in containers	Assorted unidentified toys stored in containers	Assorted unidentified toys stored in containers

Results of IT-HOME

While visiting four families in their home, I completed the IT-HOME

environmental survey. The items scored for the Douglas came from our conversation

only. Because there was not a home visit not all items could be scored resulting in

incomplete data for the Douglas family. Table 4 shows the IT-HOME Inventory

Summary Sheet with the possible and median scores provided in the Home Inventory

Administration Manual (Caldwell & Bradley, n.d.) along with family scores. Descriptions

of what is included in each subscale was included in Chapter Three of this paper.

Table 4
IT- HOME Inventory Summary Sheet

Subscale	Possible Score	Median	Andrews	Douglas *	Roberts	Beck	Leon
Responsivity	11	9	8	1	10	2	10
Acceptance	8	6	8	2	7	6	6
Organization	6	5	3	5	6	4	5
Learning Materials	9	7	9	4	8	8	8
Involvement	6	4	5	5	6	2	3
Variety	5	3	3	4	5	3	4
Total Score	45	32	36	21	42	25	36

Shaded area represents Subscales, Possible scores, and Median scores provided in Home
Inventory Administration Manual by Caldwell and Bradley n.d.

* Data for the Douglas family is incomplete; conversation only, no home visit

Three of five families exceeded the total median score provided by the IT-HOME

(Caldwell & Bradey, n.d.). One of the families scoring below the median was the

Douglas family where there was no home visit. The other family with a low score was the

Beck family who had only one subscale scored above the median. All five families rated

higher than the median on the Variety subscale. The four families I visited had a higher

than median score for Learning Materials and the Douglas family scored nearly half of the possible points just based on our conversations. Three of five families scored at or above the median on Acceptance, Organization, and Involvement subscales.

Chapter Five: Discussion and Implications

In Chapter One I stated my intent to use a strength-model lens to ascertain human, material, and experiential resources supporting emergent literacy that were present in some low-income family homes. Through conversations with parents I sought to identify resources already present in homes, and low or no-cost activities and opportunities to support emergent literacy regardless of family income.

Consistent with the strengths approach, in this chapter I first describe the assets I saw present in each family based on my conversation with the parents. A discussion of the IT-HOME results follows this. Then, I present the themes that emerged from the conversations with participant parents, include commonalities and divergent viewpoints as they surfaced, and offer my perceptions on the ways these emergent themes intersect with young children's emerging literacy.

Following the presentation of the thematic analysis, I offer my responses, gleaned from the data, to the stated research questions. I then propose ways the data I collected can inform strength-based emergent literacy teaching practices of teachers currently working with young children and families as well as faculty who educate future early childhood professionals. Finally, I identify limitations of the current study and provide suggestions for future research.

Participant Family Strengths

You may recall that earlier I described the work of Green et al. (2004) who designed an assessment measure that evaluated whether parents receiving program services believed their family plan implemented family strengths. Of the criteria they identified, one was whether parents believed that service providers supported what family

members saw as family strengths, and then encouraged them to approach problem solving by implementing those strengths. In order to provide such support, the service provider, or in the case of this research study the early childhood professional, needs to recognize those family assets. In the following section, I share the strengths I recognized in each participant family based on the conversation I had with them.

Andrews Family Strengths

There were several strengths revealed in this conversation. The father spoke of childhood memories and the influence they had on his parenting practices. He wanted similar experiences with his children that he had in his childhood such as active exploration in museums. The parents took their daughters to a children's museum for their first birthday, which showed implementation of memory experiences rather than simple reminiscence. He remembered his father reading technical materials to him rather than stories, and believed that might be why he read his textbooks to his children even though he had not yet started to read storybooks. The mother wanted to create shared activities although she did not recall many in her childhood. Her specific ideas included descriptive walks and more interactions with others. The parents recognized that their use of a message board in the family home showed that written words were a form of communication. While storybooks were not yet a part of their daily routine, they often sang and danced together. The mother created homemade toys of materials found in the home after learning the skill from a visiting public health nurse; this indicated a willingness to take the ideas of others and implement them. The parents exhibited positive interactions with their children who were sick at the time of the interview.

Douglas Family Strengths

The mother in this family was open to possibilities. She was optimistic and positive in affect and conversation. She considered our conversation and began to think of changes she could make to enrich her son's emerging literacy skills, such as re-arranging the living space to allow the child access to books rather than storing them out of reach. The opportunity for creative fine motor activities that included writing utensils was a particular strength. She used descriptive language in family activities and narrated connections between books and real-life events for her child. This mother read a book to me and her voice intonation and volume was evidence of engaging shared reading experiences. She had a specific plan to increase socialization for herself and her son through meetings with friends with young children. An additional strength was her expectation for her child's future reading and had committed to being a strong role model and supporting the development of his literacy skills.

Roberts Family Strengths

Two particular strengths I identified in this family were the mother's childhood reading experiences and her commitment to play. She had high expectations for her children's future in reading and was committed to supporting emergent literacy skills in order for them to experience reading success without the struggles she had as a child. She understood the feeling of failure as a child and worked to provide positive enriching activities for her children. She wanted reading to be fun rather than work. The mother not only provided opportunities for dramatic play but also encouraged it and engaged in imaginative play with the children. She recognized that the opportunity for language use in dramatic play was significant and planned for it accordingly.

Beck Family Strengths

The mother in this family engaged her young child in household tasks and clearly saw her daughter as a competent person. She was responsive and understood her girls' verbalizations to meet their needs. While she described herself as a non-reader, she read to her children at least once a day. The children had a large container filled with children's books. Even though they had just moved to this home in the previous days, the home was fairly organized and the girls' playroom was functional.

Leon Family Strengths

One strength of this family was the extended family. Many relatives read stories to the child and also provided toys. The mother exhibited creativity in adding sounds to directives to engage the child's attention and cooperation rather than responding in a punitive manner if he did not obey immediately. She encouraged activities such as writing and saw his current scribbles as turning into letters and words. She said several times that it was important for her to be a good role model for him in many ways especially letting him see her read, write, and use appropriate language. She had high expectations for his future reading habits.

IT-HOME Survey

Data from the IT-HOME inventory supplemented my findings from the conversations with parents. Because participant families were low income, below median scores were expected. Contrary to that expectation, scores on the IT-HOME inventory were higher than anticipated for most families. Explanations for lower scores in some subscales of the Andrews family included the children's ill health on the day I visited, and the fact that there were one-year-old triplets in this family, which is not a norm and

presented unique challenges. There was not a home visit to the Douglas family, thus the low overall score there. Families identified some areas they would like to improve as we conversed such as increased social contacts for their children and potential trips they wanted to take with them.

   While conversing with one mother, I recognized a lack of social interaction with family or friends and wondered about the impact of that situation on the family. When scoring the IT-HOME there were lower scores in the subscales of Responsivity, where the checklist items related to positive interpersonal exchanges, and Organization that included a variety of activities outside the family home. I had difficulty engaging this mother in conversation, perhaps because it was a very hot evening and there was only a fan to move the air. The family had just finished moving in to their current home and that is tiring and stressful for most. The mother's speech was not always clear, there was little affect, and no interaction between the mother and children while I was present. There were no signs of affection for the children and my field notes included the observation that the older child needed attention concerning personal hygiene. If I were an early childhood professional interacting with this family as part of a parenting program, I would consider the possibility that the lower IT-HOME scores were related to the limited social interactions this family had. A follow up conversation would help determine if this were a problem to address or if the timing of our meeting on a hot day while they were still settling in to their new home influenced our conversation and thus the results. The Organization score for this family was a bit low because the family took limited excursions outside the home. The mother had limited contact with others other outside of the time when she was working. As an early childhood professional I would attempt to

learn more about why the family seldom left their home for activities or social interactions. The family's Involvement score was also low. The children were in view during our conversation, but the mother did not visually check in with them. Based on the conversation I had with the mother, there was a lack of parent engagement and structure in child playtimes. She said the toys were available to the children but did not convey any information about playing with them. She also said she never planned activities for them. During our discussion I saw no signs that the mother encouraged any specific developmental advances.

Across my whole group of participants, even though in some instances a few IT-HOME elements were lacking, the parent(s) offered reasons for the missing elements in our conversations. I considered the recognition of family needs and making plans to meet them as a family strength. Knowing that parents recognize obstacles that prevent them from engaging in desired activities creates the opportunity for an early childhood professional to problem solve possibilities with the family. For example, an early childhood professional might help the family discover places within walking distance if there were no car or money for gas or other transportation. On the other hand, if the cost of activities nearby was prohibitive, an early childhood professional might help the parents find free activities.

<center>**Emergent Themes from Conversations**</center>

In this section I describe the topics covered in the parent conversations and the commonalities and divergent ideas that emerged from participant responses. Each topic listed includes a brief description of the question(s) that elicited the responses, my understanding of essential elements of parental views, and my interpretation of the way

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the parental view potentially impacts their young child's emerging literacy.

Parental ideas about literacy practices

The first question I asked parents was what it meant to them when I said I was interested in the literacy practices in their family. Later in the conversation we talked about toys and activities that supported literacy. The following information is inclusive of all references to literacy practices.

Commonalities. While there was no consistent parental description of what literacy practices were, all six parents used the term r*eading* at multiple points in our conversation. A second thematic idea was *words* which could be oral or written. For one parent literacy was simply "reading" (Douglas Mother, personal communication, April, 2014) and for another the description encompassed an entire process, "The ability … to read the written word and to comprehend … the meaning behind the written word and make judgments based off of what they have read." (Andrews Father, personal communication, March, 2014). Only one parent viewed literacy as a broad concept inclusive of "anything that has to do with words" and "…literacy doesn't necessarily have to be written down. It can be verbal, it can be in pictures … ." (Roberts Mother, personal communication, April, 2014). Parents considered literacy related to educational or learning toys, such as those with the alphabet, shapes, or colors and educational places such as museums. Only one parent named places, materials, and activities both in and outside of the family home that support emerging literacy skills.

Impact on emergent literacy. It is important to begin with the practice of developing common definitions of terms when speaking with parents or students about literacy. While one parent described literacy as reading, another parent said "…except

babies this little don't read." (Andrews Mother, personal communication, March, 2014) thus literacy activities might be considered as what a child can do independently rather than interactions with the other people and materials in the microsystem. A parent who described my interest as being the environment later described wanting toys that taught something. In that case, literacy required the right materials rather than human resources. The parental view provides the parameters of what is considered a literacy experience. If this view is confined to 'reading', it is less likely the parent will scaffold the multiple other aspects of emergent literacy that lead to traditional reading, writing, speaking, and listening without extending the concept of literacy to be more inclusive.

Parental Memories of Childhood Literacy Experiences

I asked parents about their memories of someone reading to them as a child. At times, they offered additional literacy related memories as we spoke. If parents had no recollection of such events, I asked if there were things they wanted to do with their child because either they had done them as a child or because they wished they had those experiences with their parent.

Commonalities. What emerged from the parental memory aspects of the conversations was not a particular shared experience, but the influence of childhood memories, or lack of them, on current parenting practices. This idea held for both positive and negative experiences. For example, a participant recalled his father reading technical manuals to him and had currently read his homework aloud to his children rather than stories. He also recalled multiple experiences in museums as a child and expressed a desire to share similar activities with his girls. Another parent described traumatic experiences including being teased for her inability to read. These memories influenced

her to approach literacy experiences in natural ways and recognized the need for her to be flexible yet firm if one of her children experienced any reading difficulties "I don't want them to have those experiences." (Roberts Mother, personal communication, April, 2014). A third parent recalled a lot of time watching television as a child and limited that activity for her son.

Impact on emergent literacy. I did not expect parents to make specific connections between their childhood memories of literacy experiences and their parenting practices. What I heard was that parents wanted good literacy experiences for their children regardless of their personal history. The Andrews family father stated he wanted to engage in similar experiences with his children because he enjoyed them and attributed his intellectual capabilities to those activities. The Roberts family mother was motivated to create fun and positive activities for her children so they would not experience the negative feelings of failure. The Douglas mother encouraged the father to read his childhood favorite books to their child because it was enjoyable to share a fun experience in reading.

In this case, the parental view had a significant impact on the literacy practices in the family. Choices about what activities to participate in, as well as the affective factors present in these interactions, were determined by the parent's desire to either repeat or change behaviors in order for the child's experience to be pleasant and enjoyable.

These parental viewpoints are consistent with a review of the literature by Baker et al. (1997) who looked at motivational factors that come from a child's home. They identified the activities engaged in to support their child learning literacy in one of three ways: as entertainment, to learn a set of skills, or as an integrated part of daily life. They

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also described parent diaries that relayed parents' intent to make reading enjoyable so that children would think positively about the experience and want to continue to read for pleasure themselves later in life. Based on this research, the parents' desire to make literacy experiences pleasurable for their child would increase the chances that their child will view literacy in a positive way and continue to be engaged with the process.

Parental Reading Expectations for Their Children

This theme came primarily from the answer to one question I asked wondering what parental expectations were for their children related to literacy and reading.

Commonalities. The theme that emerged here was that parents had a strong expectation for daily reading by children when they were old enough to read independently; two parents included a desire for their child to enjoy reading. Two parents envisioned long-term reading strength of their child that assisted them in future endeavors leading to overall academic success. Parents planned to support their children in achieving these reading goals. Two parents referred to the importance of being a role-model and one said "… I hope that I raise him to where he wants to do that… ."

Impact on emergent literacy. The impact of this parental viewpoint on emerging literacy skills seems clear. One potential long-term effect for low-income families viewed from a deficit perspective was described in Chapter Two as resulting in lower expectations for academic achievement for the child or parents. As a result of the lowered expectations, the child was likely to be in the lowest-performing group. The parents I spoke with not only cared about learning and practicing reading skills, they stated a commitment to support their child in these endeavors by reading to them and serving as a role model. As noted in the previous question, the parent commitment to enjoyable

literacy experiences likely enhances the child's engagement in the future.

Shared Reading Experiences

When I talked with parents about shared reading experiences we covered topics such as when parents began reading to their children, who initiated the experience, who read to the child, and whether the child appeared to be engaged in the shared reading experiences. I also asked if parents read the words of the text or the illustrations.

Commonalities. Several themes emerged relating to the topic of shared reading experiences. I discovered that daily reading occurred in five of six families and began by six months of age; one parent started to read to her child in utero. Some children had multiple adults who read to them and had several reading times each day. There was active engagement by children in shared reading times. Descriptions of engagement included eye contact, assistance in page turning, opening and closing the book, and sustained attention. Most parents read the words and used illustrations in limited ways. One parent stated that she told the story from the illustrations when she did not want to read all the words. Another parent occasionally used the illustrations to assist her child in understanding the text. Close contact during reading was a theme. Children often sat on their parent's lap for reading. The mother in the Douglas family said sitting in her lap allowed her child to see what the mother was seeing. Three parents read books to their children that they had enjoyed in their childhood. Children in three families initiated the reading process by bringing a book to the parent. One child was just crawling and did not have independent access to books yet.

Impact on emergent literacy. Several findings in the literature correlate children's potential future success in reading with shared reading experiences. The

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participant families read to their children daily and Westerlund and Lagerberg (2008) found an association between significant vocabulary growth and shared reading if it took place at least six times per week. Additionally, Wells (1985) described the positive correlation between teacher ratings of children's oral language and reading comprehension in kindergarten and second grade, and how often someone in the home read stories to the child between the ages of one and three years. Bus et al. (1995) stated the importance of shared book reading in order for books to be fully accessible to children; mere contact with books was not enough for children to experience significant growth in vocabulary or literacy skills.

Communication

While my question to parents was about oral language, the topic expanded to include other forms of communication such as gestures or approximations of words.

Commonalities. All of the parents described verbal communication in the home as typically being conversational in tone. At times participants described disagreements between the adults that involved raised voices, but they shared that there was typically no verbal arguing in the home. Families believed that there were consistent communication patterns among children and the adults in their world.

Several elements of communication were common among the families. One theme was parental responsiveness to their child's word approximations, gestures, or vocalizations. I observed several indicators of nurturing relationships such as hugs and kisses, conversational tones, and inquiries of child's well-being during home visits with participant families.

Another theme was the belief that vocabulary learning came from intentional

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teaching or hearing the conversations of others with whom they were in regular contact. Parents identified two strategies for teaching words. One was naming unfamiliar objects. The second was repetition of new words and asking the child to say them after hearing the parent. One parent assisted in pronunciation by breaking words down into individual sounds. Participant parents used oral language to respond to infant vocalizations, described actions, responded to children's questions and named unfamiliar objects. All families sang with their children and three added dancing while they sang.

Impact on emergent literacy. Literacy involves reading, writing, listening, and speaking. Oral language and vocabulary are aspects of these literacy skills as foundational for recognizing words when they are encountered in written form, comprehension as the child has a mental image of the word meaning, and writing as the child learns to associate sounds with representative letters. Receptive and expressive language skills increase the child's ability to express their needs and understand the world. As parents respond to their children, label new objects, encourage language, use language in multiple ways such as describing, naming, singing, chanting and reading they are supporting language development through interpersonal, responsive care and interactions in ways that research indicate is supportive of brain and language development (Healy, 1994; Tamis-LeMonda et al., 2001; Dehaene-Lambertz et al., 2008). Family environments with primarily conversational tones will not have the additional stress level associated with verbal or physical conflict. Less stressful environments are more conducive to development.

Types of Toys Parents Think Support Developing Literacy Skills

My conversation with parents included several topics related to toys. Described

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here is the parental view of which toys support emerging literacy skills.

Commonalities. Parents viewed toys that supported literacy skills as 'educational.' They described the toys that supported literacy development as those that sing, speak, teach letters, colors, numbers, shapes, and words as well as those that talked and 'interacted' in response to an action of the child. High technology toys all had one or more of these aspects and all families had at least one of them. While parents considered some toys as supporting emergent literacy, not all toys provided such learning opportunities. For one family, educational toys supported literacy and other toys were just for play, "…there are some toys that are helping in that way; there are some you know he won't learn anything from."

Impact on emergent literacy. Considering only 'educational toys' as providing support for emergent literacy limits opportunities for language development as well as the related cognitive skills associated with manipulating objects and describing the ways the toys could be used. While some toys may be more conducive to teaching and learning some concepts, any toy can provide an opportunity to use descriptive words and interpersonal interactions between a child and parent, or child to child.

Selecting and Obtaining Children's Toys

As the conversation about toys continued, we discussed how parents made decisions about which toys to purchase for their child(ren). That led to where they shopped, or other ways they obtained toys.

Commonalities. The primary theme in toy selection was that the toy must include learning elements. Parents also found developmental appropriateness and consistency with the child's interests to be important factors in toy selection. A main source for

obtaining children's toys was family and friends who gave them the toys their children no longer used. Three parents said they purchased toys from thrift stores or Goodwill. One parent discovered an affluent neighborhood where good toys were out in the trash; going there on trash day resulted in several good 'finds.' Another family learned to make homemade toys from a public health nurse.

All of the families I visited had multiple toys available for children to play with. The toys present in these homes were age appropriate and supported the physical and cognitive development of children as well as their imaginative play. Many of the items helped develop cognitive concepts such as color, texture, sound, music, and vocabulary development. There were high-quality materials in all homes. I saw open-ended items to use in multiple ways. Stuffed animals were common in all four homes. All families indicated that their children had an interest in the lights and sounds of toys; two families mentioned having Leap Frog toys. Every family had at least one electronic-learning toy.

Impact on emergent literacy. All families had books, soft cuddly items, many children's books, props for dramatic play, items to develop both large and small motor skills as well as toys to develop cognitive skills. Children's development takes place through play. It is the play experience that allows them opportunities to problem solve, move, observe, explore, describe, develop interpersonal skills and self-regulation skills. Even infants have the opportunity to move, vocalize, and problem solve in their play!

These activities all contribute to emerging literacy skills such as fine motor skills later used in writing, experiences of all sorts to think about, plan, describe, and maybe even write or illustrate a story about.

Places and Activities Parents Think Support Developing Literacy Skills

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Another aspect of our conversation involved places and activities that parents participated in with their child(ren). This included special places outside their home as well as family errands or visits to others. I asked parents which of those places or activities they believed supported their children's literacy skills.

Commonalities. Zoos and museums were the places parents identified as supporting literacy skills. These places were consistent with the idea that there was a need for educational features in order for literacy to be supported. Although most children went along on errands, shopping, or to church, parents did not name these activities as aiding in emerging literacy. Some children observed or participated at times in regular household tasks, although no parents connected those experiences to their child's dramatic play possibilities. No parent spoke of going to a library.

While I expected the activities named as supportive of developing literacy skills to include looking at books, reading with their children, and coloring and drawing, these were not consistent responses. Two parents said reading was an activity that supported literacy, one included coloring. Other activities mentioned were playing with games or flashcards, coloring, watching television, and looking at pictures. Answers from two parents represented opposite sides of a continuum. One parent considered multiple options and saw connections to learning and literacy in nearly everything she did with her children including observing and talking about everyday things such as clouds in the sky or sailboats (Roberts Mother, personal communication, April, 2014). The other parent said, "I don't know. I mean I guess I really haven't thought about it. There is nothing I have that thought like okay we've got to do this to help that." (Douglas Mother, personal communication, April, 2014).

Impact on emergent literacy. Parents did recognize a few places that likely supported their child's literacy development, although they were clearly 'educational or learning' places. A broad array of experiences both within and outside of the home provide opportunities for vocabulary development as well as listening skills for the sounds in the environment and potentially creating categories of sounds such as bird song along with the similarities and differences in those songs.

Families that allowed child participation in household tasks noticed that their children included behaviors such as reading, writing, cooking, dressing, playing with the game controller, using the television remote, or combing hair in their imaginative play. Dramatic play generates conversation as well as reinforcing comprehension of abstract concepts learned as a result of actions. For example, a child cannot see 'around' but can learn what it means to walk around a table. Possibilities develop over time for more complex imaginative play that may include writing signs, drawing pictures, or labeling items which involves both writing the label and reading what was written. There is a range of emergent literacy skills.

Access to Writing Materials

I asked parents if their child(ren) had access to writing materials and how they were used. Some parents elaborated a bit on this topic.

Commonalities. The theme of this topic was supervised access. Most children had access to some sort of writing materials to use with supervision. Four of five families said their children currently had supervised access and that independent use would come when the children were mature enough to manage this activity and keep their writing and drawing on the paper. Two families described their children's use of the writing materials

as scribbling. The Roberts mother said her child named shapes in his scribbles; the Leon family mother stated "He likes to scribble. I think in his mind that is helping to develop something. You know because usually that would turn into letters and then into words, so we just let him scribble away." (personal communication, July, 2014).

Impact on emergent literacy. The availability of writing or art tools are a strong support for developing literacy skills. The reading and writing processes are connected as children use invented spelling to write their ideas before they have developed the phonetic skills needed for actual spelling (Chomsky, 2001; Read, 1971). They then read what they have written, again by using the skills to read, rather than write, the message. The parent comments are consistent with Marie Clay's (1966, 1972) description of the emerging nature of writing as a literacy skill. The use of items such as paint brushes, markers, or chalk strengthen the fine motor skills used for writing. Eye-hand coordination and hand strength develop in activities such as cutting with scissors and playing with clay or playdough.

Things in the Home to Read

Having talked about toys, activities, and places that might support developing literacy skills, I asked parents what they had in their home to read. After they answered that, I asked if there were other items in the home with letters or words that they had not thought of when I asked about things to read.

Commonalities. The theme of items in the house to read was books, in particular children's books, as well as books for adults in the home. Reading materials included multiple genres such as informational books, poetry, novels, and textbooks. One parent stated that she personally did not read and had nothing other than children's books in the

home.

Broadening the scope to items in the home that were not books but that included words, answers came slower and were limited; four of five families included picture frames. One parent was encouraged to continue thinking of items with words through additional questions. As she continued naming household items with words she commented, "You're blowing my mind here!" One parent said there was nothing else in the house with words.

Impact on emergent literacy. Parental answers in my study indicated that not only did families own books of multiple genres, they had already used poetry, information books, and maps to interact with their children. Research findings include the variations in verbal interactions with different genres of books and thus different literacy skills are influenced (Pellegrini & Galda, 2003; Price et al., 2009; Stadler & McEvoy, 2003). Families spoke of using informational texts rather than just storybooks. Price et al. (2009) stated that expository texts tend to generate more cognitively complex conversations and include twice as many verbalizations with more diverse vocabulary usage.

Research Proposal Questions

The following sections states the research questions addressed in this study and my findings for each one.

Question One

What do parents consider as human and material resources of their family that will support the literacy development of their young children?

Material resources that my participants considered supportive of literacy

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development included educational toys such as those that sing, speak, teach letters, colors, numbers, shapes, and words as well as those that talked and 'interacted' in response to an action of the child. All families provided access to writing materials and two parents in particular described the emerging nature of writing skills. Parents first response describing things to read was children's books.

Parents saw themselves as teaching their children language and did so through modeling. They also saw themselves as role models for children through their reading behaviors. Parents identified themselves and others as important for reading stories to children and most families had multiple family members who read to the children.

Parents included their children in most of the daily activities and some used those opportunities to extend vocabulary; they also recognized that during the child's imaginative play they imitated activities the parents had done. Parents considered taking their children to places such as a museum or zoo as sites that contributed to literacy development.

Question Two

What resources, both human and material, are present in the microsystem of the very young child which the literature typically includes as supportive of literacy development in young children?

In addition to the human and material resources listed by parents, I observed the following:

- responsive and interactive communication between parents and children
- parent responses to children's approximations of language
- visits to places outside the home other than educational sites

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- organization of the home environment in ways that facilitated the child's access to appropriate toys and materials

- all toys, not just 'educational' or 'learning' toys

- multiple book genres present in the home

- potential use of book illustrations to tell stories

Question Three

What resources, both human and material, are present in the microsystem of the very young child that may not be included in the literature yet that could be supportive of literacy development in young children?

While I have read about environmental print in the literature, it has typically been items easily recognized by children such as a stop sign or a fast food restaurant sign. Environmental print available to families also includes things such as street signs, license plates, and less familiar store signs. Print in the family home included mail, free newspapers or advertisements, food containers, toiletries, and the H signifying hot or C representing cold on water faucets.

The literature focuses little to no attention on the opportunities for developing emergent literacy skills within the everyday activities of families or the common items in the home and surrounding environments such as experiencing the life cycles of plants through weeds or plants in the garden, naming colors and shapes in the environment, or naming, counting, or describing furnishings, toys, walls, cars, busses, blankets, clothing, people, and so on. Every item has a name and description that will add to a child's vocabulary and comprehension. Considering the skills that rated as highly correlated to conventional reading skills by the NELP (2008), there is a plethora of free or low-cost

materials available to support development of those skills.

Implications for Early Childhood Professionals Working with Low-Income Families

Through the reflective process from analysis to suggestions to inform professional practice, it became clear to me that not only did I see the framework of Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems theory but the influence of the socio-cultural constructivist ideas of Vygotsky. My work with diverse, poor, multilingual and multicultural community college students provides multiple examples of the bi-directional influences between all of the systems as described by Bronfenbrenner. As an educator I also see the teaching and learning that come from students collaborating with each other, the development of a 'common language' related to early childhood practices, the light in a student's eyes when someone understands them or accepts a viewpoint different from their own, and the ways that student learning is scaffolded through me as the instructor as well as their experienced peers.

Vygotsky (1978) proposed that knowledge is constructed through language and interactions with others in a cultural setting with common experiences which support the development of mutual understanding. Young children develop language skills, both receptive and expressive, in a home microsystem of people and surroundings that spring from the cultural beliefs and traditions of their parents. Further, the interplay that Bronfenbrenner includes as critical in proximal processes mirrors to some extent Vygotsky's views of scaffolded learning in interactions with adults such as parents. In both perspectives the child is interacting along pathways that become more complex over time.

What follows implements theoretical perspectives described in this paper as they apply to implementation of a strength perspective, rather than an existing deficit approach, in working with college students, parents, and families. Included are the biases confronted, preconceptions that were either supported or altered, and ideas for working collaboratively with low-income families. What this study offers to early childhood professionals is the possibility of 'increasing the odds' of low-income student success by recognizing when a deficit view lowers their expectations as a teacher and working instead to develop a strength or asset perspective to see possibilities for alternative pathways to learning objectives.

What follows in this section are elements of early childhood professional practice I find integral in developing a strength-based approach to collaborate with parents in order to provide appropriate support for the emerging literacy skills of young children.

Shared Language

The first question I asked parents in our conversations was what they thought I meant when I said I wanted to talk about the literacy practices in their family. What I discovered was that there were multiple ideas that had some common elements but had many nuances that could present confusion or misunderstanding. In a deficit perspective, these differences of ideas could lead to a perception that one person (likely the parent) was wrong, while the other person (likely the early childhood professional) was correct. However, if I thought of literacy as a broad spectrum of activities, and parents viewed it as reading books, it does not mean that parents are wrong; rather, that it presents a particular foundation on which to build common ideas and understanding.

In Vygotsky's view this could be considered as creating a culture of literacy

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through the development of a common language to discuss the emergent literacy skills of young children. A collaborative partnership allows for both early childhood professional and parent to share knowledge and ideas and learn from each other. This collaboration could be viewed as proximal processes in which there is a bi-directional relationship, each entity both giving and receiving. It is likely also an example of scaffolding, first between parent and teacher as each assists the other in learning, and then between parent and child, or instructor and student.

Extending Knowledge Through Collaborative Practices

A significant element in a strength-based approach is being in the role of partner or collaborator rather than expert. It is important to recognize and confront expectations and be open to seeing differences as opportunity rather than obstacles. Collaboration allows for developing options rather than presenting pre-formed solutions to perceived problems.

I see this concept reflected in this research project. Similar to the work of Janes and Kermani (2001) who experienced collaborative efforts from research participants once the researchers listened and honored the cultural values of the participants, I informed potential participants that I was interested in what they were willing to share with me about their ideas related to literacy. I believe that because they understood I wanted to learn from them, rather than to tell them what to do or how to do it, I received access to their home, permission to observe them with their children, and even photograph the children's toys and play areas. I took the opportunity to tell a parent that I was not there to judge when she told me the children watched television more than they should. I also had an opportunity to empathize with difficult parenting experiences that

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affirmed that the parent was not the only one who attempted to manage misbehaviors.

The collaborative relationship allows both parents and the early childhood professional opportunities to scaffold current knowledge to expanded possibilities. For example, I know I want parents to read to their children and transform the shared reading experience from simple reading of the words to integrating the illustrations, developing vocabulary, and developing language and cognitive skills through dialog and distancing strategies, but if I simply tell a parent they need to do these things it is doubtful shared reading experiences will change. Instead, if I ask a parent how they view literacy and the response is book reading, I follow up by asking if there are favorite books, or types of books that they read. This creates opportunities for me to use my knowledge base to intersect with a parental practice and explore the ways parents might consider different genre of literature and broaden the scope of emerging literacy skills. If a favorite book has a kitten in the story, I ask the parent if they, or anyone they know, has a cat. The follow up might be a suggestion to ask their child that question as they read the book. Possible extensions include a broader question of who we know with cats or pets, and at some point making a written list of those pet owners. In this way I do not simply tell a parent what to do, but provide an experience for them that they could later incorporate with their child.

This practice implements the social constructivist tenet of knowledge being socially constructed and one person scaffolding the learning of another. It is also an example of Bronfenbrenner's proximal processes as the interactions between parent and professional increase in complexity over time just as the parent child experiences will. The proximal process expands to what Bronfenbrenner referred to as process-person-

context-time. The interactions are sustained over time, they are interactive, and they are increasingly complex. The element of time is an influence for both the child and the parent as each of them, in the bi-directional experience, responds to the other in the moment which also influences future interactions between them.

A caveat to the collaborative process is that it takes time. As I worked with the data collected in a one-hour period with parents, it was clear that this short amount of time was not enough to understand fully their beliefs and practices. I came to understand parental definitions of literacy throughout the entire conversation, so a one-time question or interaction is unlikely to give a complete picture of the individual's beliefs.

It did, however, provide me the opportunity to learn that the participant parents were committed to their child(ren)'s developing literacy and working with them to discover ways to utilize the resources in their home and family activities as a means of supporting emerging literacy skills.

Recognize Family Strengths

You may recall that in Chapter Two multiple phrases are used to denote family strengths. One was cultural capital that stated all ethnic, racial, and socio-economic groups possess skills, knowledge, and traditional practices that were valuable; still, those assets were not always valued in the same way in school settings that base their practices on White middle-class norms. In the previous section one question I proposed asking parents was if there were favorite books. Another possibility could be to ask about times oral language was used in interactions. I may learn that one family read together daily, another composed songs and dances, and yet another family created imaginative play opportunities to use language in novel ways. Any of these practices could be

implemented in infant, toddler, and preschool programs and provide evidence to families that the early childhood professional is willing to implement the ideas of parents, rather than simply telling parents what to do at home. Heath (1983) described this process in her work as coming to understand that, "…in schools, commercial establishments, and mills, mainstream language values and skills were the expected norm, and individuals … brought different language values and skills to these situations" (p. 4). As a result, rather than acting on the perception that children would be unsuccessful in school, teachers modified their teaching practices so that "… their approach was not a remedial one designed for poor learners. Instead, … the attention given to different ways of talking and knowing, and the manipulation of contexts and language benefitted all students" (p. 355).

Confronting Biases and Expectations

You may recall that before analyzing the data I first attempted to recognize and put aside my biases. I believe I did that because in reviewing the results after analysis there were several findings that challenged my earlier beliefs. This section addresses some of those topics.

Language development. An expectation from the literature was that families in lower income homes talked less, used more naming and direct statements than open ended or descriptive verbalizations and used more directives than choice opportunities in their interactions. This resulted in smaller vocabularies which ultimately diminished the child's success in future literacy learning (Hart & Risley, 1995).

In contrast to this image of deficient oral language practices I found that all five participant families believed their children learned oral language either through their direct teaching or by listening to others around them. They told of direct teaching

techniques they employed such as repeating new words, asking their child to watch their mouth, and even breaking words down into individual sounds. All five families sang to their children as well as labeled new items.

From a collaborative and social constructivist viewpoint, the early childhood professional who is aware that parents implement such strategies for learning new words can ask parents to share with them the ways they teach their children new words and subsequently encourage the parent to recognize the number of items in all environments that can be named and described. Again, from Bronfenbrenner's process-person-context-time tenet, these are all proximal practices that take place in increasing complexity over time and are reciprocal interactions. They also reflect the socio-cultural view of developing common language through a scaffolded experience. This may present an opportunity for the early childhood professional to recognize the parent's important contribution of responsive human interactions in their child's development from infancy forward and discuss differences between passive and reciprocal interactions. Toys that talk develop cognitive skills of cause and effect while human conversations involve facial expressions, voice intonation, and the possibility of branching out into multiple topics. As described in Chapter Two there are many studies that show correlations between responsive interpersonal relationships and brain and language development.

All families responded to their young child's approximations of language and four of five described at least some of the daily activities to their infants as they engaged in them. Participant parents said that they made requests of their children rather than simply telling them what to do. Directives, when used, were typically with time constraints such as meal times or at the end of the day getting ready for bedtime. Behavior guidance

started with a verbal correction and one parent enhanced the request by using sounds such as turning on the water to reinforcement the message of coming for bath time. When children behaved contrary to parental directions, all parents indicated they told the child "no" in a firmer tone. One parent sat a child down and had a conversation about what was wrong with the behavior. Spanking was mentioned only once and not as a first response. Most children made their own decisions about which toys to play with.

   Shared reading. A common perception is that lower-income children lack literacy skills because their parents do not read to them. Contrary to that expectation, I found that all five families appeared to be aware of the importance of reading with their children; four of five had started reading to them by four to five months of age. No one offered excuses for not reading to their children. Rather than citing a lack of time to read, two families had a parent read their homework aloud to the child. Although one parent described herself as someone who did not read and had never found reading enjoyable, she engaged in reading with her child at least daily and had multiple children's books in the home. A parent who struggles with reading told the story from the illustrations so that she did not need to read all the words.

   The reminder that things to read goes beyond shared reading of children's books is important. If finances are limited in a household, children's books might not be plentiful. When I asked parents about words and pictures in places such as advertising and food containers I observed a parent response that indicated it opened a whole new world of opportunities. Although I did not pursue it in my study, this presents a situation where parent and teacher could brainstorm ways to use these items. For example, creating a grocery list from the weekly advertisement, making a map of the grocery store and

pasting pictures of the food to indicate where they are in the store, or looking for pictures of fruits or vegetables.

Other potential professional practices related to developing shared reading experiences were discussed above in the section on collaborative practices**.**

Toys. I did not anticipate the number and quality of toys in these low-income homes. Parents considered toys with voice and music to be more educational than others; teachers may also hold that view. This presents an opportunity to consider a strength or asset approach rather than a deficit one. If the expectation is that children need these sorts of toys in order to learn vocabulary, colors, shapes, animal names and sounds, and other educational concepts, lacking them could be seen as a deficit. In contrast it could also represent an opportunity to consider how these concepts can develop in interpersonal ways and with less expensive toys. For example, instead of using a speaking toy to identify color shape and texture, the parent can do that with items in the environment. An added benefit to this practice is that they become interpersonal interactions with people talking and singing rather than the toys enhancing the bi-directional component of the child interacting with their environment.

Lost Opportunities

Parents miss multiple opportunities to assist their children in developing vocabulary, as well as other literacy skills, if they believe that places and activities need to be 'educational' in order to be of use. In two conversations, after the parent told me the places she went with her child, I asked if those trips might aid in developing literacy skills. One parent paused, then replied, "I guess that could help him. I mean he's getting out and seeing things and experiencing things which I am sure help." (Douglas Mother,

personal communication, April, 2014). Another parent responded, "I'm not even sure. I don't pay any attention to it." (Beck Mother, personal communication, June, 2014). Early childhood educators can work with parents to highlight that places and life activities are times to develop vocabulary by using descriptive interactions.

It was surprising to me that parents did not name the library as a place to visit that would support literacy. Early childhood professionals need to be clear about the plethora of ways language is used in imaginative play and support development of such play in family homes.

A use of collaborative practice could include a discussion of the places and activities parents engage in with their children with the follow up question about how those might support emergent literacy skills. This is not an attempt to tell parents what to do, but to open the discovery of the many opportunities to develop language and cognitive skills without needing to spend money.

Use of Technology

Electronic toys at times seem to provide the response and interaction a child seeks, and sometimes parents use these toys as a replacement for themselves. The Andrews family described it this way,

> …if it is three of them we can't always be right next to them you know. We've got to take care of the house and stuff too, so I figure if we aren't in a room interacting with them at least they'll have something to interact with them and teach them something. I love educational toys. (Andrews Father, personal communication, March, 2014)

> In addition to the many electronic toys available for children, other digital

technology advancements have influenced media use in young children to the extent that the American Academy of Pediatrics revised their professional recommendations about the use of digital technology with young children. These recommendations are listed on their webpage www.aap.org and the recommendations for parents of children birth to age five are:

- For children younger than 18 months, avoid use of screen media other than video-chatting. Parents of children 18 to 24 months of age who want to introduce digital media should choose high-quality programming, and watch it with their children to help them understand what they're seeing.

- For children ages 2 to 5 years, limit screen use to 1 hour per day of high-quality programs. Parents should co-view media with children to help them understand what they are seeing and apply it to the world around them.

(American Academy of Pediatrics, 2016, para. 10)

Early childhood professionals should consider having a conversation with parents about their beliefs and practices about the use of technology and sharing these recommendations. A Family Media Use planning tool designed to assist parents in developing a plan for technology use for their family is also available on the AAP website.

Summary

Valuing and practicing a strength approach is critical. The deficit approach addresses what is missing and likely reduces the confidence of parents and lowers the expectations of teachers and parents alike. If someone believes they do not know enough, and do not have enough, the obstacles might be too great to overcome. In contrast, the

strength approach recognizes parental interest in, and ability for, supporting their child's future reading success. The family microsystem includes materials and people to encourage development of emergent literacy skills. There are strengths on which to build. Parents read to their children even if it is difficult for them. Print knowledge becomes a part of book reading. Telling stories can replace reading stories at times. Even more, the parent can write down those oral stories to read in the future or record them for listening. Every object encountered in the world has a name and attributes to describe so activities within and outside the home can increase vocabulary. Letter sounds embed in word play. Quick naming games are possible with any objects.

This study has changed my teaching practice with college students as well as my personal interactions with young children and their parents in several ways. I share them here in order for other early childhood professionals to consider implementing them in their work with young families.

Limitations

There were several limitations related to my sample. It was a very small sample that limited the amount of data generated. Finding participants was difficult and the recruitment strategy required modification for my college students to provide study information to their friends and classmates. As a result, all of my participant families had at least one parent with college experiences that possibly influenced their parental practices. One parent in particular referred to a college class that influenced her parenting practices of reading to her child and two parents said they read their college textbook homework to their child. While all participants were low-income families, they could not be considered as representative of any specific population.

One of the five families did not invite me for a home visit limiting the information available from their home environment.

While I sought participants with children under the age of four, the oldest child in a participant family was just two years of age. Thus, the data is devoid of parental perspectives about emergent literacy in children ages two to four years of age.

I requested about an hour of participant time. Most conversations went over an hour but did not always include all questions. Staying true to my structured conversation required listening carefully to what the parent had to say, and at times the conversation took a direction that I had not anticipated. This meant that some families did not answer all of the questions.

One parent answered questions without much elaboration. In a future study, I would seek another participant who would elaborate more and provide additional details. The difficulty in finding participants and the amount of time I had already spent in that process were influential in my decision to keep this conversation in the study.

As a qualitative study using naturalistic inquiry as a strategy, the information I collected came from a specific group of parents with young children. The data informed my professional practice as an instructor of future early childhood teachers who will work with low income young children and their families, however the data may not be generalizable to all or most populations

Future Research

Having more time with families may provide enhanced information, however some parents are more loquacious than others and while that adds detail to the information about the family microsystem, it also potentially limits the scope of the

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information provided. A larger sample size to study would also assist in developing a broader perspective.

There are multiple populations referenced in the literature that are considered primarily through a deficit lens such as homeless families or migrant populations. Finding the assets in these families would add to the knowledge base in a significant way.

Having participants of a broader socio-economic range would provide potential for looking at specific experiences, toys, or interactions in the different categories that would achieve similar results in emergent literacy skills.

The use of technology was not explored in this study, yet the use of smartphones, tablets, electronic books, and more have increased in recent years. Conversations with parents about their family use of technology and its perceived impact on emerging literacy skills would provide another pertinent topic for study.

Conclusion

For many years I read and heard that the deck is pretty much stacked against the children in lower socio-economic families in multiple ways including, or maybe especially, in academic settings. My teaching in some of the poorest areas of the state had me wondering what it felt like for my professional students to get this message not only through multiple media sources, but also in nearly every textbook they pick up. The predominant themes in these sources are 'What is lacking, and what are the deficits these families face? While I acknowledge there are multiple enhancements that discretionary funds can provide for families and children, I discovered far more resources in family microsystems than are typically referenced by the literature. I did not expect the complexity of some of the answers I received, nor did I anticipate the quality and variety

of toys and interactions in family homes.

In this study, I confronted expectations and stereotypes about literacy and low-income families. I discovered several family strengths and ways to support emergent literacy with low or no-cost options. While parents were actively engaged in communication with their young children they did not usually make the connection between developing literacy skills and a variety of family activities. All elements in the family microsystem have the potential to support emergent literacy. One aspect of my conversation with the mother of the Douglas family particularly influenced me. As we were speaking of items in the family home with words she reached a point where it appeared the proverbial lightbulb went off in her thoughts. Her statement of "You're blowing my mind here!" inspired me and confirmed I was doing important work. This same mother ended her conversation with me in this way,

> I'm recognizing, yes, that it's not just reading…I mean, when you hear the word literacy that is what you think of but I get it's not… you don't have to read constantly to learn how to read or write stuff. Like world experiences. Seeing and doing… and I guess that I always knew that but when you're asked that, that's not where my mind goes to. I guess I never even thought of listening as a literacy skill… but, yeah… I never thought about that until…. Reading and writing and talking yeah… but didn't think of listening or speaking… and.. you know…I knew that but having someone point this out is different. (Douglas Mother, personal communication, April, 2014)

Socio-economic status is often included in the discussion of research studies as a variable that, while not causal in nature, surely appears correlated to lower achievement

scores of children in lower socio-economic groups (Coley, 2002; Hart & Risley, 1995; Weigel et al., 2006). While these results derived from multiple studies with experimental designs and participant samples that allow for generalization to a broader population, the current study reminded me of the obstacles to teaching and learning when the statistics lead educators to embrace a deficit approach with low income families.

NELP (2008) identified alphabet knowledge, phonological awareness, rapid naming tasks, writing or name writing, and phonological short-term memory skills as highly correlated to reading skills. They also gave importance to concepts about print, print knowledge, reading readiness, oral language, and visual processing. While financial resources might increase the experiences in which these emerging literacy skills develop, the microsystems of the participant families all had assets that would also develop these skills.

Perhaps it is not what a parent does not know, but that they do not realize how much they know. It may not be what a family does not have but what they do not realize is available.

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Appendix A
Interview Question Guide

Parent Beliefs and Values	Related to Child
What does it mean to you when I say I am interested in literacy practices in your family?	
What were your childhood experiences with reading?	Have you started to read with your child? (if yes, when?) What can you tell me about those experiences? (how often, enjoyable? who initiates? do you read the pictures? words? ask questions while reading?) Who usually reads to child? Do you tell stories to your child?
What are your expectations for your child related to reading/literacy? What sorts of activities do you think are important to develop literacy skills for your child? (in home, outside of home, with child? independent for child? activities you want your child to see you doing?)	Tell me (more) about the places you go with your child outside your home. (how often, where to you go together, who else might go with you?) Do you think these trips help develop literacy? How?
Are there particular items (things) you think are important to develop literacy skills? What are they and why do you think they are important?	Tell me about the toys your child has. How do you decide what to get them? Where do you keep them? Does your child choose what to play with? Do you think some (or all) of these toys support learning literacy skills? Who does your child play with?

If I ask you about things to read in your home, what do you think of? What types of books do you have in your home? (stories, adult/child, poetry. Concept books, information books, electronic books, etc.) Are there other things in the house that have printed words but you did not think of related to reading?	Does your child have access to writing materials? (if yes, which ones?) What does your child do with those materials?
Oral Language Use	Family Tasks and Routines
Tell me about the ways you communicate with each other (verbal, non-verbal, conversation, debate, questions and answers, directive) Are there some times of day or certain activities that have more communication than others? Tell me about those. Do some members of the family communicate more than others? Tell me more about that. Do you talk with your child? Tell me more about that (when? Type of talk) Can you give me an idea of some things you might say? (in play, in routines such as toileting, bathing, eating, getting ready to go somewhere, etc.) Do you sing or chant with your child? How does your child learn new words?	When do you do family tasks such as laundry, cleaning, or cooking? Is child awake or sleeping? Do you include child in these tasks? Do you see them imitate these tasks in their play? What sorts of things do you hear them say when they are playing this way? Can you give me examples of other things your child says while playing>? How does your child let you know what they want?
What cares for child? Any differences in the interaction styles of individuals? How do you respond if your child does something they should not do? Does the child have contact with other family or relatives? Is there anything else about literacy and your family you would like to share with me?	

Sample Text Analysis of a Collective Viewpoint of all Five Participant Families

M: No, not that I ever remember. **D:** My **mom** uh read to me as a child. **my father**, he would have me **on his lap and he would read technical manuals to me**, technical stuff like that. **My grandfather** used to read a lot to me. And my **grandmother** she used to **read a lot of older Italian books** to me.	M: You know, **I really don't feel like we had much.** My parents both worked and so my brothers were watching me all the time and that was more like 'let's beat each other up and wrestle around', not let's go read a book. So I don't - **I mean I have books in my head that I remember reading as a little kid but I don't feel like we did it - it wasn't like a night time thing.** *I: Do you remember anybody reading to you?* **M: My mommy read to me, but not like on a regular basis. Like if I said hey will you read me a book? She read to me, but it wasn't on a regular basis type thing.**	M: **Non-existent.** I didn't know how to read basically until sixth grade. And, before that I only really remember like, you know, **Dr. Suess books** or the **Golden Books**, the little stories, the puppy, all those ones… I had those…but didn't read them but I had those – around - when I was a child. **I didn't READ** them, **I looked at the pictures and someone read them to me.** I remember being at like the movie theaters and trying to like read the trivia pieces. I tried to read those fast enough but I could never read past like three or four words and then the page would flip because I had such bad fluency…	M: **I don't know.**	M: It was **kinda like in between.** My parents would try and talk as much as possible, but they really didn't have the time to. I kind of developed reading and writing for myself, like uh**, they would read to me,** but I think I probably got more interested in it when I was younger and started writing poetry and read poem books and things of that sort. So, I think that was probably the thing that helped me get closer.	**Memories of being read to and by whom:** None – 2 Unsure – 1 Mom – 3 Dad – 2 Grandparents – 1 One parent remembers dad reading technical manuals. This parent also read textbooks to his children. Two participants say their parents were very busy and didn't have time to read to them.

Appendix C

Sample Text Analysis of an Individual Family

I: What does it mean to you when I say I am interested in literacy practices in your family? P: What our **communication** is? How we, I guess… I don't know.. I kinda say **how we practice talking** I guess **with the babies** and stuff? Maybe? So, I don't know; I think that answered your question. *I: So when you think about literacy you think about communication.* P: I think **reading stories, communication**, uh.. well **anything that has to do with words..** you know, even **watching tv almost.. could be a literacy factor.** *I: What were your experiences, when you were growing up related to reading.* P: **Non-existent. I didn't know how to read basically until sixth grade**. And then **my special education teacher**, who made me want to do all this teaching stuff, **she got me to read** *Harry Potter*. And so I learned to read by reading Harry Potter.. I got my tattoo on my foot.. (laugh).. because of Harry Potter. I have a great appreciation for Harry Potter because I literally learned how to read off of Harry Potter. I mean I read *the Amelia Bedelia books and whatever, little Berenstain Bears,* **but I didn't READ them, I looked at the pictures and someone read them to me. I remember being at like the movie theaters and trying to like read the…** you know sitting there twenty minutes before the movie they used to have those.. **what are they? (Trivia pieces?) Yeah, the trivia pieces I tried to read those fast enough but I could never read past like three or four words and then the page would flip because I had such bad.. uh.. uh.. I don't know the term? my speed, my uh (fluency?) fluency… my fluency was so bad.**	• communication/talking • Adds reading stories – anything to do with words, even TV • TV could be considered a part of literacy due to the language in it. • Says her reading was non-existent till 6th grade • SPED teacher got her interested in Harry Potter which is how she learned to read. • Remembers looking at pictures (notes *Amelia Bedelia* and *Berenstein Bears*) and someone else reading them to her, • Remembers trying to read trivia before movies in the theater but too slow to read more than a few words.

Appendix D
Sample of Field Notes from Beck Family

- Mother does not shout at child but cousin did

- When cousin is there they try to play dress up

- Primarily mom with 2 children. Not a lot of interaction with other adults

- Difficult conversation

- Very short answers; not much extended answering

- No interaction with baby while I was there

- Communication with older child was 'no candy' and 'eat cereal' when we went to look at toys.

- Cousin put baby next to couch and went to sleep.

- Baby was awake and in infant seat with pacifier during visit. At the beginning of the visit was in front of the television, facing it.

- Older child needed nose wiped; no one seemed to notice.

- Mom doesn't read

- Mom says nothing with words in house; I see patterned sheets and food containers.